



An Eco-Critical Reading of Philip Larkin's Poetry

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Abstract:

The present paper investigates the contribution of Philip Larkin's poetry to increase the ecological consciousness of man. His poems are analyzed in the light of Eco-criticism and natural resources. Thus, the poems in the volumes *North Ship* to *High Windows* have proved to be very provocative and disturbing to many people in England, not only because of their content but also because of their style and technique. The present paper attempts to study Philip Larkin as an Eco-critic and substantiate Philip Larkin's poetry as a typical eco-critical work.

Keywords: Philip Larkin, Eco-criticism, poetry, consciousness.

Introduction

Eco-criticism is one of the important aspects of the study over the last three decades, Eco-criticism is a study about the relationship between man and nature. The late twentieth century has threatened by ecological, imbalance. The writers had started writing on this new subject. The word Eco-criticism first appeared in William Rueckert's essay *Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Eco-criticism* in 1978. It was only in the 1990 that Eco-criticism emerged as a separate discipline although it is a fact that the relationship between man and his physical environment had always been interesting to literary critics (Volkman Pg. 370). The poets have a natural quest for the environment.

Eco-criticism is one of the branches of literary criticism. It is an interdisciplinary study of literature and the environment. The relationship between nature and man has been reflected in the poetry. In Philip Larkin's poetry nature is one of the themes of his vision. Philip Larkin lived through a period of transition where man was very close to its environment.

Eco-criticism takes as its subject interconnection between nature and culture, specially the cultural artefacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the non-human. (Glotfelty XIX)

The present paper is to attempt an Eco-criticism analysis of the poems of Philip Larkin with reference to his collections of poetry.

Philip Larkin is one of the leading poets of the post - war period in England. He was identified in the fifties with *The Movement*. *The Movement* is regarded as a reaction to the excesses of modernist poetry and fiction of the early 20th century. Larkin was influenced by Dylan Thomas. In 1946, Larkin came across Hardy and at once, her realized Yeats limitations. Hardy become as a literary ideal to Larkin. Thomas hardy helped Larkin to find his poetic vision, as he says.

Hardy taught me to feel, rather than to write.

Philip Larkin developed his poetic vision through images from the nature. The present paper attempts to examine the nature in selected poems of Philip Larkin's poetry. Nature is important in 'The North Ship' because of Larkin's philiosopy towards life. Nature is cold, alienating and a powerful tool. The poet has picked up the gloomy aspect of nature. The presentation of 'The North Ship' has evoked sad visions. 'Nature lies heavily on his soul like a sodden blanket.'

The effect of nature's power has presented in the poems of 'The North ship'. The star imagery in the poem 'Night Music' brings out the rich background of the stars in their blazing solitude. They are the fixed points of light and contrasted with the moving object, the earth with its blowing winds and the poplars. There are bleak fields on every side; Larkin's landscapes are assailed by blowing winds, wastes of thistles.

And in their blazing solitude,
The stars sang in their sockets through the night,
Blow bright, blow bring
The coal of his unquicken world

(The North Ship, P.11)

In this stanza, poet glances at the sky to measure its creative potential, lost in contemplating. The stars sang in their sockets, he makes a feeble effort to lose himself in the world of the divine; and in their blazing solitude, but earthly time limitations immediately assert themselves and to give this attempt unfruitful.

The seasonal process and night and day cycle are recurrent themes in Larkin's poetry. Larkin's approach to nature is unromantic. He seems on the verge of being romantic, but suddenly takes a different turn, gloomy and changes the whole approach.

As Donald Daine says

We recognize in Larkin's poems the season of present-day England, but we recognize also the seasons on English soul the moods he expresses our moods too, though we may deal with them differently. (1973.p60). In the poem 'Spring', Larkin describes people, who are resting on the grass as,

Green shadowed people. (CP, P84) On the other hand, the children 'Fingler' the fresh born grass. Weather is calm a single cloud which is static in the sky and only one bird singing somewhere. The speaker describes his own childhood to feel. The pleasantness of the nature does not make the speaker happy.

Larkin's another poem 'Drypoint' is about the destruction of things in the nature. The struggle between the man and the nature. The ultimate power of the world is nature. Man is struggling for his existence. But he realizes that everything is going to transform into ashes. Water is one of the important parts of nature. The sea stands for life. Water is a symbol of life and death. The sea is an unending source of rain. The clouds form and fall again as rain, goes into sea. The movement of time and water in nature is completed.

In 'The Whitsun Weddings', the poet uses the theme of celebration. Mental scapes merge with landscapes. This clarifies through documentation the poet's vision. The poems form this collection deals with a man in his old age, watching the passing days and keenly observing the approaching end of life. Perhaps, it makes him to be more philosophical. 'The Less Deceived' showed Larkin's sprouting forth out of the unprepared soil of 'The North Ship', 'The Whitsun Weddings' shows that he is steadily 'coming into leaf'.

