

PHILIP LARKIN'S POETRY: DUAL ATTITUDE TOWARDS WOMEN**Edith-Hilde Kaiter, PhD Assistant, "Mircea cel Bătrân" Naval Academy of Constanța**

Abstract: The characteristic feature that pervades most of Philip Larkin's poems is its gloomy atmosphere. Most lines from his poems are devoted to the negative aspects of life, such as loneliness, dejection, disappointments, loss and terrifying prospect of impending death because people and life seem to have let Larkin down. As a matter of fact, in his poems men are usually seen as victims, while women are powerful and able to control them, though he considers them insignificant and inferior to men. He somehow associates deprivation with women and his relationships with women seem rather difficult. Maybe this is the reason why women feature prominently in a variety of his works, becoming the centre of his focus.

The present paper deals with the close relationship between the development of Larkin's style and his rather contradictory attitude towards women as well as with his problematic relationship with them.

Keywords: Larkin, women, frustration, poetry, dilemma.

As critics remarked, Larkin's fury against women is not so much a "declared state of siege against them personally as it is an internal battle raging within himself."¹ Not even his mother, one of the most important persons in his life, was spared from Larkin's critical thoughts. In 1965, in a letter to his friend, J.B. Sutton, Larkin wrote: "My mother is such a bloody rambling fool, that half the time I doubt her sanity. Two things she said today, for instance, were that she had 'thought of getting a job in Woolsworth's' and that she wanted to win the football pools so that she could "give cocktail parties" [...] I suppose I shall become free [of mother] at 60, three years before the cancer starts. What a bloody, sodding awful life."² At that time, Eva Larkin was seventy-nine and she died at ninety-one. After his mother's death, his poems, more or less, stopped coming and, as Andrew Motion noticed, there was no coincidence. In a world characterized by deprivation, women came to stand for the fact that: "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."³

People and life seem to have disappointed Larkin a lot. Still, he always associated deprivation with women. He had often difficulties in his relations with women – the inability to work out why things should be so difficult and the frustration of trying to accommodate his own needs. In another letter to Sutton, in 1950, he wrote: "My relations with women are governed by a shrinking sensitivity, a morbid sense of sin, a furtive lechery and deplorable flirtatiousness – all of which are menaced by the clear knowledge that I should find marriage a trial."⁴ This witnesses a general attitude towards women and it refers more specifically to one of his relationships, the one with Ruth. During the last few months before he left for Ireland, in September 1950, Larkin continued to 'shilly-shally, lurching between thoughts of

¹ Janice Rosen quoted in Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin, Contemporary Critical Essays*, Macmillan Press, London, 1997, p. 135.

² Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin, A Writer's Life*, Faber and Faber, London, 1993.

³ Janice Rossen in Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin, Contemporary Critical Essays*, Macmillan Press, London, 1997, p. 135.

⁴ Quoted in Eduard Vlad, *The Glory and the Gloom*, Mondograf, Constanta, 1997, p. 186.

“matrimony”, love of “solitude and eternal wayfaring”, and in the wish to “trust life to bring... something more decisive”.⁵ In this context, “the intertextual associations *bride-bridal-bridle*, more mere echoes, acquire a definitely obsessive significance.”⁶

Larkin’s views of women seem to be clearly part of his larger struggle with life in terms of encountering its ‘having-to’, and feeling continually forced into enduring what he dislikes. It is difficult to know who is to blame because of his negative thoughts. In another letter to Sutton, he wrote: “I am of the opinion that I shall never know anything about the woman I marry, really. What do I know of you? Nothing at all. Preserve me from interesting personalities.”⁷

As a matter of fact, he never got married, maybe because he wanted to live only with his thoughts and this remark dates from an early period in Larkin’s life, before he had time to revise his views. To some extent it talks about the dilemma of his generation of men, who were educated apart from the ‘girls’, who came to seem rather mysterious and inaccessible. It assumes that women are ‘other’ and distanced. Some years going down from Oxford, Larkin wrote to Sutton, somehow in self-mockery: “I don’t know about women and marriage. One thing I do think is that if we had known as many women as we have read books of DHL we would have clearer idea of the situation.”⁸

