



## Life, “A linear-Time Dimension” in Human Time: An Overview of Philip Larkin’s Poetry

Dr. Rajamouly Katta\*

### Abstract

According to Larkin, life is a texture in “a linear-time dimension”. It is a hard journey through time in which “happiness is too going” (TLD, 44). It is the illusion of illusions as time rules life to turn it into a supreme illusion. All time - present, past, and future – serves as a three-fold illusion and becomes a source for disappointments in life. Mortality and futility are the inevitable facts of life. The future, which is unpromising, acts as a harbinger of misfortunes including death, the harshest fact of life. The present is seen with a series of failures and frustrations in life on the collapse of castles built in the air. The past is past to serve as a reminder of what we ought to have been. Life after all is in thrall to time’s constant flux.

**Key words:** Time, powers, thrall, illusion, life, birth, growth, childhood, youth, middle age

A human grows conscious of time and its inexorable flow to bring about inevitable changes in life. He finds his child growing from childhood to youth and his parents growing from middle age to old age. Time in its endless fleet brings about changes like growth or decline. His life flows with the stream of time. It is the study of life in the domain of time. There is a poet par excellence to deal with life in the reign of time in the British literary firmament. He is none other than Philip Larkin who as a poet treats time as man's element and believes in time to enthrall life. He, as a poet and man, grows conscious of the fact that human lives are in the strict governance of time,

What are days for?  
Days are where we live  
They come, they wake us  
Time and time over.  
They are to be happy in:  
Where can we live but days?

“Days” (TWW, 27)

Larkin as a poet and man concurs with time as it conquers life by its invincible powers. For him, life is rooted in time, and it is in the thrall of time, as it exists in “a linear-time dimension”. Time is not an abstract idea but has dramatic functions as a double-edged weapon, “eroding” agent. Time in its relentless, endless stream bestows on life mortality. It is time that bestows on us the brevity of life in time’s flow:

Endlessly, time-honoured irritant,

...

...

...

It will grow again, until we begin dying

(TLD, 19)

Life is therefore a voyage in the ocean of time with ebbs and tides. Life is after all a sojourn to traverse from womb to tomb in time's domain. The concept of time in the life of every creature especially man is human time that is the focus and fulcrum of Larkin’s poetry.

Time as a double-edged weapon turns life mortal in life on one hand. It turns life futile in its exorable flow by shattering dreams, hopes, expectations and aims on the other hand. As a result, life is full of failures, tensions, disappointments, and frustrations against man's wishes in life,

On this we blame our last

Threadbare perspectives, seasonal decease.

“Triple Time” (TLD, 35)

\* Dr. Katta Rajamouly, Professor and Head, Department of English (S.H), Ganapathy Engineering College, Warangal  
Email: [rajamoulykatta@gmail.com](mailto:rajamoulykatta@gmail.com)

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Man looks at the future expecting it to be the harbinger of good fortune. It is to bring "the sparkling armada of promises" (TLS-20) like the cloud to shower rain, the tree to offer fruits or the ship to carry comforts to him,

Always too eager for the future, we  
Pick up bad habits of expectancy.  
Something is always approaching; everyday  
Till then we say. "Next, Please" (TLD, 20)

Larkin has a clear perspective about time in the time future, time present and time past. Time flows from the future through the present into the past. Man looks at the future in his childhood, loaded with dreams, expectations and wants. In the ravages of time, the promising future turns into the dull and prosaic present against all expectations in life as man does not fulfill all those for his disappointment. The present turns into the past to remind him of failures to prove that life is futility and nullity.

All time-present, past, and future – serves as a source of discomforts and disappointments in our lives. Larkin realistically portrays life and failures in life with snapshot details. As Calvin Bedient says, "Like Hardy and Frost, he uses imagination precisely in order to show what life is like when imagination is taken out of it."

