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Negotiating Death in Philip Larkin's "Ambulances" and "Aubade"

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Abstract

"Ambulances" and "Aubade" are two widely read poems of Philip Larkin (1922-1985) which any serious reader of modern poems would be reminded of in these difficult times. The poems help in negotiating and coming to terms with the inevitable fact of life that is death. The imagery of a suffering patient and the way the society responds to such a spectacle is vividly documented. The ebb and flow of emotional flux emanating from the idea of death is uniquely articulated. As a Movement Poet his style in these two poems is traditional but his subject matter is derived from the observations of contemporary life. Despair is one word which haunts the mind on reading the poems. The bleak view of human existence is sharply reflected in the imagery created in the poems. The detachment of which Larkin is capable of as a poet helps in infusing artistic triumph. This artistic detachment shadows the despair forming the tone and tenor of the metaphors used. Use of alliteration in short verses leaves a jarring effect on readers. The color coding like white, red, grey, glossy, dark, is a technique enriching imagery of the poems. Personification of death and un-resting and having neared by a day creates the eerie mood required for the theme of the poems. The rich metaphors used for death bed and death itself are perhaps not very common in modern poetry in English. This paper shall lay threadbare the success of Larkin as a poet in creating a work of artistic excellence out of the most odious idea like death.

Keywords- Death, Despair, Hardy-esque, Movement Poets, Sickness, War Poetry

Philip Larkin's poem "Ambulances" in five stanzas and thirty lines is a very close observation of sickness and death in modern times. He almost elevates the word ambulance to a metaphor signifying death. Larkin begins the poem using a simile of "confessionals". The ambulances, he says, run throughout the cities like a thread. Ambulances are so stark, cold and eerie that they do not at all return any glance which they get. Larkin is quick to notice that people look at ambulances with abhorrence, fear and pity. Carter and McRae rightly observe that "A typical

The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Larkin poem begins with a precisely observed description of a scene from contemporary life and moves to a conclusion which reflects on the significance of what has been described” (334). Described as glossy grey stopping here and there and in the process visiting almost all the streets of the city “Ambulances” makes an exquisite poem depicting the sharp power of observation and his ability to emphasize and articulate the same. In the first and the fourth line of the first stanza Larkin makes use of alliterative verse leaving behind a benumbing effect while describing ambulances.

In the second stanza, children playing and loitering in the city and women finishing their shopping witness a sick person being taken on a stretcher wrapped in blanket. While all this happens the patient recollects “the past smell of different dinners”. The jarring alliterative description of a “wild-white face” infuses pain and empathy within readers. It also brings them in a one to one encounter with the process of ageing, becoming sick and dying.

By the third stanza the poet lapses into philosophy and starts questioning, the significance of all human business and engagements:

And sense the solving emptiness
That lies just under all we do,
And for a second get it whole,
So permanent and blank and true.
The fastened doors recede. Poor soul,
They whisper at their own distress;

(“Ambulances”, Larkin)

Larkin is of the view that the spectacle of sick-dying man makes the on lookers realise the emptiness and transitoriness of life. The adjectives – permanent, blank and true act as cold philosophical words which make all the charm of life fly away. The receding ambulance signifies the fast withering away life of a man and the imminent death while the onlookers express their heart-felt sympathy for the poor dying man. The poet, Larkin is quick to point out that it is more the distress of the onlookers than their sympathy for the man being carried away in the ambulance.

In the fourth stanza of Larkin depicts the sick man being borne away in the ambulance. The poet uses “deadened air” and “sudden shut of loss” as uniquely original phrases to draw a vivid imagery of death and quietus. The imagery is largely inclined towards creation of a morbid mood. But the artistic purpose of Larkin is to articulate the responses that the fact of death can elicit. The second line of the stanza “round something nearly at an end”, express the nothingness into which the being of men ceases so as to be called as “something” instead by a name or an identity. The stanza reinforces the fact of the transitoriness of life. The poet also laments at the

The Creative Launcher

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doing and being of men being turned into ineffectual things when faced with death. Larkin very ironically puts up a question:

And what coheared it in across.

The ears, the unique random blend

Of families and fashions there.

(“Ambulances”, Larkin)

In the last stanza of the poem Larkin points out that the sick hoary man is laid inside an unreachable room that is the ambulance where no exchange of love is possible. Identity, relations, attachment and ownership all come to an end and nothing accompanies a man in his death. Such stark realize of life have been ironically infused into the word and the metaphor of death that is ambulances. The concluding lines of the poem bring the ironic note to a notably high level when the poet concludes in the last three verses:

The traffic parts to let go by

Brings closer what is left to come

And dulls to distance all we are

(“Ambulances”, Larkin)

“Aubade” is the second poem dealing with the theme of death in the typical Larkinian style with Hardy-esque undercurrents. The term “Aubade” is drawn from a French word. Aubade means a song in praise of the dawn. Larkin’s “Aubade” is however different as it is devoid of any praise or celebration. On the contrary it is the poem about death and mortality. “Aubade” was first published in the *Times Literary Supplementary* on 23rd December 1977. Larkin’s “Aubade” deals with the Hardy-esque themes of gloom and death in which the poet sees:

