

The View of Death in Philip Larkin's The Trees and The Building

Xiangyu Du^{1,a,*}

¹Department of English, City University of Hong Kong, 83 Tat Chee Avenue, Yau Yat Chuen, Kowloon, Hong Kong, China

a. xiangyudu3-c@my.cityu.edu.hk

*corresponding author

Abstract: Philip Larkin was one of the most important poets in British poetry after the Second World War and one of the outstanding representatives of the Movement. Death is one of his core themes in his poetry. This article is designed to show Larkin's views and attitudes of death through the analysis his *The Trees* and *The Building*, employing New Criticism theory. Under the guidance of this perspective, this article shows that Larkin is preoccupied with death, but is not simply pessimistic and despairing in the face of death. Although the poem *The Building* is filled with sad and dark atmosphere, it is imbued with an implicitly positive attitude. The same is true of the poem *The Trees*. *The Trees* provokes the reader to think about life through the observation of trees' blight. In the attitude toward death, facing death and discussing it calmly so as to realise the meaning and value of life, is perhaps the best way to overcome death.

Keywords: Philip Larkin, view of death, new criticism theory

1. Introduction

Philip Larkin is the most influential English poet of the twentieth century after T. S. Eliot. W.H. Auden once praised Larkin as "a master of the English language" [1]. Lowell also spoke highly of Larkin, whom he considered the most exciting poet since Auden, and was fascinated by the traditional forms and outspokenness of his writing [2]. Chinese scholar Wang also pointed out that Larkin wrote a new kind of English poetry by returning to the English tradition represented by Hardy... ending the reign of modernism that had been established in English poetry since the 1920s [3]. Despite his wide popularity, Larkin is more willing to be away from public, rarely consents to be interviewed or read, casts himself as a right-wing figure, and is frustrated with his reputation. *The North Ship*, his debut collection of poetry, was released in 1945. Besides, Thomas Hardy's poetry caught Larkin's attention in 1946, and he quickly grew to respect it. By reading Hardy's work, Larkin learned how to use the everyday and frequently dull facts of his existence as the inspiration for poems that are incredibly difficult, uncompromising, and memorable. Therefore, Larkin, like Hardy, emphasized raw, intimate feeling while rigidly avoiding sentimentality or self-pity. The poetry is chilly, melancholy, and self-deprecating, largely influenced by Hardy, and it painstakingly paints a picture of the historical context and mentality of a generation of Englishmen. In addition, *The Whitsun Weddings*, which was published in 1964, and *High Windows*, which was published in 1974, both established Larkin's status as a major poet. These collections, despite their sharp, frequently mocking wit, do not hide the poet's

dark vision and underlying obsession with themes of mortality, love, and human solitude. Larkin discusses the anxiety of dying and disappearing in this poem. Fear of losing reality is a component of the fear of death. Death and nothingness are brothers. Larkin lived in the little city of Hull, where he worked as a librarian and passed away on December 2, 1985, without ever getting married. From his home base in Hull, Larkin wrote poetry that captured the melancholy of post-World War II rural England and expressed the spiritual anguish of the contemporary era.

After all this, there is a strong sense of mortality in his poetry, which shows a deep contemplation of death and a deep concern for the fate of mankind. Jiang pointed out that many of Larkin's poems give vent to dissatisfaction with reality and fear of death [4]. Wang also mentioned that in Philip Larkin's poetry, the consciousness of death has been internalised from a single external manifestation into a poetic quality with deep philosophy and rich connotation [5]. From this it is easy to find that almost everything Larkin writes always has a sense of approaching death. According to Larkin, poetry is written in order to preserve what he see, think and feel (if he may so indicate a certain mixture and complexity of experience), both for himself and for others, though he think his chief duty is to experience itself, which he endeavour to keep from being annihilated ... [6]. From this, it is clear that Larkin saw poetry as the resistance of man's limited existence in the world of everyday life to the encroaching forces of time and certain death. It can be said that Larkin's poetry always deals with death, either directly or indirectly. For example, In *The Building*, he discusses the powerlessness of medical treatment. In *The Mower*, he discusses the death of animals caused unintentionally by man. In addition, a sense that life is a finite prelude to oblivion underlies many of Larkin's poems. However, hope is implicit in his poem. Just as Jiang argued that in Larkin's death poems the reader can always feel the concern for truth, goodness and beauty and the admiration for love [4]. For example, *The Tree* is a highly condensed metaphor for life and death, presenting a paradox of life and death. The whole poem is a metaphor of a tree, and the life of a tree is a metaphor for the unbreakable contradictions of life, but in the midst of many difficulties, pessimism and despair are not helpful, so it is better to face them frankly. In *The Building*, in the eyes of the speaker death is the greatest reality compared to the world outside the hospital. The world outside the hospital is a completely different, unreal world. The poem is an honest account of the poet's view of everyday encounters", the description is subtle and the tone restrained, yet expressive and ironic. In the end of the poem, the speaker suggests that humans can pray, lay flowers, or do penance as a means of transcending the thought of death. Facing death and discussing it, so as to realise the meaning and value of life, is perhaps the best way to overcome death. It can be found that the lyricism of the poems and the uneasiness of life are strangely fused together to make the poems full of tension.

