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## UNIT 49 PHILIP LARKIN AND MOVEMENT POETRY

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### 49.0 OBJECTIVES

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The objective of this unit is to make you aware of the new trend that crept into English poetry in the 1950s, and to introduce you to the work of Philip Larkin. After reading this unit you should be able to

- Understand the main characteristics of Movement Poetry which emerged as a reaction to the poetry of Eliot, Auden and others;
- Be familiar with the poetry of Philip Larkin; and
- Assess Larkin's place in the English poetic tradition.

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### 49.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the first place, this unit will discuss the reaction to the clever intellectual poetry of the first half of the twentieth-century which came with the Movement poets of the 1950s.

Then we will move on to the most important of the Movement Poets, Philip Larkin. Larkin's work, with special reference to a few selected poems, will be introduced and analyzed.

Now I will give you a step-by-step account of English poetry of the fifties.

### 49.2.1 Who were the Movement Poets?

You have already read about Dylan Thomas and are aware of the immense popularity he enjoyed. Because of this popularity Dylan Thomas provoked the ire and envy of many of his contemporaries. As a reaction to his "excesses", there began in England a new school of poetry that came to be called the Movement, the main spokesmen of which were Kingsley Amis and Robert Conquest who voiced their resentment against Thomas. Kingsley Amis had strong objections against the poet who always seemed drunk with words: in his opinion, Thomas "should have stuck to spewing beer, not ink". Robert Conquest, who edited the anthology *New Lines* in 1956, was equally vehement against Thomas. He objected to his style as "diffuse and sentimental verbiage or hollow pirouettes" and themes as "naivetes and nostalgias of childhood," strongly advocating the cause of pedestrian decency. What came as an immediate reaction to Dylan Thomas was the **Movement Poetry** of the 1950s.

### 49.2.2 The origins of Movement Poetry

The origins of Movement Poetry may be traced to a series of events in the years that followed the death of Dylan Thomas. To begin with, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 1954, there appeared an anonymous article in *The Spectator*, the purpose of which was apparently to ring out the current poetic norms and usher in a new era in poetic fashion. With this aim, the article spoke at length about the changing times and how, change being the law of life, it is but desirable that literature, too, should change accordingly. Literary tastes keep changing, and a new age has its own brand of sensibility which must be expressed in a new language. The "approved names" of the previous decades no longer fitted the bill: they were simply relics from a bygone age. The way must now be cleared for a younger generation with different ideas on poetry. *The Spectator* article was simply a harbinger of what was to follow. It prepared a suitable background and suggested that a new generation of writers had now emerged on the literary scene, more suited to the changed world of the 'fifties. These writers of the new "Movement" thus emerged as a reaction to the older generation of poets. They were described as taking on a stance antithetical to that of T. S. Eliot in that they were "skeptical, robust, ironic, prepared to be as comfortable as possible in a wicked, commercial, threatened world". The disagreement, thus, is not with the milieu, not with the perception of the world: the group of poets that emerge in the 'fifties see the world as materialistic, evil, and banal as that visualized by Eliot. The difference with the older poet lies in the individual reaction to it. Eliot, as Tiresias, would sit by the Thames and weep for the horror, the boredom and the glory, but the younger generation of poets remains undisturbed: in fact they are even robust in the face of despair.

### 49.2.3 The Movement Progresses

Two other events in the following years are important landmarks in the evolution of the new poetic movement. The first was the publication of *Poets of the Nineteen-Fifties* by D. J. Enright in 1955, and the other was *New Lines*, published by Robert Conquest in 1956. These two anthologies together published the work of nine new poets who were considered *avant garde*, heralding a change in literary taste. Apart from D. J. Enright and Robert Conquest, the poets were Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, John Holloway, Elizabeth Jennings, John Wain, Thom Gunn, and Philip Larkin. Today when we speak of the "Movement," we generally refer to this group of loosely linked poets. It is a reactionary movement in the sense that these poets share a mutual dislike for their immediate predecessors in poetry. Their resistance to existing poetic norms holds this assorted group together. If we take the poets individually, we see that they have little else in common. In fact, several of them did not even wish to be identified with a group, others seemed unaware of its existence. Besides, most of them outgrew their

community of interests, developed in diverse directions, and moved on. Philip Larkin was an exception who remained consistent in his themes and attitude.