... I see what’s really always there

Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,

(“Aubade”, Larkin)

Chaudhary and Goswami in *A History of English Literature: Traversing the Centuries* observe that there are many parallels to be drawn between Larkin and Hardy, whom he saw as a major poet of the modern period. Like Hardy, Larkin valued the importance of a native English tradition and he explored eternal themes of death and change by using conservative poetic forms. (pg 333). The description of light strengthening as “the room takes shape” reminds us of Thomas Hardy’s “The Goging”, which describes the poet’s experience of seeing “morning hardens upon the wall”. Morning hardens and, in so doing, shuts off whole avenues of possibilities which we could have pursued in life, but didn’t. Like Hardy Larkin exemplified movement poetry not only with his perfectly formed phrases, but also in his provincialism. Most of his poetry rooted in his life in Hull and his persistent resistance to London’s literary elite. He withstood other culture and other cultural forms, and this trend was later taken up by various regional poetic groups. (334)

The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

His poetry constantly portrays a shunning of grand romantic gestures, allowing things to be as they are. In his most famous poem “The Whitsun Weddings” 1964, Larkin describes newly-wed couples striving for order and happiness, but concludes that happiness is a distant dream to be found in the past, rather than in the present (304). He used colloquial language and adopted an essentially conversational style. It is, however his mastery of traditional metrical patterns and his ability to structure his poems through the use of unobtrusive rhymes which explain the poignancy that his everyday language can achieve. (334)

Larkin wonders at the possibility of his death. Though he is sure of his imminent death but he is unaware of the time, place and manner in which death would come to him.

Larkin writes about death:

Making all through impossible but how

And where and when I shall myself die.

Arid interrogation: yet the dread,

Flashes afresh to hold and horrify.

(“Aubade”, Larkin)

Larkin vividly expresses the horror of death and its bleakness when he finds his mind “running blank at the glare”. However, Larkin accepts the fact that death is inevitable but he is full of guilt and remorse at the things not done before death. There was possibility of doing good, loving and utilizing time in better manners. Drawing to the end of life Larkin laments at the “total emptiness”, “sure extinction”, terrible and true end of life. In the first stanza of twenty lines, the poet records the horror of death where no logic or common sense work. This part of the poem is drenched in the hoary and bleak thoughts of death which is soon drawing near.

In the second stanza the poet tries to assuage his fear of death and come to terms with it. In doing so he rejects the use of religion which is usually taken recourse to in accepting death. The concept of afterlife which could be better based on the conduct in the life on earth is rejected by Larkin. Larkin says:

...Religion used to try,

That vast, moth-eaten musical brocade

Created to pretend we never die,

(“Aubade”, Larkin)

After having rejected religion Larkin takes recourse to reasoning for coming to terms with death. Larkin argues that “a rational being” cannot fear something which cannot be felt because after death a man is left cold as unfeeling corpse without any sense perception. However in a dramatic way, the artistic part of Larkin comes into play and argues that not feeling and not seeing is in fact the most dreaded aspect of death. This part of the poem turns out to be the most ironical where Larkin lapses into his poetic best:

The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

That this is what we fear- no sigh, no sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic form which none came round.

(“Aubade”, Larkin)

Philip Larkin’s poetry continues to attract considerable attention from scholars and students of literature, though he once said in an interview, “I should hate anybody to read my work because he’s been told to, and told to what to think about it” (Larkin, 1983: 56). Larkin’s resentment against those who try to interpret his poems does not, however, have its root in the soils of his reserved character, rather his firm belief in the clarity of meaning in his works is the reason behind his resentment. In the same interview, he asserts, “I think in one sense I’m like Evelyn Waugh or John Betjeman, in that there is not much to say about my work. When you’ve read a poem, that is it, it’s all quite clear what it means” (Larkin, 1983: 53-54). In a letter to Monica Jones dated 8 November 1952, Larkin mentions death as a primary issue of high literature, and insists that it should be treated with respect and mastery. “To me,” he writes, “since death is the most important thing about life [...], so the expression of death & the effects of death are the highest planes of literature [...] and should not be lightly loosed upon the populace [...]” (Larkin, 2012: 495). It can be thus observed that he became obsessed with the idea of death in time. In a letter to Winifred Arnott dated 9 June 1977, Larkin writes, “I get less used to the fact of death as I grow older & I was never very used to it” (Larkin, 2012: 495). It is in a letter to Kingsley Amis dated 12 August 1977 that the story told in “Aubade” is explained: “Poetry, that rare bird, has flown out of the window and now sings on some alien shore. In other words I just drink these days... I wake at four and lie worrying till seven. Loneliness. Death. Law suits. Talent gone. Law suits. Loneliness. Talent gone. Death. I really am not happy these days.” (Larkin, 2012: 495). In other words, Larkin’s obsession with the approaching death gradually grew into a poem.

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,
Making all thought impossible but how
And where and when I shall myself die.
Arid interrogation: yet the dread
Of dying, and being dead,
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify

The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

(Larkin, 2012: 115)

The verbal similarity between the letter and the poem suggests that, “Aubade” is actually the frustrated feelings, given a verse form that, the poet experienced towards the end of his life.

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