Larkin accepts that all facts, all emotions, and all dreams, related to man's life and measured by time. Life ceaselessly traverses through stages: birth, childhood, youth, middle age, and old age to culminate in the end of age in time's constant flux to show that life is vulnerable. Time's flow is irreversible and so life is futility first then, it leads to mortality,

Life is first boredom, then fear  
Whether or not we use it, it goes,  
And leaves what something hidden from us chose,  
And age and then only the end of age. "Dockery and Son" (TWW, 38)

Life is a thrall in time's domain. Life goes against man's wishes. Man wants to live longer and happier but fails due to the ravages of time. According to Larkin, "something" is nothing but time in its powers that leads life,

Something is pushing them  
To the side of their own lives. "Afternoons" (TWW, 44)

Man's life in the animal kingdom marks a clear-cut departure from floral life, plant kingdom. Man's life culminates in death, the end of life. Larkin, as an agnostic feels that there is no life or rebirth after death. Life culminates in inevitable mortality, death as the deadline to the breath of life to mark a difference from trees. The trees have the yearly trick of looking new but not man's life that starts its voyage in the river of time with birth and advances youth, middle age to old age and finally to inevitable death. Birth gives life to man, but life gives death to him in its journey through time. For Larkin, "life necessarily means time" as time is man's element. What we were, are and will be decided by time alone. Time in its constant flux and its effects in the life of man is the nucleus of his poetry.

Life is the union of three important stages: birth, marriage (growth) and death. Life exists between two oblivions: birth and death with the shelters of womb and tomb respectively. Church represents, "a serious house on serious earth" for the three stages in "Church going" (TLD, 28) as it is the place, which has much to do with birth and marriage and more to do with death.



Only in separation – marriage, and birth  
And death, and thoughts of there – for which was built  
This special shell? “Church Going” (TLD, 29)

Birth initiates life voyage in the ocean of time. Larkin photographically depicts life with birth in the womb,  
“... a sense of falling, like an arrow-shower  
Sent out of sight somewhere becoming rain.” (TWW, 21).

Here rain serves as a symbol of energy for the creation of life by means of birth, the first and foremost stage. The “arrow shower” and “falling” are suggestive of life. Birth is always of interest since it is a serious aspect of life:  
About being beautiful,  
Or running off a spring  
Of innocence and love-  
They will all wish you that,  
And should it prove possible,  
Well, you’re a lucky girl. “Born yesterday” (TLD, 24)

Life initiated by birth first leads to childhood, the stage of innocence when we are “Always too eager for the future,” “Next, Please” (TLD, 20). In the stage we hope that the future will fulfill our expectations, dreams and desires by means of “our adult enterprise” (TLD, 35) but we are indeed ignorant of what will definitely happen to us. We experience a series of failures, missed opportunities and disappointments,  
And on another day will be the past,  
A valley cropped by fat neglected chances  
That we insensately forbore to fleece  
On this we blame our last  
Threadbare perspectives, seasonal decease. “Triple Time” (TLD, 35)

As seen from my childhood, the future is the stage of innocence is the harbinger of good fortune. The future is full of dreams and expectations. Larkin focuses on childhood from two angles. One is to see the stage in childhood days with “sparkling armada of promises” (TLD, 20) and an optimistic outlook in fulfilling of them. He watches the stage in the middle age of his life with the experiences as childhood with unfulfilled promises,  
We think each one will heave to and unload  
All good into our lives, all we are owed  
For waiting so devoutly and so long  
But we are wrong. “Next, Please” (TLD, 20)

Life passes from the future, the stage of innocence in childhood to that of experience in adulthood. The present that was once the future as seen from childhood with its dreams, expectations and desires turns dry, dull, and prosaic. Larkin as a poet finds them shattered in the present in the ceaseless flow of time. Life encounters a series of clashes between what we expect and what we experience. Larkin’s poetry holds mirror to the clashes between the opposing attitudes in life: illusion and reality, truth and hypocrisy, desire and actuality, choice and failure, hope and hopelessness, fact and fantasy, solitariness and sociability, work and idleness, plan and practice and so on.



Blake, Wordsworth, Dylan Thomas, Thomas Hood, Subhadra Kumari Chowhan many other poets feel like recalling the past and fill their hearts with happiness, but Larkin does not sentimentalize the past.