2. The Domestic and International Studies on Philip Larkin's View of Death

Larkin's view of death has been fully researched abroad. John Wain as early as 1957 side-stepped the issue of death in Larkin's poetry. In analysing the poem *Madmen Name*, Wain pointed out that in this poem time is still an echo in the woods, but it is the dwellers of the woods who have found a defence, not complete, but the best, namely, memory [7]. This is a profound comment, and Wayne recognises the tendency of Larkin's poetry to resist the passage of time leading to death. Salem K. Hassan also mentioned that Larkin's main themes in his writing were time, frustrated love, unfulfilled desires and death. These are the themes to which he often returned in his later poems [8]. From Hassan's words, it can be viewed that death is an important theme in Larkin's poetry. In addition, K. Rajamouly believes that in Larkin's poetry, time entangles the human world and rules daily life, making daily life a journey from birth to death [9]. In addition, domestic studies of death in Larkin's poetry have also yielded some results. For example, Chen mentioned that time is the corrosive force that controls everything, and man is bound to die from Larkin's view [10]. Jiang also argued that Larkin is able to push the boundaries by treating death as an inherent reality of existence, integrating the subject of

death into the trivial narratives of daily life, examining death from a cold perspective, and treating the theme in a frugal but uncomplicated manner to make the theme full of tension and memorable [4].

Summarising the current situation of domestic and foreign researchers, we can find that some interpretations of death in Larkin's poems have been made by scholars. However, there is still quite a bit of room for discussion around Larkin's concept of death, such as analysing specifically some of the poems that exemplify his view of death.

According to the theory of "New Criticism", a literary work is an independent and self-contained body of language produced by the use of linguistic techniques, and the "specificity" of a literary work exists in the work itself. A close reading of these poems using "New Criticism" techniques reveals that death has been integrated into the colloquial and trivial narrative of everyday life. Under the guidance of New Criticism, this paper explores the poet's manifestation of the consciousness of death by focusing on two of Larkin's poems.

3. Larkin's View of Death

Death, a natural phenomenon, means the end of life in the physiological sense. However, as a self-existing being with a spiritual dimension, man's self-awareness enables him to look at himself when facing death, and to think about and judge the meaning, value, and essence of death. It is in the awareness of death that one can truly understand and appreciate the meaning of life. Larkin's view of death is absolute. Liu concluded that "for Larkin, the increasingly ineffective Christian redemption in everyday life of the earthly world, the limited medical healing to human body, the natural deceptive rebirth, and the emptiness of love, all fail to affirm eternity" [11]. The following will mainly talk about two features of Larkin's view of death.

3.1. Inevitability of Death

In the world of Larkin's poetry, death is ubiquitous and inescapable, a mysterious force against which no one and nothing can stand. In the second stanza of *The Trees*, the poem opens with a rhetorical question. As the poet writes, "Is it that they are born again/And we grow old? No, they die too," Through the two lines, the speaker explains that not only do people die, but trees die too. To explain this, "trick" in the seventh line implies that trees just mislead humans that they not die by the green color, which illustrates why the speaker doubts that trees can rebirth and further explains the fact that trees also die. Also, this shows one of Larkin's cognition of death which is the "natural deceptive rebirth" [11]. Apart from that, the poet also implies that death is not limited in scope to human beings. Trees are different species from us but it is death that connects us together. Throughout the poem, the poet sees death as a process. From the coming into leaf, fullgrown thinckness in May to death of *The Tree*, it can be seen that death comes, mostly, with the advance of time. Therefore, through trees' life process, the poet shows the inevitability of death.

