

Full Length Research Paper

The social animal: A scrutiny of Philip Larkin's "Wants"

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A humanistic and analytical approach has been applied to comprehend one important longing that is solitude, hidden at the bottom of the human heart. At heart every person is lonely and likes to be alone. A case has been made for this quaint social creature called the human. He is studied intrinsically to uncover the essential vacuum of his heart. On the other hand, three gloomy and poignant truths such as futility, death and oblivion are earmarked to sketch out the tragic human.

Key words: Humanistic, analytical, comprehend, solitude, quaint, social creature, vacuum, poignant, earmarked.

INTRODUCTION

As social beings we are trained from the beginning of our life to act and behave like fellow human beings. We go to school, receive education, earn a degree, work, marry, have children, retire, fall sick and finally die. Nothing much happens to disturb this routine pattern of life except for additional mishaps and misfortunes. Larkin endeavours to break up this vicious cycle of happy-go-lucky nature and unleashes an important secret of human life. It is a wish to be left alone and much more than that an earnest desire for "oblivion". The present paper attempts to explore a deep craving of the human heart, which overshadows all adventitious mental constructs of the social human. In other words it questions the genuine sincerity and adaptability of individuals within their own environment.

Text

Beyond all this", the poet begins with this phrase to

suggest that behind all the paraphernalia of our social life lies our hidden wish to be alone (Brett, 1999). No sound and sane person can bear a high load of tragic emotions. We are reminded here of Plato who condemned the work of the poet for his capacity to arouse strong emotions. Strong emotions and passions are pernicious to the nature of man. This is so because a person has to be sound and stable if he has to lead a noble life. The poet makes him deviate from that state of self-possession. Aristotle, however, disagreed with his master on the effect of such an arousal. He mainly emphasized upon the therapeutic effect. He said that "pity" and "terror" aroused lead to a process called catharsis, which may be roughly regarded as a healthy draining out of emotions. But going back to "Wants" and the other reflective poems of Larkin, one realizes that life is no art that can be twisted and turned according to individual pleasures and satisfaction. We are all subjective to a common fate "sufferance". Life showers a variety of obstacles and impediments before us in a deranged order. We on our

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part try to collect arrange and tackle them in a calm and steady manner, without losing our minds over them.

Plato once said that "man is a social animal". He is gregarious and likes to mingle with fellow humans. He cannot live alone. It is this point that Larkin deeply explores. He does not contradict the idea. He only says that there is a limit to this. Too much company can be obtrusive and uninviting at times. It is this that Larkin zeroes on. What he succinctly implies is that our capacity for bearing social tension is very limited.

The sonorous lyric, which clearly upholds a crucial idea, is also ripe with imagery. Larkin seems to have been influenced by Eliot's "Objective Correlative", the relationship between a set of words or imagery and the aesthetic emotion that is aroused. The second line of the poem is overtly suggestive. "The sky grows dark with invitation cards". Invitation cards stand for our sociability, of our coming close to one another and exchanging some apt and insincere words. By saying that, "the sky grows dark", the poet is suggesting that they (invitation cards) keep out the light and create a sense of oppression. The phraseology of the poem is very effective. "The printed directions of sex" suggest two things. The first is, the solitude breached by the union of a man and a woman. Secondly, "the printed directions" indicate that the directions are well known and familiar to the entire human race; and have nothing to do with the individuality or the uniqueness of the individual. The poet uses another image, which is of a group photograph under a flag. The photograph shows a number of people sitting together. The flag indicates a sense of unity and group identification. Yet, the wish to be alone remains.

In the second stanza, the poet goes a little deeper in his analysis of the social animal. He says that, it is not merely a matter of wishing to be alone, but a deep-seated desire to forget and be forgotten. According to the famous psychologist Freud, one of the two basic urges is the desire for death. The overbearing consciousness of death and destruction has often served to play an important role in a number of Larkin's poems. In fact, many poets have made word of it in their own works. We fondly remember Keats's, "magic casements, opening on the foam...in the faery lands forlorn." Typically, Larkin's "Aubade" strikes us with his soulful perceptions of tragic life. Larkin works at the level of a realist and not an idealist. He does not mince his words while pinpointing the frailties of the human mind, even though he sympathizes with them. He points out three such conditions. One of them is the dependence of some humans on religion to console and shelter them before or even afterlife. Larkin negates all such delusions referring to it as, "the moth-eaten musical brocade", suggesting thereby that it is a veil of countless lies and dubious promises, which impede the clear thinking of man. The second such condition is the daunting courage displayed by some humans at the question of confronting death. This daring is ridiculed by Larkin who says that, "Being

brave" "let no one off the graves" "Death is no better whined at than withstood". Thirdly, Larkin downcasts the philosophy adopted by some humans that after death nothing matters for we cannot fear what we cannot feel, immediately unravelling the fact that it is this that we fear; fear of losing all the five senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch; of sinking into nothingness; of losing the familiar and treading the unknown. Larkin was an atheist, so both God and ghosts were out of his comprehension of life. He did not believe in any afterlife. For him this awareness was the penultimate fear and he made voice of it in many of his poems.