#### 49.2.4 A Reactionary Movement

##### Reaction to Eliot and Pound

John Wain's autobiography, *Sprightly Running*, speaks of Oxford in the early 'forties when a group of friends with a community of interests clustered together for mutual encouragement and support. They tried to give a new direction to literature. The key figures in this band were Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin whose views were strongly influenced by their tutor, Gavin Bone. This, incidentally, was a period when the influence of T. S. Eliot was at its zenith, but the tutor and his two students were unaffected by it. For them, Eliot's was a negative influence on literature and something had to be done to counter it. If the modernist movement advocated a new way of looking at life, a new form and mode through which to express the sensibility of the age, Larkin and his friends disputed each tenet of modernism. In fact, Philip Larkin went to the extent of saying that Ezra Pound, Pablo Picasso, and Charlie Parker were three villains of the age. What Pound (who was undoubtedly the most influential figure on the literary horizon in the first quarter of the twentieth century), the unconventional painter Picasso, and the controversial modern jazz saxophonist, Parker, had in common was the spirit of innovation. Ezra Pound, with Eliot, weary of hackneyed poetic modes, advocated a new way of approaching poetry directly, with the minimum possible words, creating images striking for their clarity and appropriateness. Pound was unconventional, flamboyant and loud. He wielded authority on the literary scene like a dictator and got away with it. Inevitably, his attitude caused resentment for there were those, supposedly lesser talents, who were not sponsored by him whereas Eliot was. A reactionary group was bound to come into existence sooner or later. Up to the second world war it was the modernist wind that blew strong and could not be withstood. But in the nineteen-fifties, when the strength of the wind began to abate, the time was ripe for the authority of Pound and Eliot to be challenged. And this is exactly what Larkin and his friends did.

The Movement poets were antagonistic towards Eliot because much of his work is too clever and too allusive to be understood by the common man. His poetry makes far too many assumptions, too many demands on the reader. It is not meant for relaxation, not suited to leisurely reading. It needs a special kind of audience, not only familiar with the collective mind of Europe, but also aware of the entire history of humankind from ancient times to the contemporary scene. The mythic mode practiced by Eliot involves a broad frame of reference, an expansive vision on the reader's part. Larkin disapproves of Eliot's style: "...first of all you have to be terribly educated, you have to read everything to know these things, and secondly you've got somehow to work them in to show you are working them in...."

Besides being too learned, Eliot's poetry voices a discontentment with things as they are. It does not lull the reader into a hushed acceptance of reality. Visualizing the present-day world as a barren waste to be contrasted with a rich but and productive distant past when social and moral values had were not yet fallen, it attempts to incite the reader into an awareness of the spiritual drought of the times, pointing towards the need for rising out of all complacencies to work a way towards at least personal salvation. The appeal of such poetry is inevitably to the minority of readers who are aware of needs other than the physical. Eliot, certainly, is unsuited to the ordinary man whose concerns are generally limited to daily routine and the mundane aspects of existence. A new kind of poetry was the need of the day, so Larkin and his friends were convinced.

##### Reaction to the Poetry of the 'thirties

If Eliot was out, so was Auden, and for almost the same reasons. Auden's work, again, is intellectually demanding, although in a manner different from Eliot's. It is political in the sense that it speaks of the conditions between the two wars, the insecurity, the

hardships, and the growing mechanization of life. It goes beyond mere superficialities, trying to trace the malady of the age to its roots. Doing so, Auden often resorts to Freud, and sees the cause of most ailments to be psychological. At the same time, Auden's views were influenced by Marx and by the educator, Homer Lane, a disciple of Jung. As a result of these shaping forces, Auden develops a breadth of vision that encompasses vast vistas of human civilization, and at a glance takes a bird's eye view of life in all its multifarious aspect. Inevitably, such a panorama visualized by a hawk or an airman will not be a simplistic one. It will include the good and the ugly, the high and the low facets of life. And such is Auden's perspective in his poems. It can be appreciated only if the reader has the intellectual background, flexibility and receptivity of mind to keep pace with his thought. But for the Movement poets of the fifties, he was just too clever!