Though he considered deeply Lawrence’s and Freud’s discussions about unresolved sexual conflicts as they relate to one’s earliest years, Larkin seems to have declined ‘to press the issue further in order to gain insight into the problem.’⁹ “No, if I consider my state of permanent non-attachment, my perpetual suspension, my sexual indifferences, I should put it down to Mother - complex if I were honest, I suppose. How irritating! And nasty, too!”¹⁰

The poem *Love Again* comes closer to formulating a reason for his inability to avoid the pain of love, by finding it impossible to ‘say why it never worked for me’. Larkin’s poetry on this subject often points in the direction of his suffering, but does not fully explore its implications. *Love Again* suggests a strong desire to avoid finding the source of his misery – always supposing that source was possible to find – by resisting the task expressing it. That ‘usual pain’ means his feelings of being victimized by the outside world, which seem to disregard him completely and to mock his desire.

Larkin’s general sense of frustration and alienation from the outside world is evident in a cartoon entitled *Portrait of the Author and Family, 1939*, which he drew during his late teenager years. It presents the artist’s family: his father, mother and sister are facing one another and talking about different subject; all of these figures are talking at once, and disregarding each other’s conversation. The father is reading a newspaper, the mother is knitting, and the sister is standing in front of them, gesturing with one hand. What is weird, but in the same time strikingly about this cartoon, is the fact that the young artist is sitting somewhere outside this circle, scribbling at a desk with one hand while looking up; his face, on which one can easily see the dark emotion, is turned towards the one who sees the picture, while a huge wordless exclamation is over his head. This sense of emotion characterizes much of his writing, and also informs many of his views on women and family life. Women represent time ‘wasted’ or stolen and appropriated entirely, as in ‘Self’s the Man’, where “the money he gets for wasting his life on work / She takes as her peck.”¹¹

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 187.

⁷ Quoted in Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin, Contemporary Critical Essays*, Macmillan Press, London, 1997, p. 136.

⁸ Ibid., p. 137.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Anthony Thwaite, *Collected Poems*, Faber and Faber, London, 1998.

Women tended to play a role in his writing, which counterbalances some misogynist tendencies: “To call Larkin a misogynist would be an overstatement – to call him a misanthropist might be closer to the mark; at the least, he capitalizes on the energy which derives from seeing sexual politics solely from the man’s point of view, and from projecting much of his frustration onto women, thus locating the source of his anger there.”¹²

This view, being based on universal human conflicts, reflects a dilemma with which his readers, even female readers, can identify – and which accounts in part for the appeal of his work. As matter of fact, his negative and hostile view of women is countered by the lyrical, tender side of his poetry which perceives women as inspirational and pure, as in poems such as ‘*Maiden Name, I see a girl dragged by the wrists, Latest Face*’ and *Broadcast*.

In Larkin’s poems, men are usually seen as victims while women are powerful and able to hurt or control them: “The habitual sense of self-consciousness which men feel in relation to women can be excruciating; to escape from man-hunting harpies requires all one’s wits and energies.”¹³ Larkin’s male characters are convinced that no woman, “attractive or unattractive, would look twice at them without the light of matrimony in her eye, and they see themselves doomed, to their chagrin, to relationships only with women in the latter category.”¹⁴

Larkin’s bachelor characters usually assume that beautiful women will pay no attention to them. If one is so lucky to meet a ‘bosomy English rose’, the way the speaker in *Wild Oats* does, one may be certain that the beauty will be ‘trying’ for her part, ‘not to laugh’. Moreover, he also thinks that the available women are rather ugly, and therefore undesirable. For Larkin, “marriage is absolutely contrary to nature, both because man cannot help desiring many women and because women in any case become undesirable at twenty-six.”¹⁵

The problem concerning women represents a real dilemma for the middle-aged bachelor, both personally and morally. Larkin addresses this problem in his poetry in a variety of complaints against life, his own lack of power, and women themselves as the probable cause of his suffering. His ‘technique’ is to adopt the freedom of the sexual revolution in talking about sex openly, proclaiming all the time that he ‘can’t enjoy its fruits in actual fact’. As poems *Annus Mirabilis* and *High Windows* suggest, he feels himself caught between two generations. That might be because he feels personally affronted by women and in consequence his poetry approaches the problem from the man’s point of view, as a victim of the system and from the perspective that women are responsible for all the deprivation in the world.