Again resuming with the poem (Wants), we come upon another image, which is that of a calendar that we use as a tool for reminding us of many things like appointments, engagements and holidays. "Life insurance" is another device for keeping memory alive. We encounter another compelling phrase, "fertility rites". Every society for the preservation of the race must support some system of marriage. This system is different from society to society. But their purpose remains common, which is the maintenance and preservation of the human species. Larkin calls them, "fertility rites". They go against our desire for oblivion. Larkin says that those who are in possession of great wealth and fortune spend enormously just to make themselves forget that are going to die, not realizing that death is inescapable and inevitable and that sooner or later we all have to succumb. No medicine, no prayer, no philosophical or metaphysical consolation or otherwise can reduce its overwhelming impact and magnitude. We are unguarded. We are vulnerable. We are mortal. All the same, we want to forget and be forgotten.

Philip Larkin addresses some key issues of human existence, which are the drudgery of following the lead, the superficial characteristic of socialization, the underlying misery beneath a handful of joys and pleasures offered by the world. Youth, beauty and happiness all are transitory. In other words, he underlines the futility of all things that we do to numb ourselves all the while through this excruciating journey called life. We are reminded here of the astounding lines of Thomas Nashe's, (Davie, 1973).

"Brightness falls from the air;
Queens have died young and fair;
Dust hath closed Helen's eye.
I am sick, I must die."

(A Litany In

Time Of Plague)

Or the breath-taking and enchanting beauty of Keats's, "Where youth grows pale and spectre-thin, and dies" and "Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes" (An Ode To A Nightingale). Or even Larkin's own spectacular delineation as in,

"The women shared

The secret like a happy funeral;
While girls, gripping their handbags tighter, stared
At a religious wounding" (The
Whitsun Weddings)

Andrew Motion (1993; 2003) once said that most of Larkin's poems were a "debate between hope and hopelessness, bet-ween fulfilment and disappointment". The fact is Larkin realized pretty early what Lady Macbeth came to realize at a later stage.

"Nought's had, all's spent,
Where our desire is got without content.
Tis safer to be that which we destroy,
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy."

Behind the resonating and echoing," Beyond all this", "However" and "Beneath all this", there seems to be a stark suggestion that whatever we do we, we continue to suffer. But that however, did not give him reason to remain glum and melancholic throughout his poetic career, for Larkin could be deeply appreciative and perceptive regarding the beauty and bounty displayed by nature as in,

"Like an arrow shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain."

As well as the charismatic" human potential" (see Stephen Regan, 1997) as in,

"The huge decisions printed out by feet
Inventing where they tread."

Having said this, Larkin seems to have favoured the advocacy of unrelenting bitter "truth" than feasting on a hollow mass of cotton candy, which he himself believed was necessary for the "spiritual development" of the individual.

Larkin as in most of his poems highlights an existential problem, but does not endeavour to offer any solution. Keats in one of his letters about Shakespeare wrote that the great poet had a quality that is very rare. He could suspend his judgement. Many of us, when we think about a problem cannot rest unless a solution has been found. As a consequence, we satisfy ourselves with half-baked answers. Nothing is certain in this life full of unfenced miseries. Ignorance is the very condition of life. Shakespeare knew this and did not always give a clear-cut yes or no answer. It is to this charm and awe that Matthew Arnold paid a tribute to the bard in his famous sonnet which reads,

"Others abide our question. Thou art free.
We ask and ask-- Thou smilest and art still,
Out-topping knowledge"
(Shakespeare)

To that end, Larkin seems to have done a fair justice though it would be grossly erring to parallel him with the intellectual genius of Shakespeare. Larkin also has this unusual quality of being," darkly humorous" or humorous and melancholic almost both at the same time. The matter is not hard to guess, if one follows his," Romantic Comfort Principle" (Bayley, 1999). He does not encourage over-sentimentality and naivety. He depicts things as they are. If too heavy and burdensome, Larkin makes them endurable through his sparkling wit and perky humour. Larkin is a poet who can continually surprise in delight. Altogether "Wants" is a very neat poem.

Conclusion

Philip Larkin in his poem, "Wants" closely analyses this animal called "man" (though he is not cruelly and grossly satirical as Swift). The poem presents a sharp contrast between man's "social self" and the "innermost desire" of his heart. This short lyric of ten lines remains unforgettable like some of the other scintillating poems by Larkin and stands the test of time for its universal appeal to humanity. Larkin's approach is pragmatic and realistic. He once said about his poems that they should give his readers the feeling of, "a chap chatting to chaps." Being a man of few words like Shaw, (1976) he never bothered the toil of putting pen to paper just for art's sake alone. Larkin passionately loved what he did and like Pope, his "numbers" came naturally. For future research Larkin's poems offer an orchard only to delve deep and exploit the dainty region of human emotions. One may go so far as to pick up the choicest fruits and be overwhelmed by the aura.

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