Larkin has a unique way to forget the past and so he does not sentimentalize it as he treats it as forgotten boredom. In “Coming” he treats his childhood as the uneventful, “a forgotten boredom” (TLD, 17). He never attaches any nostalgic importance to childhood. Larkin's poem, “I Remember, I Remember” reflects the memories of the poet's own past without any sign of sentimentality: “my childhood was unspent” (TLD, 38). Childhood does not look familiar to him now in middle age. All the places connected to his childhood or youth have nothing to remind him of anything worthy, ‘was that’, my friend smiled, ‘where you “have your roots”?’

No, only where my childhood was unspent,

I wanted to retort, just where I started: “I Remember, I Remember”, (TLD, 38)

Larkin's attitude towards childhood is in contrast with that of Thomas Hood, Subadra Kumari Chowhan, Dylan Thomas and Wordsworth. They treat it as a delightful and spectacular event. Thomas Hood's poem “I Remember, I Remember” is an example for its very much nostalgia and sentiment:

I Remember, I Remember

The house where I was born

The little windows where the sun

Same peeping at noon:

He never came to wink too soon

Never brought too long a day

But now, I often with the night

Had born my breath away. Poem No: 224, pal groves golden Treasury.

Larkin disagrees with the notions of romanticized childhood as in Thomas Hood. He treats his childhood at Coventry as the uneventful event and the period of dire nullity, emptiness and even dullness. He describes his childhood as the stage “unspent” to mean that it has “scarcely happened at all.”

By stopping the entries in his diary, the poet attempts to forget his childhood in the past though it is an integral part of his life. Larkin draws a thick curtain over his past because he finds the present life empty, dry, and meaningless in the ravages of time.

Larkin as a poet recognizes the ordinariness of childhood. He treats his whole life as an ordinary one like that of unnumbered ordinary people. Referring to Larkin, P.R. King says that we “cannot escape the mundane lot of a perfectly ordinary life”.

Larkin wishes Kingsley Amis's daughter, Sally Amis an ordinary life: “an average of talents.”

May you be ordinary;

Have, like other women,

An average of talents.

Not ugly, not good-looking

Nothing uncustomary

To pull you off you balance

“Born Yesterday” (TLD, 24)

The poem, “Maiden Name” reflects the change in the maiden name of the poet's former girlfriend, which has significance up to the marriage of a girl. In the wake of her marriage, the maiden name,



associated once with her girlhood and adolescence is transformed to a different one in life. The maiden name is to mean now “what we feel now about you then” (LD, 23). The maiden name embodying her young beauty is “applicable to no one” now. Life brings in this transformation in time’s flow:

Marrying left your maiden name disused;  
Its five light sounds no longer means your face,  
Your voice and all your variants of grace;      “Maiden Name” (TLD, 23)

Larkin feels that the maiden name, associated with her youth belongs to the past. In the present, the maiden name is “past and gone”.

In “Lines on a young Lady’s Photograph Album”, the Larkin speaker comments on his girlfriend’s family album and the impossibility of photograph in preserving a moment of reality. The photographs of the past life in the album strike a sharp contrast in real life in the present. The girl’s youth in the past is in faithful arrest in the photographs to contrast with her past in the present. The past is past in the constant fleet of time,

That this is a real girl in a real place,  
...      ...      ...      ...      ...  
Or is it just the past? Those flowers, that gate  
These misty parks and motors, Lacerate  
Simply by being over; you  
Contract my heart by looking out of date.  
“Lines on a young Lady’s Photograph Album” (TLD, 13)

The snapshot details in the album appear to be “out of date” and growing “smaller and clearer as the years go by” in the passage of time.

Larkin, as a thirty-year old poet makes constant futile attempts to destroy the barrier of time as stated in “Reference Back”. He opines that the ceaseless flow of time is responsible for his separation from his mother and his youth turning into his middle age. He therefore firmly believes in the conviction that the shocking transformation from youth to middle age results in time's flow. It also leads him to “unsatisfactory age” in the 'Reference Back' (TWW, 40) in the present life. Three decades of life in time is prone to become “unsatisfactory”.

