CHAPTER – IV

THE WHITSUN WEDDINGS

_The Whitsun Weddings_ got published in February 1964, nine years later than _The Less Deceived_. This volume contains thirty two poems most of which discuss the ‘central issues of ordinary life in the language of ordinary speech [and the] details of everyday.’¹ In England, like _The Less Deceived_, it was immediately a great success with a rampant sale. This volume, which ‘made him famous’² contains a variety of mood according to Larkin: ‘I think their strong suit is variety of mood: if you are not enjoying one, at least the next will be different!’³

The sense of alienation and the fear of death possess him more in this volume. This fear of death is what prompted many of the poems in this volume apart from his social commentaries in a number of poems. The polemicist of “Toads” in _The Less Deceived_ is now with a darker mood of “Toads Revisited” in _The Whitsun Weddings_. He has now become a more real man of his time. Poems contained in this volume are more autobiographical than those of the previous volume. Larkin’s view on life will have more lucidity in this volume and as such his sad face will be identified poem after poem:
Larkin’s sensitivity to the sadness of the human condition is connected with his basic view of the incompleteness, the imperfection, of it. In his view of that condition, what connects us all is the irony of the discrepancy between our spiritual wants and the designs of a world that fails to satisfy them. Just as we struggle for the harmony of fulfilment, time and death effortlessly conspire against us.  

This ‘sensitivity’ of Larkin is prominently exposed in this volume and the poems having this sensitivity are given a central place for individual discussions in this chapter while incorporating some other issues here and there. Six poems—“Days,” “Mr Bleaney,” “Whitsun Weddings,” “Self’s the Man,” “Ambulances” and “Dockery and Son”—are individually discussed in this chapter for these poems show the major concerns of Larkin. These poems are simple in diction with vivid metaphors and show Larkin’s skills in his exposition of life and the inevitability of the horrifying death. The portrayal of the mundanity of English life in the wake of consumerism and individual freedom is another facet which these poems show clearly.

“Days”

Of all the poems in The Whitsun Weddings, “Days” is the earliest one. It was written in August, 1953 when Larkin was the librarian of Queen’s University, Belfast—a time believed to be the lonesomest period of his life and the place best suited for writing: ‘The best writing conditions I ever had were in Belfast, when I was working at the University there.’

The poem begins with a startling question—‘What are days for?’—and the answer to this question immediately comes in the next line: ‘Days are where we live.’ So days are important because they provide space for our
survival and they also remind us everyday that we are living. But suddenly the poet brings in another question in the last line of the first stanza: ‘Where can we live but days?’ We do not know whether the speaker of the poem is unhappy while living within the sphere of ‘days’ or not, yet he has at least raised this rhetorical question. Thus the first stanza of the poem is boxed in between the two questions leaving us unanswered of the second one.

The second stanza opens with an exclamatory word ‘Ah’ and is followed by a panorama of a picturesque field where ‘the priest and the doctor/ In their long coats’ come. The key words in the second stanza are ‘priest’ and ‘doctor,’ both of which remind us of illness and death. Doctors come to us when we are ill and the priests help us solve moral and religious problems in life. Moreover priests can say about the religious issue of life after death. However to Larkin religion is completely useless in our practical life:

Religion used to try,  
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade  
Created to pretend we never die,  
And spacious stuff that says no rational being  
Can fear a thing it will not feel . . . (CP 208)

Religion, here, cannot solve the problem of the ‘Anaesthetic from which none come round’(CP 208) and as such the ‘priest’ in the poem is a failure in his attempt to answer the question— ‘Where can we live but days?’ The picturing of the priest and the doctor has, thus, a larger significance in a philosophical context. Larkin brings in two aspects of life in the second stanza of the poem; one, the physical aspect represented by the doctor and two, the spiritual aspect represented by the priest.
The doctor is important in the light of Larkin’s bad health—eyesight problem, hypochondria, deafness, hay-fever, nose operation to remove a polyp, giddiness and agoraphobia, frequent exhaustion and above all cancer. The wish for a spiritual life comes generally when one’s physical health is deteriorating. However Larkin’s effort to find solace in religion turns out to be futile because, for him, it is a mere pretension: ‘That vast moth-eaten musical brocade/ Created to pretend we never die’ (CP 208). He is fixed within the boundary of reality, and indeed he is ‘a declared realist.’ His problem is an average man’s problem, the inability to provide meaning to what religion says when ‘The dead are shapeless in the shapeless earth’ (CP 269).