One aspect of the inaccessibility of desirable women – and its frustrating effect on men – is presented in four of Larkin’s poems: *Lines on a Young Lady’s Photograph Album*, *Sunny Prestatyn*, *Essential Beauty* and *Wild Oats*, depict idealized and beautiful women who appear in fiction or in photographs and they seem to have a mental influence upon the viewer, because from now on, everything happens in the viewer’s brain: “their removal from the realm of present reality stresses their unavailability and thus subtly raises their value. At the same time, when these women appear in advertisements, men are invited by the photograph and others who create these glamorous images to appropriate and possess these women in fantasy, and create for themselves an unsatisfying illusion. Ironically of course the inaccessibility of the beloved can also define romance, in another context. [...] Romantic distance is in some ways the most desirable relationship one can have with a woman.”¹⁶

¹² Janice Rossen in Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin, Contemporary Critical Essays*, Macmillan Press, London, 1997, p. 139.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

Another possible result of distance is simply that of envy. The girl presented in *Lines on a Young Lady's Photograph Album* seems to stir his jealousy; she is present with the poet when he views the photographs of her, remaining in some way inaccessible. He becomes jealous about the times in the past when he was not present. The girl, or the 'real' girl as she existed in the past, still remains inaccessible to him; his ideas of photographs are made of 'a past that no one now can share'. The distance from the young woman is more painful because she is seen to be a 'real girl in the real place' through the convincing medium of the camera.

The women in *Essential Beauty* and *Sunny Prestatyn* represent 'an exalted, infinitely distanced version of femininity'.¹⁷ Using their sexual powers for a specific purpose, they seem to promise themselves through the medium of the product they represent. *Essential Beauty* depicts a girl in a cigarette advertisement, while *Sunny Prestatyn* depicts a girl who advertises a beach resort. These are the fact 'real' girls because photography reproduces them faithfully, but unreal – because they very well glamorized and because they exist only in a photograph. Thus, photography 'becomes a kind of metaphor for not being able to communicate with or touch a woman.'¹⁸ Further, the women are seductive because they attempt to sell something through selling themselves first. Frustration seems to be the potential effect that these women have on the men who behold them. For Larkin it is obvious that the women fail to deliver on their promises, and never appear at all. Moreover, Larkin thinks that the girl in the cigarette advertisement in *Essential Beauty* is a beautiful messenger of death: "... dying smokers sense / Walking towards them through some dappled park / As if on water that unfocused she / No match lip up, nor drag ever brought near, / Who now stands newly clear, / Smiling, and recognizing, and going dark."¹⁹ The girl stands here for announcing death, which overtakes those who smoke in an effort to consider her real and she seems to accept complicity.

The girl on the poster in *Sunny Prestatyn* identifies herself with the holiday beach resort. From the male point of view, she invites him to take his pleasures: "Come to Sunny Prestatyn / Laughed the girl on the poster / Kneeling up on the sand / In tautened white satin."²⁰ The invitation might stand for a sexual advance. The poster is described by means of coarse language and a great number of critics asked themselves how much complicity the poet shares in the act. For instance, Terry Whalen, in *Philip Larkin and English Poetry* from 1986 sees the poster as 'source of imaginative decadence, and also as a stimulus, maybe not because she is beautiful, but because of her being feminine. The 'friend in specs' tries to 'capture' him through the use of feminine wiles other than beauty, more notably that of sexual accessibility. In this case the image of the 'bosomy rose' overshadows the friend completely, making a relationship with her impossible for the poet. The end of the poem presents the image of the 'rose': "In my wallet are still two snaps / Of bosomy rose with fur gloves on. / Unlucky charms, perhaps."²¹ This makes the reader think of the idea that the glamorous woman is unattainable in person and the poet remains with her image in mind. As an irony, beautiful women in Larkin's poems tend to be 'too good for this life', as *Sunny Prestatyn* puts it.

Larkin, as a human being, always enjoyed his time being alone. About this solitude he 'talks' also in some of his poems. But since Larkin often insists so strongly "on the dichotomy of singleness as opposite to marriage, with sexual desire wreaking havoc in the middle, he seizes on the sexual revolution of the 1960s as an illustration of what can happen when several of these earlier restrictions are lifted. While this change could theoretically create a

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 142.