### Reaction to Dylan Thomas

Dylan Thomas, too, went out of favour with the Movement, but for entirely different reasons. If Eliot and Auden offended them by being too clever, Dylan Thomas's naivete also irked them:

Poets like Mr. Donald Davie or Mr. Thom Gunn are only less hostile to the political preoccupations of the Thirties than to the lush, loose fashionable writing of the Forties and the Fifties.

This is how an anonymous article in *The Spectator* (1, Oct, 1954) summed it up. There was a protest against Thomas's excesses. His poems were too spontaneous, too full of emotion to be considered mature. Kingsley Amis stated his objections in "A Poet's Epitaph," that Thomas was guilty of being "drunk with words." Robert Conquest, in *New Lines*, strongly attacked Thomas, voicing the opinion of all the Movement poets. He disapproved of Thomas's poetics, calling him the exponent of "the debilitating theory that poetry must be metaphorical". Even though Donald Davie partly defended Thomas, the general opinion remained critical of his verbal calisthenics. Dylan Thomas went out of fashion.

## 49.2.5 The New Manifesto

### The Role of the Poet

In particular, the new generation of poets was averse to the romantic concept of the poet being a special person in any way. In the nineteenth century, the poet was regarded as a seer of sorts, a mystic who could see into the heart of things. He was believed to have powers that were denied to the ordinary human being and was on a plane far above the normal. His vision extended much beyond the frontiers of the terrestrial world. "Hear the voice of the Bard!/Who present, past, and future sees," said William Blake, in his Introduction to *Songs Of Experience*, anticipating the thoughts of the poets who followed in his footsteps. The poet as a special person: this is also the idea behind Wordsworth's *The Prelude* which traces the evolution of a mere child into a poet groomed by the beauty and the fear of Nature. This is also the feeling the reader gets on reading Coleridge's extraordinary poems like "Kubla Khan," "Christabel," and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," partly because of the strange atmosphere of the poems and partly because our reading is coloured by our awareness of the poet's addiction to opium and the resultant fantasies which inspired his muse. Our impression of the nineteenth-century poet, thus, is that of a man possessed by divine powers in the twentieth century, for T.S. Eliot, too, the poet remains a gifted person. In Eliot's opinion, he must have a Tiresias-like vision and, though blind, should be able to see the squalor and depravity in all walks of life. He is different from the rest of mankind which remains blissfully unaware of the spiritual sterility they suffer from. The poet is an exception among the "dull roots" for he alone has been stirred by the "spring rain" into an awareness of the drought condition. He can comprehend the fragmentation and complexity of life and searches for a way towards redemption.

With Dylan Thomas, the image of the poet is no longer a rational, controlled one. Thomas's is once again the romantic concept of the poet as an inspired soul who, in a kind of frenzy, composes his poems. He is aloof from his fellowmen, "Shut, too, in a tower of words..." the poet is the inspired bard again, composing verse when overcome by the powerful overflow of spontaneous feeling. He is especially vulnerable to external influence; like the aeolian harp, he is played upon by the natural elements, the wind and the diverse sounds of the natural world. He is unique in that he is aware of the various forces that work on him and can sing about them, even in praise of them, "[e]specially when the October wind / With frosty fingers punishes [his] hair...."