The language employed here is ‘abstract language’ and may allude to a number of conjectures. The first question is raised by the ‘we’ in the second line and immediately finds its answer—‘Days are where we live.’ These ‘days’ become an authority in the third line making us do our duty and telling us that we cannot go beyond the boundary of ‘days.’ ‘We’ are, thus, subjected to reality when the answer of ‘Where can we live but days?’ is left to the hands of the ‘doctor’ and the ‘priest.’ ‘We’ know that the ‘doctor’ and the ‘priest’ are needed to save our ‘body’ and ‘soul’ respectively whether ‘we’ live inside or outside the ‘days.’ However, the ‘priest and the ‘doctor’ also fail to provide the answer of the second question of the poem and they are ‘running over the fields’ in search of the answer.

The personification of ‘days’ as ‘they’ in the third line gives the impression that ‘days’ and ‘we’ are two opposing forces out of which ‘they’ overpower the ‘we.’ The ‘we’ in the sixth line of the poem, therefore, tries to escape from the clutches of this ‘they.’ This is an impossible effort which
the poet cannot stop doing. The unsettled second question in the first stanza forms the core of Larkin’s riddle of life and death, an ontological question which controls many of his poems. The contradiction between ‘days’ and ‘we’ is thus given an ontological shape out of which the ‘doctor’ and the ‘priest’ come to play their roles:

The activity of the priest and the doctor— their frenetic scampering ‘over the fields’— suggests fear, desperation and helplessness. Life, the poem (“Day”) implies, is impotent before death, as neither religion (“the priest”) nor science (“the doctor”) can help us counter it, for there is no antidote to death.8

This is the predicament of Larkin in many of his poems such as “Church Going,” “Aubade,” “At Grass,” “Wires,” “Next, Please,” “Triple Time,” “Myxomatosis,” “Nothing To Be Said,” etc. Like the ‘old cattle’ and the ‘young steers,’ ‘we’ in “Days” also are imprisoned within the limitations of the ‘days.’ This is to ascertain what P.R. King says:

Larkin’s poetry is a poetry of disappointment, of the destruction of romantic illusions, of man’s defeat by time and his own inadequacies. It could be seen as the poetry of the impotent self, unable or unwilling to risk being wrong.9

The ‘risk’ here is the risk of being wrong when ‘we’ want to be independent of the ‘days.’ The ‘priest’ and the ‘doctor’ cannot do anything for the ‘we.’ The uneasiness of the ‘priest’ and the ‘doctor’ suggested by the last line of the poem is characteristic of many of his poems such as “Going,” “At Grass,” “Wedding-Wind,” “Next, Please,” etc. All these poems are from *The Less Deceived* which ‘made his name.’10 “Days” shares the mood of these poems, particularly that of “Going,” in style and language.
The simplicity of diction and the ontological content of the poem are well matched to give the rhetorical effect in the last stanza. There are four actors in the poem—‘days,’ ‘we,’ ‘priest’ and ‘doctor.’ Among them ‘days’ serve as the most powerful actor in the sense that ‘we,’ ‘priest’ and ‘doctor’ are all acting on a stage under the direction of the ‘days.’ The desire to cross over the boundary of ‘days’ means the ‘desire of oblivion’ (CP 42) which means death. The ‘priest’ can say about life after death while the ‘doctor’ can do his job on this side of the physical world. Thus the ‘doctor’ and the ‘priest’ represent two different worlds between which Larkin’s dilemma continues time and again. This is an unresolved question between the doctor’s world of reality and metaphysical world of the priest. In this sense the poem, though the theme is a recurrence of what has been in the poems discussed in the previous chapter, is a manifestation of Larkin’s deeper philosophical penetration in life and is more mature than the earlier ones.

“Mr Bleaney”

Of the many autobiographical poems Larkin wrote, “Mr Bleaney” is one which represents not only the poet himself but also the English people against the backdrop of the postwar English society. The poem narrates the whole drama of a common man and his nature described in terms of how one lives within a society where he is tightly conditioned. This poem also delineates the link between one’s psychological world and the physical world outside it.

The poem begins in the form of a dramatic monologue with the speaker describing Mr Bleaney’s life in terms of the condition of the room he (Bleaney) once lived. Mr Bleaney lived in the room and was later forced to leave the
room: ‘They move him.’ It means that there is certain disagreement between Bleaney and the owner of the house. The description of the room shows that it is not a spacious and comfortable room. ‘Flowered curtains’ which are short decorate the window above ‘five inches of the sill.’ There is a ‘bed’ and an ‘upright chair.’ There is ‘no hook/behind the door’ and ‘no room for books and bags.’ Yet, he has accepted to stay there— ‘I’ll take it.’ It shows that Mr. Bleaney is threatened by both poverty and alienation:

In the eyes of the speaker, everything in Bleaney’s life points to failure. He had no wife, no house, no money. He seems to have been degradingly dependent upon the hospitality of others. Throughout most of the poem, the speaker’s contemptuous tone of voice is his method of drawing a distinction between himself and the dead man.11

Larkin makes one assumption here that he is different from Bleaney. He thinks he is better than Bleaney.

