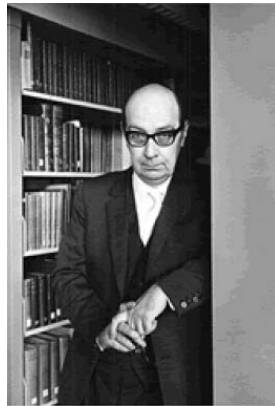


"Next, Please" by Philip Larkin



A Biography of Philip Larkin

Larkin was born on 9 August 1922 in Coventry England, the only son and younger child of Sydney Larkin (1884-1948) and his wife, Eva Emily Day (1886-1977). His sister Catherine, known as Kitty, was 10 years older than he was. His father introduced him to the works of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and above all D. H. Lawrence. His mother was a nervous and passive woman.

He is regarded as one of the great English poets of the latter half of the twentieth century. His first book of poetry, *The North Ship*, was published in 1945, followed by two novels, *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947), but he came to prominence in 1955 with the publication of his second collection of poems, *The Less Deceived*, followed by *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974). He contributed to The Daily Telegraph as its jazz critic from 1961 to 1971, and wrote articles gathered together in *All what Jazz: a Record Diary 1961-71* (1985), and he edited *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973). He was recipient of many honours, including the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. He was offered the position of poet laureate in 1984, following the death of John Betjeman, but declined it.

His poetry

His poems are marked by what Andrew Motion calls a very English, glum accuracy about emotions, places, and relationships, and what Donald Davie described as lowered sights and diminished expectations. Eric Homberger called him "the saddest heart in the post-war supermarket"—Larkin himself said that deprivation for him was what daffodils were for Wordsworth.

Larkin is influenced by W.H. Auden, W.B. Yeats and Thomas Hardy. His poems are highly structured but flexible verse forms. They were described by Jean Hartley as a "piquant mixture of lyricism and discontent," though the anthologist Keith Tuma writes that there is more to Larkin's work than its reputation for dour pessimism suggestions.

Poetic Style:

Larkin's poetry has been characterized as being "ordinary, colloquial, clear, reflective, ironic and direct with commonplace experiences".

Larkin's style is bound up with his recurring themes and subjects, which include death and fatalism, as in his final major poem "Aubade".

Larkin does not use free verse. He writes in traditional rhythms, meters, and rhymes and syntax because his concern is to celebrate traditional feelings.

Next, Please

Always too eager for the future, we
Pick up bad habits of expectancy .
Something is always approaching; every day
Till then we say,
Watching from a bluff the tiny, clear
Sparkling armada of promises draw near,
How slow they are they are! And how much time they waste,
Refusing to make haste!
Yet still they leave us holding wretched stalks
Of disappointment, for, though nothing balks
Each big approach, leaning with brasswork prinked,
Each rope distinct,
Flagged, and the figurehead wit golden tits
Arching our way, it never anchors; it's
No sooner present than it turns to past,
Right to the last
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;
Only one ship is seeking us, a black-
Sailed unfamiliar ,towing at her back
A huge and birdless silence .In her wake
No waters breed or break

The Analysis of *Next, Please* (1964)

Philip Larkin's poem, **Next, Please**, is a direct look at the folly of expectancy. A light beginning develops into dark gallows-humour. Another important recurring theme that Larkin tackles is an endless wish entitled ***Next, Please***.

"**Next Please**" sounds like a shop or doctor's waiting room and the references to death in the last stanza hint at the answer. This is Death calling! The Grim Reaper is calling this title out loud to us all.

The poem is self explanatory as indicated in the title. Larkin sticks to reality and an empirical tone in various themes. He conveys a message to the reader that death is the natural and inevitable fate of all human beings. Similar though in a different context, Larkin very clearly calls our insights that being humans, nothing can stop us. In other words, there is no end for our desires. But the real, empirical view denotes the opposite which is that our desires are like a ship without "anchor". The poem starts as follows :

"**Next Please**" opens with a statement of the emotional concept with which it is concerned:

***Always too eager for the future, we
Pick up bad habits of expectancy.
Something is always approaching; every day
Till then, we say,***

and a parable begins, the poet grasping the arm of the reader on a rocky headland, looking out to sea. He is not referring to the bad habit of expecting things, but rather bad habits of how we go about expecting things. Larkin states that "Something is always approaching" as a way of confirming that there is something to expect, and allowing the reader to discern precisely what about expecting things he is referring to; expecting a specific event to happen does not give an excuse for expecting extravagant consequences to come along with the event. Larkin shows that these expectations are built upon pretenses that have not been proven, but are mere speculation.