For the Movement poets, however, the poet is an ordinary man, like the man next-door, a common man who lives a commonplace life. Moving away from the romantic vision of the bard, the Movement poets take up an anti-romantic stance. There is nothing special about a poet, nothing heroic about his deeds. He lives a humdrum existence which is special because of its ordinariness. If life comprises mainly "toad work" (as Larkin calls it) then it is toad work that even the poet must be engaged in throughout his life. For the Movement poets there are no heroes and no heroic acts; it is the commonplace that is exalted. [This point will be discussed again with reference to Larkin's poems.]

#### Discarding Tradition

The sense of tradition which was greatly valued by T. S. Eliot, is completely dismissed by the Movement poets. There is a statement to this effect by Philip Larkin in D. J. Enright's anthology:

As a guiding principle I believe that every poem must be its own freshly-created universe, and therefore have no belief in "tradition" or a common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets, which last I find unpleasantly like the talk of literary understrappers letting you see they know the right people. (Enright)

This is a direct attack on Eliot, his mythopoeic method, and his theory of tradition and the individual talent. Rather than the intellectual, academic poetry of Eliot and Auden, the Movement poets prefer to write of non-intellectual matters. Instead of the joyous exuberance of Dylan Thomas, they advocate a restraint on emotion. This anti-Thomas attitude should logically bring them, close to the "classicist" tradition of Eliot, but they choose to look back to the eighteenth century and find a model in the neo-classical stance of Pope and Dryden. Thus, values from the Age of Reason are revived in the poetry of the middle decades of the twentieth century. A subtle wit, for instance, coupled with irony; and a strong focus on the syntactical and stylistic aspects of the poem, particularly the rhythm, the iambic pentameter, and the stanzaic forms. The emphasis is on the right manner of expression, as it was stated by Pope: "What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed." The finesse of the final poem, rather than its emotional content, is once more of great significance. The movement claimed to be "anti-phoney, anti-wet" (Spectator article). It had a strong distrust of all display of emotion.

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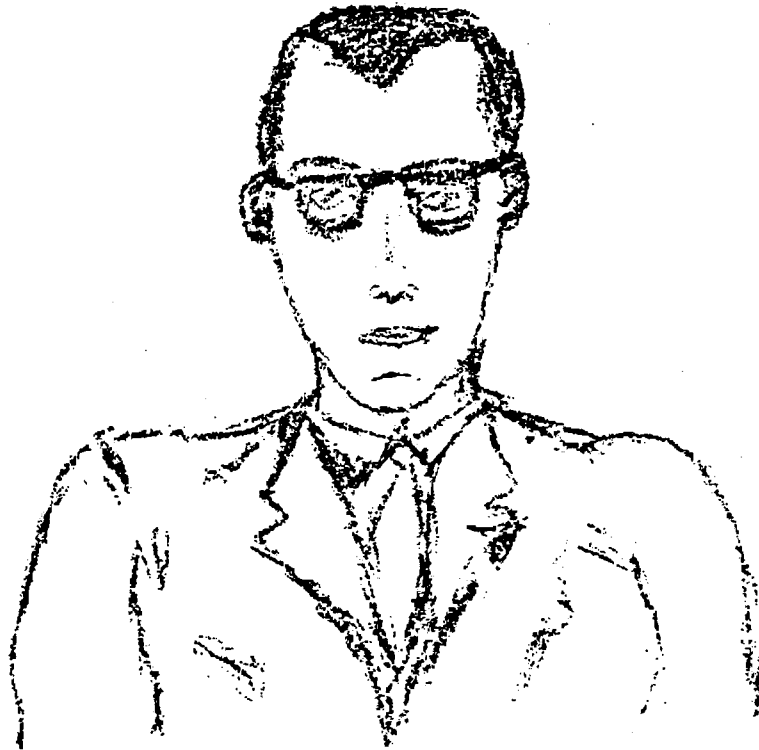
### 49.3 PHILIP LARKIN (1922-1985)

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Philip Larkin spent his early years in Coventry, Warwickshire, where he was born on 9 August 1922 and later went to Oxford for higher education. At Oxford, in the 1950s he made friends with Kingsley Amis, a fellow student, and came into contact with other writers like John Wain, D. J. Enright, Robert Conquest, Donald Davie, and others. Together they brought out their poems in two anthologies of the 'fifties: *Poets of the*

1950s, ed. D. J. Enright, and *New Lines*, ed. Robert Conquest. This was the beginning of a reactionary movement against the Eliot-Auden school. It heralded the beginning of the "Movement," the new wave in the English poetic tradition.