Though the poet is contemptuous of Bleaney’s habit, his final point— ‘. . . I don’t know’— is suggestive of the similarities between them. Here is an interesting point: Like Bleaney, Larkin spent throughout his life after 1943 in a place far away from his original home. The condition of the room where Bleaney was lodged has something to do with what Larkin complained of Holtby Hall where he was lodged on his arrival at Hull. On 24 March 1955, two months before writing the poem “Mr Bleaney,” Larkin, complaining over the state of affairs at Holtby Hall, wrote to Judy Egerton:

As you see, I have arrived, and have been at it four days. Verdict? Well, the above address is not [emphasis Larkin’s] suitable: small, barefloored and noisy: I feel as if I were lying in
some penurious doss house at night, with hobos snoring and quarrelling all round me. There is a negro in the next room who wd [sic] benefit enormously from a pair of bedroom slippers.\textsuperscript{12}

Later in the same year on 26 April 1955 after he had moved from Holtby House, Cottingham to 11 Outlands Road in the same village, Larkin again complained of the house owned by Mr Dowling in his letter to D.J. Enright: ‘... I can’t ignore the blasted RADIO which seems a feature of everyone’s life these days, and it prevents me from sitting thinking and scribbling in the evening, yet if I grumbled my complaint would be regarded as eccentric as a complaint against the traffic or the birds or the children outside.'\textsuperscript{13}

In the letter to Judy Egerton, Larkin has already hinted out the dreary life in a rented room which will be an inevitable part of his life in the coming years and that life is what is portrayed in “Mr Bleaney.” The ‘blasted RADIO’ mentioned in his letter to Enright is ‘The jabbering set’ of “Mr Bleaney.” This radio represents the postwar Britain in which radio has become a symbol of both cultural and technological change as described in the second chapter. The speaker’s examination of Bleaney and his room points at his (speakers) intention to give a descriptive picture of the self and its dependence and independence. Unlike “Wants,” “Mr Bleaney” is a poem that exposes Larkin’s scepticism in the independence of the self. This is unique because in most cases Larkin has highlighted the importance of the self and the need to defend it from the domination by others. The two letters mentioned above complains of not only loneliness but more about the unhealthy environment created by the others in the house where he is lodged. The dilemma is between the self and the unhealthy environment where the self is placed. This is a postwar phenomenon ascertained by the diction itself: ‘upright chair,’ ‘sixty-watt bulb,’ ‘jabbering set,’ etc.
If one’s life is to be determined in terms of how he lives— ‘That how we live measures our own nature’— the speaker tries to know how Bleaney lives to determine the standard of his life. However he could not come out with a definite answer. The speaker says, ‘I know his habits’ in the fourth stanza and contradicted himself by saying ‘. . . I don’t know’ at the end of the poem. This is a state of confusion. But with no option in hand, after a minute examination of Bleaney’s life, the speaker has to take Bleaney’s room: ‘So it happens that I lie/Where Mr Bleaney lay.’ It means that the speaker is like Bleaney who has no home, no wife, no family. However this Bleaney has his positive aspects including some success. He is a failure only materialistically as Lolette Kuby writes:

Materialistically, Mr. Bleaney was a failure, but there had been overtones of love in his life that the speaker is blind to. Much of what he knows about Bleaney is, after all, apart from a few material objects, learned from the landlady’s compulsive chatter about him. From her point of view quite a different Bleaney might be envisioned. This Bleaney would be one who maintained lasting friendships; one with an urge to salvage and beautify a littered, tussocky strip of land; one who could evoke the concern and warmth of a landlady to the extent that she prepared special sauces for him, accommodated herself to his schedule, even bought a television set to please him. 14

This nature of Bleaney shows that he can still enjoy the company of his landlady, friends and relatives even though he is deprived of the material comforts of a posh life.

Thus, Bleaney bears the characteristics of a normal man in his own nature that can create beautiful human relationships though the speaker can not see that side of his personality. When the speaker chooses to stay in the room
where Bleaney stayed and starts fixing Bleaney’s life within the material description, he always hints at what Bleaney has rather than what Bleaney is. Here, Bleaney is higher than the speaker: “The speaker is isolated and lonely, while Bleaney does not appear to have been so.” However four months after the completion of “Mr Bleaney,” the loneliness and isolation are welcomed by Larkin in the poem “Counting”:

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Thinking in terms of one
Is easily done—
One room, one bed, one chair
One person there
Makes perfect sense; One set
Of wishes can be met
One coffin filled. (CP 108)
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The description of the room here is same as that of Mr Bleaney’s. Here, the speaker approves the room because:

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...counting up to two
Is harder to do;
For one must be denied
Before it’s tried. (CP 108)
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It is not sure whether the poet desires to be alone or his choice of the room is a compulsion.