The poem goes on to elaborate the concept through a metaphor. Life's events are seen as a line of approaching ships.

***Watching from a bluff the tiny, clear
the sparkling armada of promises***

long awaited, ready to unload their cargoes into the lives of poet and reader. (Larkin uses the words 'we' and 'our' throughout.) Larkin uses the word bluff to show that the foundation from which one looks to the future is not solid ground; it is pure speculation. The thing forgotten (death) lies as the hidden groundwork for all other expectations; an armada can be recognized as something associated with war, and the main outcome of war is death. This is a parable, consciously overblown and made ridiculous, description replacing purpose, but it is done, for a purpose of the poet's own:

***though nothing balks
Each big approach, leaning with brasswork prinked,
Each rope distinct,
Flagged, and the figurehead with golden tits
Arching our way***

But, however distinct, these vessels and their cargoes are illusory. Yet we deserve all that they do not bring, the poet says. They owe us because we have waited: we should be rewarded for our patience. In the event, of course, there is no such thing as reward. At its root is the unspoken assertion that *what is desired* takes on the form of a metaphor, shimmering but unreal, while that *which happens* is intellectually ungraspable, real, and inescapable.

The words “flagged” and “figurehead” represent the idealization of the future that is not based upon a solid fact; the ideal is just a pleasant way that man “[arches his] way”, or envisions his path, into the certainty of death. Each time a situation presents itself to man, he is inclined to believe that all the best will come from it.

The image of our watching for the future is similar to someone who watches for ships from a cliff. When we watch, the ships approach like hope, but growing clearer all the time. So there is no stop for our hopes and wishes. This in itself is a gift from God to continue and never stop. The wishes are sparkling beautifully in our mind's portrayal eyes. When we are disappointed, we try again and start imagining our desires dreamily.

Oliver Boyd believes that:

In the poem, the ships are glittering sailing vessels, with ornamented figure-heads - the objects of our desires are always more attractive before they are realized. When they are realized they begin to pale; the ships reach us, but do not anchor. They turn, and recede once more into the distance.

Larkin is making the point that our hopes are never fulfilled, but that, when they are fulfilled, the fulfillment is only temporary.

Here Larkin uses the sparkling ships for our coloured wishes. These wishes fill our hearts with happiness and we eagerly watch for the ships to come near to fulfill our desire. Along our ages and when young, we hurry to reach our aim but only disappointment awaits us.

But we are wrong;

Here the author strikes down any hope that man has for the happier tomorrow.

And it is here that the works emotionally and metaphysically diverge. In Larkin's poem, comedy is dropped like a mask to reveal what he sees as the future truth. A kind of portal becomes apparent:

***Only one ship is seeking us, a black-
sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back***

***a huge and birdless silence. In her wake
no waters breed or break.***

Death itself comes, at the end, in the form of a metaphor.

There is a delicate craftsmanship in this poem. All aspects of meaning and ornament are carefully counterpoised. Under the humour is an emotion that is saved from being terror only by its orderliness; and, beneath that, the fear of the end of order cannot be spoken, because it is mute. Only one ship is seeking us, death itself.

When we become old and the wishes will no longer seem sparkling and the reality unfolds itself like a black sailed ship which is the only factual symptom. Thus, death will be waiting for us but this time our feeling is just the opposite. Larkin warns all human beings to be modest in their wishes and not exceed the normal limit.

Larkin uses a very simple language to denote the meaning he wants to convey. The theme of wish and disappointment moves in a cycle without a stop. As usual Larkin sticks to the systematic rhymes as AA BB but the theme is about disillusionment after waiting for a long time. The run on lines of poetry (enjambments) continue as if a driver were very quick and wanted to reach his aim but the conclusion of this poem contrasts strongly with the rest of the poem.