The fourth volume of poems 'High Windows' shows his vision as well as his poetic talent. 'High Windows' was published in 1974. Larkin's High Windows shows his ageing factor, he still connecting himself with the world. This volume reflects Larkin's vision of life which is sharpened and expressed in a nature tone.

In this volume once again shows his inclination to his peculiar themes. Themes like time, love, nature of his poems are the main themes.



The poems from High Windows are remarkable for their revelation of crucial moments of living organic connection within the humanity.

'High Windows' documents how Larkin counters these evils by resorting to a ode of life which clings to the principle of integration of the individual with the community tradition as well as with the spirit of the elemental world of nature. In 'Vers de Societe', 'Show Saturday', 'To the Sea' Larkin looks at the familiar social and communal rituals for the solace and inspiration that formerly might have come from religion.

Nature is one of the important themes of High Windows. 'The Trees' is a good example on the accuracy with which Larkin tackles the concept of death and rebirth of life.

The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said,
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is kind of grief

(CP, p.166)

He takes the tree as an image of the dual nature of life itself and of man as part of it. The poet takes the concept of death and rebirth. He expresses his surprise at the hidden power of nature which manifests itself in trees putting on leaves. The joy and gaiety, it is to be mingled with sorrow for life grows the seeds of its renewal and death too.

Is it that they are born again
And we grow old
No, they die too.
Their yearly trick of looking new
Is written down in rings of grain.

The fate of man and nature is the same; both are reduced to nothingness with the passage of time. Man has, therefore, nothing to learn, no consolidation to seek from nature.

Larkin equates man's life with the life span of a tree and offers solace against the world, in the optimistic conclusion. Actually, Larkin's poems about nature are pessimistic. It is difficult for Larkin to consider spring as a symbol of rebirth. He shows his awareness of this conventional message which is optimistic, which is unacceptable.

Larkin never thinks of nature as static; every object is in a ceaseless motion - the rivers, the wind, the clouds, the sun, the heat and the trees. These natural objects are charged with life by the poet's imagination. Larkin exhorts us to leave behind the past and look ahead.

Last year is dead, the' seem to say,
Being afresh, afresh, afresh.

This concludes Larkin's vision of how life treats us. Although what we are and what we can imagine ourselves to be seldom correspond. We must avoid a fall into the misery and dejection which Larkin himself leaves behind with the/ poetry of The North Ship.

We must accept life as it is with all its disappointments and un-fulfillment of our expectations. For it also offers irony, humour and the opportunity to comfort ourselves by putting behind us the past and trying to get hold of the future. Even though he has the vision to verbalize the tough realities of his own life and life in general. Larkin thus remains fundamental Hy optimistic.

All objects in the universe are the projection of man's intellect and imagination, because the universe is revealed by reflection. In Larkin's poetry, imagination plays the leading role in such a process.



In his poems, nature provides a direct correlation to the poet's emotions. 'Solar' comes under the same category. This poem is about the sun. Larkin comes close to the Psalms in style. This poem is a parody of Christian devotional poetry. The sun is an image of both delight and awe.

Coined there among
Lonely horizontals
You exist openly
Our needs hourly
Climb and return like angels
You give for ever.

The angels come from Jacob's dream in Genesis 28, but here they have become 'our needs'. The generous open hand is from Psalm 104:28.

Thou openest thine hand, and fillest
all things, living with plenteousness.

But there it is the hand of God, not of the sun. Thus, nature gives all that we need. Nature is not only lofty, but noble. The theme of nature's generosity is taken up in 'Solar',

Unclosing like a hand,
You give for ever.

These lines are a positive statement, an affirmation, of the sun's most significant quality of generosity, which towers over all his other qualities. Throughout Larkin's work, nature is generally depicted as something that is moving and vital. 'Solar' employs the imagery of the sun.

On the other hand, 'Sad Steps' employs the imagery of the moon. Both the poems make an allusion to the change in life and the passage of time, because it is by the moon and the sun that time is measured on earth. Heaney observed that, "Larkin, in *High Windows*, places his sun poem ('Solar') immediately after and in answer to his moon poem ('Sad Steps')."

'Sad Steps' describes Larkin's own reactions to the sight of the clouds. More particularly, of the moon in the sky, as he looks upwards through the curtains of his window at that early hour. The romantic association of the moon are,

Lozenge of love! Medallion of art! Lozenge' refers to the moon's round shape as well as a remedy for love. On the other hand, 'medallion' is also again any round ornament. The moon is an object of nature for the poet. It is neither lozenge nor medallion but something different. The last part of the poem expresses regret that the youth and love can't return. The youth of a person comes to an end; but there are numerous other people who are still young and who continue to draw strength from their youth, who also continue to suffer the heartaches of their youthful years.