The habit of the speaker makes him different from Mr Bleaney who can win people like the landlady. Though the sense of alienation forms part of their psychological burden, the degree of loneliness is higher in the speaker’s case than that of Bleaney’s because when the speaker cannot develop a relationship with anyone Bleaney can do it at least with his landlady. While Bleaney could
enjoy ‘summer holidays,/And Christmas at his sister’s house in Stoke,’ the speaker cannot enjoy such social gathering. The last two stanzas are significant in exposing the dull humdrum life in postwar England and the associated theme of death and alienation. The dull unromantic life is described as:

But if he stood and watched the frigid wind
Tousling the clouds, lay on the fusty bed
Telling himself that this was home, and grinned,
And shivered, without shaking off the dread . . . (CP 102)

Again the eventual end of this unromantic life is:

That how we live measures our own nature,
And at his age having no more to show
Than one hired box should make him pretty sure
He warranted no better, I don’t know. (CP 103)

Having examined the lifestyle of Bleaney, the speaker is suddenly stopped by the coffin image alluded by the metaphorical ‘hired box’: ‘it is death as the only certain solution to the riddle of the goal of life; and it is the awareness of the coming of death and man’s “costly aversion of the eyes from death” which dissolves [emphasis King’s] any possibility of our dreams becoming the reality.’17 This fact about the end of life is true not only for Bleaney who ‘warranted no better’ but also for the speaker who will follow a similar life by staying in the room Bleaney once stayed. Both of them live in the same fashion but Bleaney ‘warranted no better’ while the speaker says ‘I don’t know.’ Thus when the coffin image comes in the penultimate line, both Bleaney and the speaker fail to realize their dreams.

The language of the poem is simple and colloquial and this simplicity helps in the portrayal of the simple and uneventful lives of the speaker and
Bleaney. The shabby room and the environment surrounding it create a disgusting atmosphere from which both of them cannot escape. There are ‘Flowered curtains, thin and frayed,’ ‘Bed,’ ‘upright chair,’ ‘sixty-watt bulb,’ ‘no hook,’ ‘no room for books or bags,’ ‘saucer-souvenir’ and ‘the jabbering set’ in the room. It shows that it is a low rent room having no amenities of a posh life. Outside this room are ‘a strip of building land,’ ‘Tussocky, littered,’ ‘frigid wind’ and the ‘clouds.’ It shows the unpleasant life they experience within the limited extent of their lives.

The materials available in the room belong to the postwar England. The poem could not have been written in any other time except in the postwar period which is characterised by various austerity measures of the government which cut the English posh life down to size as narrated in the second chapter. The speaker and Bleaney are, therefore, unquestionably postwar English bearing the brunt of the economic weakness of Britain.

The speaker of the poem tries to compare ‘I’ and ‘he’ in the poem only to realize that ‘we’ which unifies both ‘I’ and ‘he’ will at last end in ‘one hired box.’ He will also move out of the room in the manner how Bleaney is moved out in the first stanza of the poem: ‘They moved him.’ The verb ‘move’ is transitive here. They ‘moved’ Bleaney because he did not or could not move ‘at his age.’ It raises a question: Is he dead? The fact that he has ‘no more to show’ means his game of life is over. However the speaker’s examination of Bleaney’s life ends in ‘I don’t know’ which is very important for Christopher Ricks: ‘The pronoun (‘I’) which so often marks the crucial turn or takes the crucial stress in his poetry; the colloquial negative ‘don’t’; and the admission as to doubtful knowledge.’ This makes the room ‘What something hidden from us chose’ (CP 183) and not the original choice of the speaker or Bleaney.
Interestingly, the speaker and Bleaney can be examined as one character split into two like the ‘you’ and ‘I’ of T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Bleaney’s failure in life is also symptomatic of the speaker’s case in the sense that both of them are unified in the ‘we’ of the first line of the last stanza: ‘That how we live measures our own nature.’ It means that the way how they live are similar. The speaker’s mood, anxiety, failure, anger and alienation are registered in his exposition of Bleaney’s character one by one along with the description of the room. Then the coffin image ‘one hired box’ and the self-sceptical ‘I don’t know’ put the whole drama to an end. Thus the speaker and Bleaney are belittled within the limits of the four-wall room with nothing special to give or take. They become very small within the small dreary room.

Larkin’s portrayal of Bleaney shows his clarity and dexterity in the observation of reality and it’s impact on the individual. The language, style, theme and technique show the depth he looks into the everyday life in the postwar England and how alienation and death form the nucleus of human psyche in his time. It is how he becomes ‘an uncommon poet for the common man.’