Larkin



Philip Larkin

**The Poet as an Ordinary Man:**

With Philip Larkin and the Movement poets, the identity of the poet is stripped of its glamour and the poet becomes an ordinary man talking about ordinary things in a language that -- though versified -- sounds quite prosaic. As a human being, the poet is in no way special, nor is there any reason to glorify his life. This is Philip Larkin's attitude in poem after poem. Even childhood, which is traditionally depicted as an idyllic, golden period, is portrayed as dull and uninteresting. Larkin is not like the



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## 49.4 THE POEMS

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Now we will discuss seven poems of Philip Larkin. You will find the text of the poem in the appendix to these units.

### 49.4.1 "I Remember, I Remember"

Larkin's reminiscence of childhood, which is generally believed a golden period, has no halo of divinity about it. He does not embark on lengthy accounts of his "Fair seedtime," the way Wordsworth does; nor does he grow nostalgic about "lamb-white days" in the manner of Dylan Thomas. The account he gives of his childhood in "I Remember, I Remember" stands out for its anaemia. The poem has been given in the appendix of this block.

Childhood is remembered as one bleak period when nothing, just nothing, seems to have happened. The title of the poem is an ironic reference to Thomas Hood's poem, "Past and Present," which describes an ideal childhood, beginning "I remember, I remember..." Larkin, unlike Hood, remembers his childhood for all the interesting things that *did not* happen. The focus in Larkin's poetry remains on ordinary things. His point of view is that life, for a majority of people, is ordinary, without any surprises. Why then, shouldn't the poet write about the commonplaceness of life? Keeping this in mind, Larkin presents life without any "spots of time" in the Wordsworthian sense. There are no epiphanic moments: the graph of life follows a straight line, never rising to a crest or falling into a trough.

The protagonist in Larkin's poetry, thus, is a plain, average, ordinary man who lives an uneventful, often monotonous life, engaged in the routine chores of everyday existence. For the adventurous who would prefer a more full and varied life, this would be a rather uninteresting reality, it would be toad-work, but Larkin sees it as an honest, sincere existence. Perhaps we may see in this attitude a defense of the quiet, humdrum working life Larkin himself spent as a librarian, but the poet is quite convinced that this is the sanest form of existence. And this is how reality actually is, even if some criticize it as dull and boring.

### 49.4.2 "Toads"

The common man, according to Philip Larkin, does not go about killing dragons: he leads a quiet, uneventful life. Time and again he presents himself as a workaday, middle-class man who has few interesting experiences to either recall or anticipate. His is an anti-romantic stance, looking reality square in the face, stripped of all dream or illusion. Real life comprises not dreams and fancies but hard work which brings in money and the physical comforts of life. So, there is no escape from "toad work," as he emphasizes in his poems "Toads," and "Toads Revisited." The first poem voices a fleeting resentment against routine, only to conclude that one cannot possibly escape it:

One has to work for a living and there is no dodging toad work. This is an anti-escapist outlook which requires even more courage than killing dragons in private fantasies.

For Larkin, toad work has its uses: it keeps one usefully occupied, and somewhat allays the fear of death. Thus, it is a solution to many problems that confront human beings

### 49.4.3 "Toads Revisited"

"Toads Revisited" reiterates this theme of hard labour. Here again the speaker confronts the necessity and value of work. Even if work is tedious, it is essential as it



makes life bearable and helps one pass time which otherwise would hang heavy. Larkin strongly disapproves of idlers, louts, and wasters -- the "Losels, loblolly-men, louts" of "Tods" -- who simply drift through life lazily, loitering around with little to do. As for himself, given a choice, he would any day opt for a regular, routine life, plod along industriously until his time is up. Such is the subject of "Tods Revisited".

