

BEYOND THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE: PHILIP LARKIN'S POETIC JOURNEY

AN ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an attempt at studying Larkin's poetic journey in the light of Freud's theory of "beyond the pleasure principle." This counters the complaint of some critics that Larkin is purely a pessimistic poet. In spite of the gloom and disillusionment in his poems, Larkin is not pessimistic. His depiction of the darker side of life is a psychological attempt to prepare the human being for facing the reality of the world after the Second World War. Thus his poems of disillusionment can be regarded as a kind of defence mechanism against mental breakdown.

Larkin began as a poet of the pleasure principle. His earlier poems celebrated love, sensual gratification, beauty of nature and beauty of form etc. But at the same time this phase was not of unmixed joy, for almost simultaneously the bitter reality of contemporary life began to impinge on his poetic consciousness. Chapter One is an introduction which gives a historical background to the twentieth century English poetry and reviews the scholarship on Larkin. Since most scholars have not read Larkin's poetry in the light of Freudian theories, the present work attempts an examination in that direction. By placing Larkin in the context of the Movement, this work goes to establish him as a poet who moves out of the pleasure principle toward the reality principle. In this part an account of Freud's main ideas on the subject of the pleasure principle and the

reality principle is given. Freud identified two groups of instincts, namely, the instinct of life which he called Eros, which comprises two groups of instincts, the sexual instinct and the ego instinct of self preservation; and the instinct of death which was later called Thanatos. In fact, Larkin is preoccupied mainly with these two instincts in his poetry.

In the light of Freud's theory of the unconscious which advocates that "nothing once formed in the mind could ever perish, that everything survives in some way or other, and is capable under certain conditions of being brought to light again," Chapter Two is concerned with the shaping of Larkin's poetic sensibility. The first part of the chapter is concerned with the influences on Larkin during the stages of his development as a poet--influences of people and the places he visited and the incidents he encountered. The second part of this chapter is devoted to Larkin's absorption of many literary influences which helped in shaping his poetic sensibility. Important among these influences are Thomas Hardy, W.B. Yeats, W.H. Auden, John Betjamen, and D.H. Lawrence.

Chapter Three undertakes the study of Larkin's early poems which were written in consonance with the pleasure principle when he was writing under the apprenticeship of Yeats and Auden whom he used as models to imitate. Though this span of his career was too short a good number of his poems written between 1938 and 1946 and even shortly after indicate that the

poet was a pleasure seeker. Pleasure in these early poems could be derived from different sources. It could be found in the formal perfection of the beauty of a poem, that even when a grim nature scene was depicted the beauty of the form was a source of enjoyment. Pleasure also could be derived from the treatment of love which emerged as a major theme in the early stage.

Chapter Four centres round Larkin's move beyond the pleasure principle in his poems of maturity. For Larkin, who wanted to be a less deceived poet, pleasure derived from the world of phantasy and dreams is a kind of deception or self-deception. Love and sexual gratification which Larkin thought of in his early poems as a source of pleasure are looked upon in the poems of maturity as deceptive and do not yield the desired fulfilment. Yet this does not mean that pleasure is completely absent in Larkin's mature poetry. There are in fact many poems in Larkin's later poetry which end on a positive note.

Chapter Five is about Larkin's treatment of time and death, which fall within the scope of beyond the pleasure principle. In many of Larkin's poems time and death occupy the focal position as they stand for the ultimate reality. Larkin's treatment of time and death is quite different from that of the earlier poets. He does not entertain any kind of illusion about time and death. He does not bring in immortality or eternity or soul stuff in order to solve the riddle of time and death, but with open eyes he looks at time and death and believes that there is no life

outside time and there is no method or remedy by which death can be conquered. He sees everything in the world change, decay and perish in the great flow of time.

Chapter Six is devoted to Larkin's move beyond depression. His characters, despite bleakness and gloom, try to strike a balance and to achieve some kind of pleasure and relief. So the main task of this chapter is to correct, in the light of Freud's theory of pleasure and pain, the image taken of Larkin by some critics and readers who thought of him as an utter pessimist or nihilist. There are many poems in the later work of Larkin which celebrate life and the social rituals, a celebration which indicates that he loves reality, the world and life around him.

In the Conclusion a summary of the ideas discussed is given and an attempt is made to place Larkin in the context of the post-Second World War British poetry. From the foregoing study we can see that the Movement poetry with which Larkin's name is associated is the outcome of interrelated socio-psychological factors. Larkin started his career as a poet who followed the pleasure principle. But later and since he wanted to be a less deceived poet he started to operate beyond the pleasure principle. It is the gloom of life after the Second World War and the pain of the stammer which were behind Larkin's somber attitude to life and which reflected in his poems of maturity. Yet his poetry, if read against the background of Freud's theory of the repeated activity, can be regarded as a kind of defence

mechanism against the harshness of reality. Being a poet who follows the reality principle Larkin wants his readers to be prepared to face the difficulties of reality but not to escape to the world of dreams and phantasy.