“The Whitsun Weddings”

Spiritual barrenness and individual freedom are two important subject matters of the talk of the town in the second half of the 20th century during which Larkin’s name sneaked into the pages of the history of English literature. The period is marked by loss of religious conviction, rise of individual freedom, advancement of science and technology, decolonisation of the British colonies in Asia and Africa, cultural hybridization etc.— all of which hit the human psyche
drastically and gave birth to the difficult poetry of the period. Immensely pleasing and, yet, extremely difficult to read, among others written in this period, is Larkin’s “The Whitsun Weddings” that details the meaninglessness of human existence and the loss of linkedness among the individuals who are living in a psychologically unorganised society marked by individual freedom. His poems show a clear picture of the complex mid 20th century which ‘brings to an end an age of innocence.’ It is in this period that Larkin wrote “The Whitsun Weddings” redefining a world of anxiety and spiritual blankness.

The poem begins with a lacklustre description of a journey on a religious day that the poet ‘was late getting away’ though it was Whitsun. He was not aware of the day’s importance that he said:

... a very slow train that stopped at every station and I had not realized that, of course, this was the train at all the wedding couples would get on and go to London for their honeymoon; it was an eye opener to me.21

The fact that Larkin is not aware of the sanctity of the day brings in our mind the world W.B. Yeats saw in the first half of the 20th century. This suggests Larkin to be the falcon of Yeats’s “The Second Coming” who cannot hear the falconer. Throughout the journey, Larkin could not link himself to the sense of community brought in by the newly married couples at different stations and he found it as a ‘frail travelling coincidence’ which their fathers would later consider as a ‘Success so huge and wholly farcical.’ Larkin’s metaphorical description of the weddings as ‘happy funeral’ and ‘religious wounding’ is like what Yeats saw earlier:

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.\textsuperscript{22}

The poem is full of the words and phrases such as ‘nondescript,’ ‘whoops and skirls,’ ‘grinning and pomaded,’ ‘girls in parodies of fashion,’ ‘posed irresolutely,’ ‘shouting smut,’ etc. which are suggestive of the negative aspect of the weddings. The newly married girls are described with such words and phrases in the third and fourth stanzas and this pathetic intensity bears its full weight when Larkin calls the weddings as ‘happy funeral’ and ‘a religious wounding’ in the sixth stanza. Not only Larkin who is a pronounced atheist, those couples aboard the train for a honeymoon trip to London have also slackened their grip on religion. Their being married on a religious day does not bear any religious sense and unity as he sees the couples as different individuals having no linkedness.

Throughout the journey, Larkin remains in his compartment passive and dull and is separated by the transparent window glass from the rest of the world. The only reaction he made to the newly married couples is his silence. However, he knows marriage better than those married and clearly sees the gap between the marriage and the significance of the ‘Whitsun.’ When he cannot link the marriages to the religious meaning of the ‘Whitsun,’ a reader is immediately reminded of the Yeatsian line ‘Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold.’ Larkin’s inability to join the togetherness in the train is primarily caused by the fact that the couples aboard the train get married because of a social habit essentially based on a material world. Marriage, for him, is where the selves suffer. The journey’s expected destination, London, does not assure anything to the poet. Instead it is overshadowed by the ‘frail travelling coincidence’: 
The gathering expectancy [of destination] as the train approaches London—‘We/Pick up bad habits of expectancy’ (Next, Please, 1955)—is but a ‘frail travel-ing coincidence’; the couples do not even think, as the poet sadly does, of their partnership in a vague featureless future.23

As the poem progresses describing the people and the English scenery the first person ‘I’ in the first line could not find its presence in the unifying ‘we’ which controls the movement of the poem in the following stanzas. ‘We’ is something where the differentiating ‘I’ fails to participate.

The journey is an allegory of human life, particularly of Larkin himself who remained single throughout his life rejecting the sanctity of marriage. Thus a feeling of alienation dominates the poem and he feels his life secure while doing so which could have been diluted if he would have been married. The distance he maintains between the dozen couples and his own life makes him alive guarding against the possible dilution of life. He always sees individuals individually and this vision of life brings him nearer to the Yeatsian line: ‘Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold.’

Larkin could not see any place to which he belonged that even his birth-place, Coventry, could not assure him anything except that it was a place where his childhood was unspent. When his friend asked, ‘Was that [Coventry] where you “have your roots”?’ (CP 81), Larkin retorted, ‘No, [Coventry is] only where my childhood was unspent’ (CP 81). The bigger question with Larkin is: ‘Where is the centre that should hold us?’ The case of Yeats is the ‘centre’ that cannot hold but for Larkin this ‘centre’ is nowhere. For Yeats, atleast, he could see the centre though it cannot hold the things that have fallen apart, but, for Larkin, he can only see the things and not the centre. He is completely uprooted in his world and he sees the same case in every individual at every
turn. What Stan Smith once said that ‘Even when, as in the title poem [“The Whitsun Weddings”], the entrained Larkin is homing in on London, this sense of exile persists’ sneaks into one’s mind the moment he goes through the lines of the poem.