In “verse De society”, the poet expects much pleasure but experiences otherwise,  
Only the young can be alone freely.

...      ...      ...      ...      ...      ...      ...  
Not peace, but other things.      “Verse De Society”, (HW, 35)

“How Distant” says that youth is transitory, and the aims of youth are shattered as time advances life from youth to middle age. The Larkin speaker gains bitter experiences in middle age in the inexorable flow of time. He feels that youth has relentlessly deserted him. He grows with the sense of his remoteness from “being young.”

How distant, the departure of young men  
Down valleys, or watching  
The green shore past the salt-white cordage  
Rising and falling.      “How Distant” (HW, 31)



Larkin realizes the harsh realities of life, as he becomes a victim to inevitable failure in satiation of his desires, dreams, and expectations in youth. He experiences irreparable loss of youth, as he does not regain it.

Of being young; that it can't come again,  
But is for others undiminished somewhere.      "Sad Steps" (HW, 32)

In time's endless flow, our lives advance to death, mortality, realize the fact that life is a series of failures and disappointments as futility. Consequently, man grows pessimistic about the future. Bruce Martin points out the fact that Larkin as poet and man never thinks of the future with bright hopes in his middle age, saying, "Earlier he looks towards the future, here he confines his attention to either his past or his present".

Larkin presents the picture of the emotional misery of wives in middle age in "Afternoons". The wives have lost their youth and charm, and experienced monotonous household routine. They, as mothers lead to middle age and old age.

"At Grass" presents a graphic overview of old age. The sunrise of life leads to the sunset of life. In decrepit old age, limbs become weak, and eyesight plays hide-and seek,  
The eye can hardly pick the out.      "At Grass" (TLD, 45)

Horses in the retired stage cannot gain youth, name, and fame in the present. Retiring from the race, the horses are leading to old age and decrepit old age and only "the end of age" (TWW, 38).

And not a field glass sees them home,  
...      ...      ...      ...      ...  
With bridles as the evening come.      "At Grass" (TLD, 45)

For Larkin, man is worried about the brevity of life. Old age like disease causes dread in life, as it advances life to the threshold of death for endless extinction. In an interview, Larkin refers to the dread of old age:

"Yes, dreadfully. If you assume you're going to live to be seventy, seven decades, and think of each decade as a day of the week, starting with Sunday, then. I'm on Friday afternoon now. Rather a shock, isn't it? If you ask why doesn't bother me, I can only say I dread endless extinction."

Larkin identifies with old people when he says, "Why aren't they screaming?" (HW, 19) He shares the suffering of old people. He calls old people "old fools" since they lose the power of memory and cannot remember what has happened. They behave in a childish way during old age,

...Do they somehow suppose  
It's more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools.  
And you keep on pissing yourself.      "The Old Fools" (HW, 19).

Larkin questions the old people on their ignorance of death: "How can they ignore it?" in "The Old Fools" (HW, 19). Old Fools live "Not here and now, but where all they happened once" (HW, 20). Death becomes indispensable to the old because life is time-bound. In the voyage of life, old people are quite aware of the aging process and the approach of death. The subject of old age is powerfully dramatized in this poem "The Old Fools". He feels that life is "slow dying" (TWW, 11) as man has the dread of aging. He becomes much pessimistic because of both the fragility of man and the dread of old age that ultimately culminates in death and futility in life. Consequently, we feel for our failure in our attempts and realize that life is futile under the "solving emptiness" (TWW, 33). As P



R King says, Larkin “records the various ways in which man pulls the wool over his own eyes in being tempted to believe that he can achieve a paradise of money, or fame, or sex, or close relationship with others”.

Larkin accepts the supremacy of time and time as the conqueror of man’s life. His attempts to fulfill his desires but fail in the passage of time, “suffering is exact” (TLD, 37) in the governance of time. Life leads to the state of sadness in the tyranny of merciless passage of time since it fills life with a series of failures and deceptions rather than adventures and rewards. As Salem K. Hasan rightly judges Larkin’s poetry, “Truly, life becomes even thinner when we contemplate the idea of human life being ‘dispersed’ into nothingness”.