The idea that Larkin tries to present is that life can be meaningful even if it is not spectacular. Besides, there is more beyond the superficialities than meets the eye: there is an internal wealth that is more than adequate compensation for the obvious dreariness.

#### 49.4.4 "Mr Bleaney"

The same theme continues in "Mr Bleaney" whose life is viewed from more than a single perspective. A first reading of the poem gives the feel of an uncharitable epitaph, almost to the tune of "Here lies Mr Bleaney....":

Mr Bleaney (his name seems to suggest both, bleak and mean, epithets appropriate to his lifestyle) is judged by the room in which he lived and the traces he leaves behind in his room. He apparently had fixed habits and cared little for frills and fancies. Mr Bleaney (the "Mr" is an ironic emphasis on the orthodox respectability of the man) has led an uncontroversial life, living in a small town, content with his job, right up to the time "They" moved him. Who moved him? The employers or the undertakers? It does not matter. What matters is that he was contented enough to lay put, moving only when there was pressure from "them."

To the narrator of the poem, Mr Bleaney's life has apparently been unbearably dull, judging from the paraphernalia left behind. How could one possibly be contented in a bare, monk-like cell with no decor, no interesting view from the window, and no means of entertainment except for the landlady's radio? This is the first perspective on Mr Bleaney, the viewpoint of an unsympathetic outsider who can see little beyond the facade. The focus is on the monotony of his life. Clearly, there are no revelatory moments in Mr Bleaney's life. But, at the same time, Bleaney has another face that his acquaintances are familiar with. His landlady, for instance, his sister and his Frinton friends have had a special, personal relationship with him. There is the second perspective on Bleaney which differs from the narrator's. With them Bleaney seems on easy terms: he can have his way with the landlady, but he, in turn, attends to her garden; the Frinton folk welcome him every summer; he is on cordial terms with his sister with whom he spends Christmas every year. So, even though Bleaney seems to have led an uninteresting life, it has been a very well-planned, organized, and satisfying one for him, which is more than the narrator is likely to have.

The third view of Bleaney contrasts him with the narrator in the last two stanzas:

But if he stood and watched the frigid wind  
Tousling the clouds, .....

.....  
I don't know.

In the worldly sense, Mr Bleaney could be called a failure -- this is how he appears to the materialistic new occupant of his room -- but he is spiritually better fortified for life. He has a rich inner life which sustains him, so his drab surroundings do not depress him the way they depress the narrator. This is the difference between the two men.

#### 49.4.5 "Church Going"

An everyday concern of the common man is religion. This is the subject Larkin takes up in "Church Going." However, there is no direct treatment of the subject. Larkin

himself says that in the poem he is concerned with "going to church, not religion." But the church becomes a representative institution, and when Larkin speaks of it, he is at the same time concerned with religion. The point of view presented in the poem is not a unilateral one. It is comparable to "Mr Bleaney" where the attempt is first to paint a humdrum picture and then to highlight its positive aspects which are not noticeable at the first glance. The tone conceals a subtle irony. In "Church Going," again, the narrator wears the mask of a disinterested observer, this time commenting not on the lifestyle of an individual he has never met (as in "Mr Bleaney"), but on the importance that the church and religion have for the common man. In the persona of the common man, the poet begins the poem:

The opening lines of the poem are important for what they imply: "Once I am sure there's nothing going on / I step inside, letting the door thud shut." The narrator probably would not have entered if some religious activity *had* been going on inside. He would have felt uncomfortable, embarrassed, ill at ease. He belongs to an age that is in ferment, the old being obsolete and the new not yet fit to take its place. Hence values that were believed in earlier no longer provide spiritual support.