The baffling notion that critics like Lollete Kuby raises on the poem is its affirmativeness which is contradictory to what has been discussed earlier:

The title poem of *The Whitsun Weddings* is Larkin at his most affirmative. The poem does not directly concern the conflict between the ideal and the real. However, interpreting the poem from the angle Kuby looks at could be misleading because one could not, at any point of the poem’s passage, see unity between the poet and the dozen couples getting aboard the train. The joy and the sense of community which the weddings convey could not reach Larkin who was always sitting in the train as an outsider. The fact is that Larkin’s position negates all those in the train. The scenery of postwar England—‘building-plots,’ ‘the landscapes,’ ‘Odeon,’ ‘London spread out in the sun,’ ‘pullmans,’ ‘wide farms,’ ‘short shadowed cattles,’ ‘canals... with industrial froth,’ etc.—is what the poet sees and not what he looks at. It all appeared because the train moved. The fact is that he is so passive to such an extent that he does not respond to such external stimuli because his link to these external objects is suddenly short circuited by the realities he sees in the married couples. Thus the ‘ideal’ suggested by the word ‘Whitsun’ is in conflict with the ‘real’ represented by the ‘dozen marriages’ which Larkin calls a ‘religious wounding’ and a ‘happy funeral’ in the sixth stanza of the poem.
What is still baffling is the last line of the first stanza—‘where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet’—because it is suggestive of a vision of affirmation. The poet sees ‘sky’ which is an allusion to heaven, ‘Lincolnshire’ which is suggestive of earth and ‘water’ which symbolises life, meeting at a point in the horizon where the poet will never reach out. If this line is read in conjunction with the last two lines of the poem, Larkin’s outlook can be debated again as to how negative he is. These two lines come as a denouement of the poem to a reader who has already witnessed Larkin’s lacklustre description of the journey. Even in it one is not sure of the place where the ‘arrow shower’ will become ‘rain.’ The ‘somewhere’ in the last line seems to be an unreal place where the girls will be marked off ‘unreally from the rest’ and where the ‘ideal’ will not meet the ‘real.’ In the very opening stanza of the poem, the poet can atleast visualize, though vague it is, a meeting point of ‘Lincolnshire,’ ‘sky’ and ‘water.’ But towards the end of the poem, Larkin has lost that sight too:

The final two lines are a study in ambivalence: ‘swelled’ implies growth, but ‘a sense of falling’ is ominous both for the speaker’s mood and for the marriages. This arc-shaped movement is echoed by the ‘arrow-shower’ rising and falling, positive only in the final fertile ‘rain’. ‘Rain’ is however, undercut by uncertainty: it is sent out of sight to ‘somewhere’, not where the speaker is.26

This is to say that the poet is not part of the ideal world of ‘sky,’ ‘Lincolnshire’ and ‘water.’

Thus what Kuby observed to be ‘affirmative’ does not make sense at all as we cannot locate the place where the ‘sky,’ ‘Lincolnshire’ and ‘water’ will meet. The three things have fallen apart like what we find in “The Second Coming.” What invalidates Kuby’s notion further is the fact that ‘The women shared/ the
secret [of marriage] like a happy funeral’ and the girls ‘gripping their handbags
tighter’ saw it as a ‘religious wounding.’ The hamartia of the couples is that they
do not know the ‘religious wounding’ they have caused and what people might
have thought of them. Children found them (couples) ‘dull’ and ‘frowned at’,
fathers found it ‘farcical’ and the speaker saw an ‘uncle shouting smut.’ Before
the appearance of the newly married couples, the poet sketches the mundane
picture of the places they pass through in the first two stanzas— ‘street of blinding
windscreens,’ ‘canals with floatings of industrial froth,’ ‘fish-dock,’ ‘town, new
and nondescript.’ This ‘nondescript’ aspect is strengthened by ‘a noise / The
weddings made’ in the third stanza where the ‘girls/ In parodies of fashion’ appear
like how the women come and go in Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.”
Thus the world Larkin saw is like the ‘Wasteland’ Eliot saw though they describe
it in different terms.

In fact “The Whitsun Weddings” captures the postwar England in which
individuals have lost their grip over any religious conviction thereby causing
individual worlds and individual laws. The poem is symptomatic of the political
and cultural decline after the Second World War. It encompasses England in
terms of its natural landscape, (I thought of London spread out in the sun, / Its
postal districts packed like squares of wheat); people (the girls, fathers, uncles,
couples); industrialization (train, fish-dock, canals, industrial froth etc.) and so
on. The poem’s lines point, in one way or other, at the people or land of the
postwar England which Yeats did in the first half of the 20th century. Thus Larkin
once again writes with lucidity the problem of alienation against the social
background of the postwar Britain.
“Self’s the Man”