How to see the poem.

If we were to remove the craftsmanship, the elegant rhyme, the humor, to look at the philosophy beneath, what should we find? Human existence inevitably depends on expectation. People spend their lives in waiting in hope. Surely patience must count for something. It does not. Death comes (it is the only expectation which actually happens) and for us the world is over.

The only time we ever experience is now. The future and the past contaminate the present with anticipation and reminiscence which are the reasons for our absentmindedness. If we lived in the present then we'd remember where we left our keys.

Some people are perpetual optimists, living in a state of hopeful expectation - "something will turn up" as Mr. Micawber said in David Copperfield. It has been said that the normal state of mind is one of a mild and unrealistic optimism. The future didn't look so rosy to Philip Larkin.

This poem doesn't hope for death, or lament it, or resent it. This poem looks towards its *effect on the living*, also, in a different way. After he disassembles any hope or expectation the reader may have, Larkin reveals that hidden among the "armada" is a single ship that is seeking the dreamer- death. Larkin demonstrates how death is the one reliable expectation that the reader may have, and ironically it brings with it none of the flourishes looked for among other ships. The one ship that the reader may count on does not need to be looked for to be found, and this knowledge leads to the mistaken conception among humanity that other things are certain to be found- when no such promise has been made. Implicit in the poem is the assertion that one cannot expect things to pass just because one would like them to, one cannot expect

that the future is certain, one cannot mold the future as if it were already solidly grasped, and one must not live in hope of a better tomorrow; one should live for the day- an uncomplicated, unequivocal truth that stands for itself, and is never a disappointment since there are no expectations to disappoint.

There is a secret to reading *Next, Please* by Philip Larkin, and once you understand that secret pleasurable knowledge will be yours to forever hold on to- to guide you through life, and help you understand all those little disappointments you've faced. The secret is that there is one thing that you can absolutely count on, one thing that you can look forward to that will fulfill your need to satisfy expectations, and that thing does not pass anyone by. Hopefully death is the only thing you are counting on, because it is the only thing that provides a permanent future for you and everyone else. Through the use of literary techniques including tone, speaker, enjambment, rhyming couplets, figurative language, and diction he shares his wisdom on the disappointment brought by pretentious hopes.

The presentation of this poem lends to the idea that the speaker is the author himself- dressed in his own thoughts and ideas. Larkin once said he wanted readers to get the impression of "a chap chatting to chaps" (PoetryArchive.org), and the tone is one of an experienced life passing on wisdom gleaned from disappointment. Note the tone in the first stanza. Lexis such as "eager" and "expectancy" have rather positive connotations, yet there is a tension when we see the phrase "bad habits".

The author uses words like "we", "our" and "us" throughout the poem which causes a sense of community through the collective 1st person terms, and this doesn't allow a stratification to occur between speaker and audience. This creates trust between Larkin and the reader that gives his words more merit; Larkin has experienced the death of his own high expectations and leads the reader to the only logical statement about expectations that he can conjure.

The phrasing of the title *Next, Please*, is often used when speaking politely to another person- as if the gentleness of the word "Please" will lessen the offensive nature of the commanding "Next" and oblige the listener to acquiesce. "Please" is also used as an expression of desire- it is an entreaty that betrays intense hope and want; as in "will the next promise for the future please fulfill my desire!" With these multiple connotations associated with the phrase "Next, Please" the author achieves a conversational tone as one who has been there, so to speak, and therefore is applying the poem to the collective human experience.

Now that the author has been shown to establish connection with the reader, the use of structure will demonstrate the natural inclination of mankind to project expectations into the future. When one uses punctuation it creates a forced pause, and because it is in the context of a poem the punctuation begs of itself why and what is next? The effect causes an impatience in the reader who then desires to quickly move on.

Larkin uses rhyming couplets throughout the poem (aabb ccdd etc.), and therefore the reader knows to expect that the message of the poem is one of uniformity; there will be nothing new presented and the theme is a universally constant one- it applies

in all cases. The first three lines of each stanza are mostly in iambic pentameter, while the last line of each is much shorter and is either four or six syllables in length.