In addition, the certainty of death can be found in *The Building*. The narrator stays in the waiting hall and examines everything around him. He first describes the physical arrangement of the hall, and then transitions from the static to the dynamic, from the scenery to the people, to the two groups of people in the hall: the patients and the nurses. The patients are anxious, with "restless and resigned" face, as if they will be sentenced to death in the next second, while the nurses are much more calm, as they are accustomed to old age, sickness, and death, and simply call away one patient after another with indifference. The narrator continues to lead the reader to the space that is part of the inpatient unit. This towering building contains many rooms, and no one knows what will happen to them once they enter them, but patiently waits for "the end of choice" and "the last of hope." Looking out of the window, the scene is very different: courtyards, streets, pipes, car parks, gates, traffic, churches, children at play. The cognitive images constructed in the reader's mind are constantly reshaped as the

narrator shifts his or her gaze. While the outside of *The Building* is vibrant, the inside is extremely morbid: the patients' suppressed hope and fear of the unknown, and the nurses' utter disregard for the patients' anxieties and lack of compassion. Although Larkin shows the reader a very different atmosphere inside and outside the hospital, he also clearly expresses in two places that men, women, and children "all know they are going to die" (line 64), which implies that death is a law, a destiny that no one can escape or avoid.

3.2. Fragility of Life

In *The Trees*, "rings" (line 8) can be seen only when trees are cut down, which suggests that trees may not die naturally because they can meet all sorts of accidents and suddenly die. Besides, "rings" provide the evidence of the aging process of trees. Here, the poet uses the life experience of trees to tell humans that life is inevitably getting older and older and even subject to sudden breakdowns and misfortunes. In addition, in *The Building*, as the poet writes, "Suddenly in abeyance; some are young, / Some old, but most at that vague age that claims / The end of choice, the last of hope; and all". In these lines, it can be found that Larkin recognises that the most uncertain thing is when and where death will come. He states the fact that there are times when a person's life ends suddenly, even if the person is very young at the time, which implies the fragility of life. On the other hand, it hints at the impotence of medical treatment, which shows another conception of death that Liu mentioned, which is the "limited medical healing to human body" [11].

4. Attitude Towards Death

In the attitude towards death, the poet thinks that life is a circle and humans should face death calmly. In *The Trees*, The poet uses the word "thresh" (line 9) to imply the difficulties in the growth of trees. As the poet writes, "Yet still the unresting castles thresh /In fullgown thickness every May.", we know that trees thrive in wind and rain. It is the same with people. The speaker wants to express that a person's growth is called growth only when he or she has travelled numerous bumpy roads, when he or she has gone through countless cruel setbacks, bitterness and joy. Also, the contrast that trees grow from "small buds", "fullgrown thickness" to "afresh" (line 12) implies that life is a process and death is a necessary part of life. In the last line "afresh" means to give new strength or energy, which in the poem suggests the renewal of trees, the opportunity for humans to start a new life and a kind of indifference to death. Besides, in *The Building*, Larkin takes a cold look at death. The title of the poem *The Building* is extremely ambiguous. Larkin deliberately avoids the word "hospital", and instead uses expressions such as "a kind of nurse" (line 15), "in washed-to-rags ward clothes" (line 35), to make the reader guess and perceive that the subject is a hospital. But why the poet uses "building" not "hospital"? The words "building" and "hospital" not only reflect the relationship between the upper and lower meanings, but also the difference in their colour meanings. "Hospital" in the associative sense will make readers think of "a place to save lives and help the injured", in the emotional sense often reflects the "care"; "Building" as a neutral word, in associative sense will make readers think of "reinforced concrete buildings", in the emotional sense is often make people feel "cold". Therefore, "building" is more objective and cold, and more capable of triggering the reader's association from the hospital to the modern city as a whole, and to the lack of humane modern urban life. The application of this title illustrates the coldness of Larkin's examination of death. In this poem, Larkin's references to death are subtle; he uses the words "choice," (line 23) "hope," (line 23) and "coming darkness" (line 71) to imply people's reluctance to speak of death and their fear of it; however, death is something that everyone has to face and cannot be avoided, nor should it be. Fear of death and resistance to death cannot make "death" non-existent. As the poet writes, "Outbuild cathedrals nothing contravenes/ The coming dark, though crowds each evening try/ With wasteful,

weak, propitiatory flowers.”, the poet says that death is a painful fact, but we must not fear it. Whether we pray, lay flowers, or do penance as a means of transcending the thought of death, all of our efforts will be extravagant, feeble, comforting.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be learned that death is an inescapable fact of life and life is fragile. In the attitude toward death, Philip Larkin think that people should face death calmly. In his poem, he views death in a cold perspective but hints optimistic insights. In addition, there are some limitations of this article. Due to the limitation of information, the examples cited in the text do not fully represent Larkin's views of death. All in all, despite the limitations mentioned, this study could provide some insights and suggestions for future studies on Philip Larkin's views of death.

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