In an interview, Larkin once disclosed that he felt as ‘an outsider’ in the society as he remained single out of his own choice. When he said this, “Self’s the Man” was in his mind. Time and again marriage and its implication in life are given a central place in his poems such as “Reasons for Attendance,” “The Whitsun Weddings,” “Dockery and Son,” etc. “Self’s the Man” is also one such poem in which Larkin contrasts his own unmarried life with that of Arnold’s married life. Arnold mentioned in the poem is Arthur Wood, Larkin’s deputy at Hull University Library. The poem is written with an intention to ridicule Wood who boasts of his married life: ‘Its immediate impetus was the wish to deride his deputy librarian Arthur Wood (transformed in the poem into ‘Arnold’). . . . It concentrates on the woe that is in marriage rather than the exhilaration that is in weddings.’ Though the speaker says that ‘Arnold is less selfish than I’ in the first stanza, he (Arnold) will ‘stop her getting away.’ It means that for his own sake ‘Now she’s there all day.’ This is a confinement of a woman for the sake of a man (husband) which Larkin dislikes most. It means putting oneself at the disposal of the other.

Like “Mr Bleaney,” this poem makes a comparative assessment of the poet and his friend Arnold. The poem begins with:

Oh, no one can deny
That Arnold is less selfish than I.
He married a woman to stop her getting away
Now she’s there all day, (CP 117)

and ends in:

Only I’m a better hand
At knowing what I can stand
Without them sending a van –
Or I suppose I can. (CP 118)
This is in a way similar to what the speaker of “Mr Bleaney” compares his own life with that of Bleaney and ends in ‘... I don’t know.’ In the same way, here, the speaker says ‘... I suppose I can’ suggesting that he can only ‘suppose’ and not sure of his own supposition. This poem gives a picture of the speaker’s unstable attitude towards life as he examines Arnold’s life, comments on it, compares it with that of his, questions his own life, interrupts himself, modifies his opinion and concludes in a sceptical line at last — ‘Or I suppose I can.’ This shows that the mindset of the speaker is unstable.

However, when the first two lines of the poem are repeated in the fifth stanza, the whole description of Arnold’s compulsive domestic life comes to an end. Love and marriage have together compelled Arnold to attend to his domestic obligations and his wife is there ‘all day’ to take ‘the money he gets for wasting his life on work.’ He has no time to read the evening paper after his supper because his domestic obligation ranges from the mere ‘Put a screw in this wall’ to writing a letter to his mother-in-law asking her whether she would come for the summer. Such obligations have made Arnold a very small figure who ‘had done nothing in the library to deserve Larkin’s wrath.’

The contrastive arguments of the speaker suddenly find a turn at the beginning of the sixth stanza when the poet surprises us with a sceptical question: ‘Is there such a contrast?’ The answer is ‘No.’ Both of them are equally ‘selfish’ as Arnold is also ‘out for his own ends/ Not just pleasing his friends.’ However the speaker changes his opinion again: ‘Only I’m a better hand/ At knowing what I can stand.’ But this changed opinion becomes questionable in the last line of the poem again. Larkin’s design of the poem becomes more important in relating such arguments and unfolding the motif behind it. The whole poem
can be divided into two— the first five stanzas and the last three stanzas. In the second part the poet contradicts what he has said in the second line of the first stanza.

The argument of the speaker is that Arnold gets married because he wants to be happy and not for making others happy:

He was out for his own ends
Not just pleasing his friends;
And if it was such a mistake
He still did it for his own sake
Playing his own game. (CP 117)

The metaphorical use of the word ‘game’ is interesting here. Arnold is not a winner in the ethical sense of the ‘game’ because his getting married does not mean a noble cause but a selfish end. The word ‘own’ which is repeated three times in the sixth and seventh stanzas is significant as it stands for Arnold’s selfish motif behind his getting married: the motif to ‘stop her getting away.’ The interjection ‘Oh’ in the first line repeated in the fifth stanza has a derogatory sense than being sympathetic.

The first stanza itself asserts this derogatory remark when the speaker ironically says ‘That Arnold is less selfish than I’ followed by the sarcastic line, ‘He married a woman to stop her getting away.’ Actually it is Arnold who is selfish because he stops his wife from ‘getting away.’ But this derogatory remark of the speaker becomes quite manifest only when we start reading the sixth and seventh stanzas with the repetition of the word ‘own’ with a special emphasis. Like how we find in “Dockery and Son,” this speaker completely
rejects the notion of marriage as an institution making people sociable, rather he sees it as an individual burden, a dilution of the sanctity of one’s individual life:

The model is a crass one: the man catches and then owns the woman, with a comic suggestion of hooking a fish in ‘to stop her getting away’. The speaker continues to describe marriage in cynical terms. When we hear that his wife takes Arnold’s money as her ‘perk’, for example, we expect to hear that she spends it on having her hair done, or on fancy clothes. In fact, she spends on the children and the house, not on herself at all.30

This is to say that Arnold is more selfish than his wife whom he finds as his after marriage. The repetition of the word ‘own’ in the sixth and seventh stanzas implies that Arnold lives for his own game of life completely belittled in his own home. Thus the speaker bachelor finds himself in an ethically higher position than his friend Arnold for marriage brings wife, children, family and an endless responsibility that will dilute his freedom. The speaker’s repeated assertion that ‘Arnold is less selfish than I’ becomes completely ironical at the end of the poem when he says, ‘Only I’m a better hand’ in the last stanza. The whole drama we have seen in the first five stanzas is turned upside down by the last stanza of the poem.