Larkin’s own sensitivity to human suffering is evident in his poetry, He believes that life travels through wilderness, “The train runs through wilderness”, Poem: XII (TNS, 24) It is time to make life travel through wildness, sadness, and nothingness in its flux, “There is regret. Always, there is regret” “Poem: XXIV” (TNS, 37). In poem I (To Bruce Montgomery) the refrain, “A drum taps: a wintry drum” is suggestive of Larkin’s early awareness of sadness. Philip Gardner says that in Larkin’s poetry there is “early awareness of sadness at the back of things, of the passing of time and inevitability of death”.

Man struggles for the harmony of fulfillment, but he undergoes experiences contrary to his choice despite his constant struggle. The hopes, dreams and desires in life will collapse leading to the realization that life has sadness or melancholy to the core. Terry Whalen puts it, “The North Ship is quite pale, not to mention, consciously aiming, in its youthful and contrived sadness.”

“Home Is So Sad” echoes the sadness of the speaker, which is in fact the inevitable state of human condition to result in the mortal nature and futile existence because of time’s eroding agents:

Home is so sad. It stays as it was left,  
Shaped to the comfort of the last to go  
As if to win them back. Instead, bereft  
Of anyone to please, it withers so,  
Having no heart to put aside the theft.      “Home is so sad” (TWW, 17)

In poems like “Cut Grass”, “The Trees”, “Sad Steps” and “Solar” the poet shows an analogy between man and the trees as they both exist in a “linear–time dimension”. Like man, the trees feel that “their greenness is a kind of grief” (HW, 12) as their leaves and flowers fall to the ground in autumn. In “Cut Grass”, there is a tone of sadness on the part of trees for transience as leaves and flowers shed for destruction like man’s life.

Cut grass lies frail:  
Brief is the breath.      “Cut Grass”, (HW, 41)

Larkin portrays clashes that our lives always confront in life. He draws the “thick curtains” between what we expect earlier and what we realize later to fill our lives with misery as man inherits misery and passes it onto man and this is inevitable in the destructive force of time:

Man hands on misery to man  
It deepens like a coastal shelf,  
Get out as early as you can,  
And don’t have kids yourself      “This Be the Verse”, (HW, 30)

Misery persists as long as man exists. Desires are the root cause of human misery. Consequently, man grows pessimistic as he experiences a series of disappointments, failures, and frustrations. The

poem reflects, as Grevel Lindop says, that man's "splendid exposure of facile pessimism" Andrew Motion says, "Larkin has often been regarded as hopeless and inflexible pessimist."

Larkin presents life as a texture in "a linear-time dimension". It is a hard journey through time in which "happiness is too going" (TLD, 44). When life is an illusion, time that rules life serves as a supreme illusion. All time - present, past, and future - serves as a three-fold illusion and becomes a source for disappointments in life. Mortality and futility are the inevitable facts of life. The future, which is unpromising, acts as a harbinger of misfortunes including death, the harshest fact of life. The present is seen with a series of failures and disappointments in life on the collapse of castles built in the air. The past is past to serve as a reminder of what we ought to have been. Life after all is in thrall to time's constant flux.

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**Dr. Rajamouly Katta**, M.A., M. Phil., Ph. D., Professor of English by profession and poet, short story writer, novelist, writer, critic and translator by predilection, has to his credit 64 books of all genres and 638 publications of poems, short stories, articles and translations published in journals, books and anthologies of high repute. He has so far written 3672 poems (including 1512 haiku) and published them in 22 anthologies, 200 short stories in 9 anthologies, 9 novels 27 skits. Creative Craft of Dr. Rajamouly Katta: Sensibilities and Realities is a collection of articles on his works. As a poet, he has won several awards and prizes in Poetry Contests. He is the Editor-in-chief, Creative Crystal Publication, Dallas, America.