The dilemma of the twentieth-century man, as Larkin sees it, is what to believe in if not religion. "Church Going" has been described by G. S. Fraser as "the Movement's prize poem." It presents a true picture of the post-war Welfare State Englishman: "shabby and not concerned with his appearance; poor -- he has a bike, not a car; gauche but full of agnostic piety; underfed, underpaid, overtaxed, hopeless, bored, wry" (Alvarez). In other words, the protagonist of "Church Going" is another variation (peculiar to the 'fifties decade) of the "unknown" citizen that Auden spoke of in the thirties.

#### 49.4.6 "The Whitsun Weddings"

Another representative Larkin poem is "The Whitsun Weddings." Whereas "Church Going" is concerned with rituals conducted in church -- rituals accompanying birth, death and marriage -- the subject of "the Whitsun Weddings" is specifically the marriage ritual and the significance it has in human life.

It is the wedding season and the poet, travelling by train, has the chance to witness a number of men and women who have recently participated in marriage parties and are on different platforms to see off the bridal couples. The poet's view of marriage is apparently a cynical one. The participants of the ritual are comic figures, beginning with the brides: the "grinning and pomaded, girls" and the equally ludicrous older generation.

The fathers with broad belts under their suits  
And scamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;  
And uncle shouting smut...

To Larkin, it is all quite "farical," the more experienced women sharing their secret "like a happy funeral," and marriage being little more than a green signal for "a religious wounding." However, the main thrust of the poem is not on the absurdity of the entire situation. The concluding note is what matters the most to Larkin: that on one particular day an assorted number of different characters involved in different situations come together briefly, sharing a few moments of their lives together. They may never meet again, and even on that particular day, they may not have met but for the "frail / Travelling coincidence." It is this strangeness of everyday life that Larkin muses on. This is a thought that does not strike the young couples who are too engrossed in the present to heed their future:

-- and none  
Thought of the others they would never meet  
Or how their lives would all contain this hour.

At the moment theirs is a closed, self-contained world that the poet is excluded from. If there are "Long shadows over major roads," they are unaware of them.

You may note that Larkin is not associated actively with the marriage ceremonies he speaks of. He is simply a casual onlooker, a chance passenger in a train, looking out through the window, observing all that happens detachedly. This is the perspective in most of his poems: he is usually the commentator, an observer and not an actor in the scene, whether he writes of "Love Songs in Age," or of a night storm in "Wedd' Wind."

#### 49.4.7 "At Grass"

When he speaks of superannuated race-horses in "At Grass," the idea that Larkin tries to get across is that old age, like youth, is a necessary part of life and one must accept it calmly when it comes. This is a point of view antithetical to Dylan Thomas's who passionately begs his father not to "go gentle into that good night," instead, to "Rage, rage, against the dying of the light." "At Grass" is a serene picture of old age, the heyday of youth having gone by and the shadows gradually lengthening in the sunset of life. We are told that the poem was probably inspired by a newsreel film on Brown Jack, the racehorse in his retirement (Timms). The horses that Larkin speaks of have enjoyed glorious times, but now have slipped into oblivion:

Unlike human beings, these horses are not nostalgic about the world of glory left behind. They do not resent the passing of time; there are no "memories [that] plague their ears like flies." They "Have slipped their names... in the evening come." These lines bring to mind the concluding note of "Toads Revisited" where the speaker, at the end of the day, would like other "toads" to help him down Cemetery Road. In the case of the horses, it is the stable boys who lead them home, but the idea is the same -- that when the time comes, one should be ready to move on without a fuss.

Blake Morrison reads the poem as a political allegory; the race horses in old age symbolizing England's loss of power and glory. It is a "post-imperial" poem and uses the "language of imperial achievement" and "imperial loss". Alvarez considers it a "pastoral" poem. "At Grass" is an apparently simple poem that is open to several interpretations. Perhaps it would be best read as a poem that reiterates the main concern of Larkin, for instance, that expressed in "Toads," or "Toads Revisited." It advocates a harmony with nature, an agreement with the pace of time, and also a preparedness for the approach of death. This, according to Larkin, would be the sensible attitude towards life.