The second stanza is rather cinematic in nature. This technique is rather typical of such of Larkin's work. He often provides us with vivid mental images. We are taken to a cliff by the seaside. From here we see an approaching metaphorical "armada of promises". It brings to mind the phrase that "one day our ship will come in." He uses a three-part list to premodify this image; it is "tiny, clear" and "Sparkling". This "armada" is laden with alluring "promises" and seems a very attractive proposition to the onlooker. However, we have a hint of caution when we note the time-reference lexis in the second half of this stanza: "slow", "time" and "haste". He seems to be suggesting that much of life is spent waiting for rewards rather than having them. The third stanza shows us Larkin's pivot word "Yet". He will often set up a scene then interject a "yet" or "but" or "however" to turn the conversation round.

The naval semantic field is extended with lexis like "balk", "brasswork" and "rope". Note the poet's effective use of postmodification too, here: brasswork is "prinked" and ropes are "distinct", but the first line has given us a very clear negative land-based metaphor in the lines:

"holding wretched stalks
Of disappointment"

We have been tantalised but are destined to be let down. Such is Larkin's pessimistic view of life.

The agony of lost opportunity is further extended in the fourth stanza. It starts with alliteration of the repeating "f" sounds and if we had originally thought the "promises" on board had been material wealth, now, the highly sexual figurehead metaphor suggests our love life is equally doomed to failure.

The naval lexis is obvious in the penultimate stanza. Apparently, the ships will dock and deliver their alluring cargo, however in the last line we are met with another of Larkin's pivot words as we are told categorically that: "we are wrong". We will not get this delivery, whether material or sexual. It has all been in vain.

Is Larkin chastising us for being fooled for so long? That depends on how you read it and that depends too on your philosophy of life.

Do you view your glass half empty or half full? Are you naturally pessimistic or optimistic? That will determine your approach to Larkin's verse; he might confirm your worst fears or challenge you to fight your corner and suggest life is NOT full of disappointment.

For most readers of this poem, our supposed rewards are depicted as a line of approaching ships that will unload their precious cargoes into our lives.

In this nihilistic poem, Larkin describes vividly the void and nothingness that comes after death. Interestingly, one student summed the poem up as being not about hopelessness but hopefulness. He was delighted to see how we “consider that happiness is just around the corner despite its repeated failure to appear.” How do you react to this personal response to the piece? Do you agree? Or disagree?

The clear references to death are startling in the final section. If the first five verses have been about life, then this final stanza is about death. It is the only thing that we can be certain of in life.

He seizes the naval image of a ship and sets out a morbid message. The sails are “black”. The connotations are clear. The ship itself is eerily called an “unfamiliar” and astern, we witness a “huge and birdless silence”. This is a very emotive line. The simple and moving alliterative last line rams home the point with “w” and “b” to pound out the beat. We have a nihilistic, cheerless end to life. No celebration; it is just silent and motionless.

Enjambments creates the sensation that at the end of each line something will follow it; this builds up the expectation of the final stanza where there can be nothing to follow, and therefore gives heaviest emphasis to the final lines. Caesura prevents the reader from wishing to linger over any one idea; in a way the reader skims over the ideas that are presented as if they are light and of little consequence. The universality created by the rhyme scheme, the sense of impatience to get on to the next point caused by enjambment, and the lack of serious weight given to ideas due to caesura all contribute to the final effect of the poem; the one thing not looked for is the one thing that must be found.

Larkin points out that we always have a multiplicity of hopes, that 'spring eternal', many of which change to expectation and even anticipation. The hopes are all promises made by no-one, merely assumed by ourselves, so approach like ships towards a harbour. But then they do not dock, they keep going past for they were not promised to us but thinking made it so, and the facts burst on us and leave us just the stalks without the expected flowers. But, no mind, there'll be another along in a minute, perhaps even three at once.

The only thing certain in life, aside perhaps from taxes, is death. Whatever your hopes may be, the only thing you can really expect is death. Religions may offer you other well-delineated ("every rope") hopes for after death, but these are promises just as airy as the ones we made for ourselves, and only death can be guaranteed actually to come, and with nothing in its wake.
And it will surprise you.

<http://english.edusites.co.uk/skills/reading/comparativeanalysis/larkinpoetryanalysis.php>

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