Larkin is not pessimistic in a general sense. It is only for him that pain and strength are lost and it can't come again. The imagery of the moon, the clouds, the sky at the early hour of four in the morning is graphic and realistic. The moon functions as a reminder for the poet of his youth, which is over. A vast empty space lies between him and the moon. Most importantly, it is the speaker's anti-romantic stance which enables him to move naturedly outward to enlarge his own vision, "to be forwarded within" himself, to recognize that personally for him, youth may have been lost, but is shining "undiminished somewhere for others". It inspires him, in other words, to show an affectionate gesture of goodwill forward to the young. The poem ends with the speaker not debunking but admitting the viability of the moon as a "symbol of the ideal to all the young Astrophels for the perfect love of their young Stellas".



Larkin effectively deconstructs the traditional symbolic value of the moon. Yet, his earthbound, reductive attitude both to himself and the moon, paradoxically, makes his vision that stems from it all the more convincing and life-oriented.

Larkin's poems recall Hardy's 'The Missed Train', to which 'Sad Steps' is very much akin. Hardy spends the first three stanzas telling us how he has to spend one lonely night in station inn and how consoled he feels by the spirit of his love.

It often seems that the past has so powerful grip on Hardy. On the other hand, in 'Sad Steps', the past has unregrettably been summoned up so far as to heighten the present which results in a sober conclusion. The moon in 'Sad Steps' certainly has a mesmerizing poetic power, but Larkin negates such a vision. He sees the moon more as a representative of youth.

High Windows shows the re-emergence of the symbolist vision which Larkin was thought to have abandoned after the publication of his first volume of poems.

'Cut Grass' is different in many ways from the poems on nature in earlier volumes. In Larkin's poems, nature is related to his melancholic moods. If nature is observed beautifully, it is only to sharpen his pessimism. Nature, for Larkin, is not pure beauty or spirituality.

'Cut Grass' is about the universal pain,
Cut grass lies frail,
Brief is the breath,
Mown stalks exhale

(CP, p.183)

The smell of newly-cut grass reminds us of the short life of grass as an object of nature and metaphysically of man's mortality. The winter and summer are the two opposite aspects of nature, symbolizing death and life.

Dies in white hours
Of young-leafed June
With Chestnut-flowers
With hedges snowlike strewn
White lilac bowed,
Lost lanes of Queen Anne lace,
And that high-built cloud
Moving at summer's pace.

(CP, p.183)

Philip Larkin's poem 'Cut Grass' is about the transient beauty of a June day with a wistful perfection. On the other hand 'Absences' shows a more muscular and robust view of nature because of the poet's absence. The absence of biology may also have made it easier for the poet to ignore life's facility, the exhausting accompaniment to scientific finding. The poem 'Absences' is also noticeably absent of biology. Larkin's poetry beginning from 'The Less Deceived' over poems of 'The Whitsun Weddings', to those in 'High Windows'. Larkin's poetry helps us 'to be forwarded within ourselves' not by offering a transcendental philosophy of life and death, but by inspiring us to inculcate honesty to our thoughts, feelings, emotions, ideas and experiences which alone can lead to self-knowledge, and worth inspiring for life.

Conclusion

The paper seeks to examine the selected poems by Philip Larkin from an ecological perspective in order to establish a logical relationship between nature and Philip Larkin's poems.



The technological outburst and its impact on environment is the approach of the study. Philip Larkin is considered as a significant nature poet.

Thus, the poems in the volumes have proved to be very provocative and disturbing to many people in England, not only because of their content but also because of their style and technique. Nature plays a vital role in Larkin's poetry. Nature takes the place of religion. It gives a feeling of continuity overcoming the fear of mortality. Larkin's nature poems take on vivid colour. His poems are about nature and its status in life. His nature appeals to common man as it deals with what is common in man. Nature is for Larkin not beauty or spirituality but it symbolizes life and death. The winter and summer are the two opposite aspects of nature. The poem 'The Explosion' is the description of a tragic incident and its aftermath. It describes an explosion in a coal-mine in which a number of people were killed. Larkin has described this poem through an ecological point of view. The theme of nature in his poetry has described the loss and regret, the past and the countryside, are typical features of the Movement. The theme of nature and life interwoven in his poems. The theme of nature is one of the tools to search for modern man's identity. Larkin writes truthfully about nature.

Larkin's poetry is the conflict between man and nature in the context of the landscapes in England. For him, nature is the constant, and only survivor. In 'Church Going' he says, 'And that remains when disbelief has gone? Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, sky'. He says death is acceptable in the context of the seasons.

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