Larkin is not immersed in life the way Dylan Thomas is, nor is he as distanced as the helmeted airman in Auden's poems. His is a halfway position, between objectivity and subjectivity. It is a middle path.

It is the middle path that Larkin insists on sticking to all the time. He upholds mediocrity in that it is uncontroversial. In poem after poem he points out that even the ordinary, mundane aspects of life have their charm, if only we have eyes to see. In a way, he is saying what Wallace Stevens says in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird": that if you look at it carefully, even the ordinary will seem extraordinary. The difference is that whereas in Stevens's point of view it is the colouring light of the imagination that makes reality seem special, in Larkin's scheme of thought the imagination does not seem to have much importance because he believes in coming face to face with the plainness, the hard realities of life. His poems are not meant for an elitist group, nor are they meant for dreamers or lovers who have "the griefs of the ages" in their arms. Larkin caters to the common man on the street who, though ordinary, is intelligent and literate. He is an anti-intellectual, "middle-brow" poet for whom "the aim of poetry is... simply 'to keep the child from its TV set and the old man from his pub'" (Timms)

The Movement was not held together by any positive programme. On the contrary, the Movement poets shared "a negative determination to avoid bad principles" (Conquest). Perhaps one could say that The Movement was basically an anti-Eliot effort, an accidental event in the history of literature that owed its existence to a few like-minded persons coming together at Oxford in the 1940s. If Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, Bruce Montgomery, and John Wain had not chanced to meet on common grounds, their shared animosity towards precursor poets would probably not have crystallized into a more or less organized movement against what they were convinced were outdated poetic mores.

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## 49.5 EXERCISES IN COMPREHENSION

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1. In what way were the Movement Poets reacting against the "excesses" of the poetry of the first half of the twentieth century? Were they, in your opinion, successful in undermining the influence of the older poets?

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[You will find an answer to the first part of this question in Section III of this unit ("The Poetry of the Fifties"). For the second part of the question you will have to think on your own and decide whether the Movement Poets were indeed successful in overshadowing the achievements of their predecessors. Hint: Whose achievements would you consider greater? Those of Eliot, Pound, Auden, and Dylan Thomas? Or those of Larkin, D. J. Enright, Tomlinson, and their contemporaries? Give reasons for your answer.]

2. Write a note on the anti-romantic stance adopted by Philip Larkin in his poems.

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[In order to answer this question you will have to look closely at some of Larkin's poems, e.g., "I Remember, I Remember," "Mr. Bleaney," and "Toads" / "Toads Revisited." Note how, in the first poem, he undermines the romantic notion of childhood being a glorious period when one has "intimations of immortality" (in Wordsworth's language) by recounting his early years as a drab, insignificant period when nothing, absolutely nothing happened. In the other three poems, bring out how Larkin glorifies not a superman or an extraordinary personality but an ordinary, nondescript individual of no distinction, holding perhaps a clerical post, leading an unexceptional life of utter boredom. Why, in your opinion, does Larkin choose to write about such a theme? Is it a reaction? And to what?]

3. Larkin has been called an "uncommon poet for the common man." Would you agree? How does he glorify the common man in his poems?

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[You will refer to Larkin's preference for the ordinary rather than the special. This would be related to the reaction against the kind of poetry that existed earlier: the nineteenth-century romanticism, and the modernist intellectualism of Eliot, Pound, and Auden. You may illustrate your answer with the help of all the poems included in this unit.]

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## 49.6 LET'S SUM UP

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In this unit we have talked about the poetry of the 1950s, in particular the Movement Poetry, and how it came as a reaction to the school of Eliot, Pound, and Auden. Philip Larkin's role in giving shape and impetus to the new movement in poetry was emphasized. The main themes and concerns of his poetry have been highlighted with reference to selected poems by him.

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## 49.7 SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

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