¹⁹ Anthony Thwaite, *Collected Poems*, Faber and Faber, London, 1988.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

better system for men caught in his bind,”²² the poet remains pessimistic about his own chances of happiness and envious of others who can enjoy pleasure without feeling guilty. Several poems from Larkin’s final volume, *High Windows*, present the middle-aged bachelor in a setting of sexual freedom; together with the sexual revolution, there is a source of bitterness and frustration. This is “a brilliant subject for his poetry to address, since the new system is in many ways no improvement on the old, thus providing a new subject for satire; freedom is the sense of lack of commitment and it does not necessarily lead to intimacy or fulfilment. But seeing it – even seeing it as an illusion – played out by others, can reinforce his personal sense of deprivation still further.”²³

Given the fact that Larkin is primarily expressing a masculine perspective on sexual matters, many critics consider that there still remains the problem of his misogyny in his work. Many readers and even critics might well ask what Larkin is trying to achieve with these poems. One answer could be that he satirises men which have this view, showing that women ought to be treated less as objects and more as people. However, this could turn him into a feminist writer, which is not the case at Larkin. Another possible answer might be that Larkin “makes women symbolic of the lure of romantic love in order to satirise the foolishness of excessive emotion; he is notably pessimistic on this subject and women in his poetry and fiction might suffer in their representation from bearing the burden of expressing this disappointment and bitterness.”²⁴

In poems such as *I see a girl dragged by the wrists* and *Deceptions*, Larkin shows tenderness, even a reverence towards women; in *Deceptions* Larkin addresses the problem of rape, seen as a combination of sex and violence. He focuses on the victim’s agony; he feels compassion for this girl’s suffering, but at the same time, he seems to show sympathy with the man who attacked her and thus he ends the poem with a rather detached attitude from the woman’s suffering, with which he actually begins his poem. This double point of view suggests a complex psychological structure underneath, where the poet can, to some extent, identify with the girl’s abuse – but only partially. He seems to show tenderness to her and participation in her sorrow because she was hurt and somehow he seems to share some empathy with her by identifying with her pain. Bruce Martin, suggest in his work called *Philip Larkin* (1978) that “though the girl cannot be consoled for her various pains, she harboured no delusions as to what was happening. Because Larkin uses the rapist’s lust as an emblem of all human desires, his sense of shared self – deception allows him to go beyond pity for the girl or indignation against the rapist.”²⁵ Anyway, this poem seems less Hardy-esque, because of its degree of sadism. The rapist is seen as an unfulfilled man, ignoring in his actions the sociological perspective. Physically, he brutalized the girl, an act which is not ‘spiritually enlightening for her so much as it damaging’.²⁶ The girl suffers so much that she begs her captor to kill her.

Although Larkin wrote non-satirical poems about men’s relationship with women, the underlying subtext still seems to express resentment towards women. The ‘burden’ of these poems seems to be the difficulty men experience in dealing with their sexual desire and in relating to women. A posthumously published but incomplete poem entitled ‘*The Dance*’ ‘provides a fascinating ambivalence, which Larkin apparently wrestled with over a long period’.²⁷ The poem describes the poet’s feelings of jealousy, a social dance and the most important ‘ingredients’: drink, sex and jazz. In this poem the view of love and desire are

²² Janice Rossen quoted in Stephen Regan, *Philip Larkin, Contemporary Critical Essays*, Macmillan Press, London, 1997, p. 149.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 154.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

presented in a nearly positive manner. The poet seems to have some feelings, but at the same time he expresses regret and real pain. The central emotional drama of this poem focuses on the poet's relationship with the woman herself. It is when they first dance together, that the possibility of love appears, which the poet clearly recognizes and, in his opinion, as well as dancing, it contains the threat of potential violence: "I feel / The impact, open, raw, / Of a tremendous answer banging back / As if I'd asked a question. In the slug / And snarl of music, under cover of / A few permitted movements, you suggest / A whole consenting language, that my chest / Quickens and tightens at, descrying love –"²⁸

He still cannot decide how he should act and he even questions himself upon his own ability to love. He even mocks himself as being too old to participate in emotional relationships.

In most of his work, Larkin's anger and frustration seem to be articulated against women. From one point of view, the only way to counter feminine sexual allure as power is by means of ...poetry.

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²⁸ Anthony Thwaite, *Collected Poems*, Faber and Faber, London, 1988.