Having discussed the issue of marriage in detail in the preceding stanzas, a larger question of alienation has already been set. Both the speaker and Arnold are not happy at all because the former is friendless, childless and has none to share his happiness or sorrow while the latter is belittled under the burden of his domestic life surrounded by wife, children, mother-in-law, etc. Though the speaker says that he is ‘a better hand,’ an examination of his character reveals
that he is a careless, freedom loving man who cannot commit anything to anybody. He is outside the boundary of our society because he rejects an important social institution, marriage. He has no knowledge of the bliss of being in the company of his wife or children, of being part of a family by becoming a father and of being a husband to a loving wife. His view of the world is dreary because of having none to be with him. His freedom has now become a burden to him. To remain single does not mean that he is away from all woes of a married life yet it means the dread of being alone in this world. Though the first two lines of the last stanza raises a positive note, the last line of the poem brings in a lot of scepticism on the projection of the speaker’s life as a ‘better hand.’ While Arnold could not enjoy the company of his friends— ‘Not just pleasing his friends’ — the speaker also feels as an ‘outsider’ in the society because of his celibacy.

Thus the contradiction between the first line and the last line of the last stanza draws a picture of the speaker’s confusion which is a case of the failure to bridge the gap between illusion and reality. While trying to be less deceived, both Arnold and the speaker remain more deceived by their own choices of marriage and celibacy respectively. Here comes what Larkin once said: ‘Anyone who knows me will tell you that I’m not fond of company. I am very fond of people, but it’s difficult to get people without company.’ It suggests that people are not a problem to him but the relationship he should keep with people is a problem for it will call for surrendering his individual freedom to sustain the relationship. A relationship is always higher and powerful than the individuals involved in it and if the individuals think or practically become higher than the relationship, it will definitely break off. Thus a relationship, for Larkin, means ‘putting yourself at the disposal of someone else, ranking them higher than
yourself.'\textsuperscript{32} Since marriage is a kind of serious human relationship involving a number of obligations that will eventually dilute the sanctity of individual freedom, Larkin dreaded over it and chose to remain single. And yet, he says that ‘it worries me from time to time.’\textsuperscript{33} Larkin pondered over the question of marriage time and again but could not come to a decisive conclusion. Remaining single worries him from time to time and yet he could not see anything admirable in marriage including that of Arnold. He could not make a choice between marriage and celibacy. His celibacy is not his choice but ‘what something hidden from us chose’ (CP 143). This precarious condition is what the last stanza suggests in the poem.

Now the eventual conclusion is that in spite of the arguments for and against marriage, Larkin’s feeling of being an ‘outsider’ in the society is quite conspicuous. He strongly tries to put his celibacy in the right perspective by deriding Arnold in the sixth and seventh stanzas. But he becomes unsure of his arguments in the last line. This poem is therefore one of his many autobiographical poems where a strong feeling of alienation because of his celibacy is quite manifest.

\textbf{“Ambulances”}

Larkin’s obsession with death is once again exposed in this poem with a deft treatment of the theme in a common environment of everyone’s everyday in London. Like “Next, Please,” this poem unfolds the gloomy mood of the poet created at the sight of others dying and finding ‘the extinction that we travel to/And shall be lost in always’ (CP 208). The poem describes a familiar sight of how ‘ambulances’ come and pick sick people from the London streets and how
this sight of the ambulances leaves the horrifying image of death to those on the streets.

The first stanza vividly describes the ambulances like the room where the sinners confess their sins in front of a priest. This description gives a religious meaning to the ambulances which form part of the everyday life in the city. However, the link between the ambulances and those in the streets becomes bleak when the ambulances do not look at anybody who looks at them. The personification of the ambulances plays an important role in the interpretation of the poem. Though our first impression of the ambulances has a religious touch which appears to be a saviour, it suddenly becomes a gloomy image of death, the end of everything in life. The fact that ‘All streets in time are visited’ by ambulances spells out death as a reality to everyone. No human knowledge can destroy this fact and the consciousness of this fact nullifies the glories of being alive, ‘Loud noons of cities’ and ‘the unique random blend of families and fashions.’ The operative part in the first stanza is its last line—‘All streets in time are visited.’ This line displays that the ambulances are unstoppable; that they can visit any street anytime and that their coming to the street is beyond the knowledge of those in the streets of life. The ambulances which are ‘closed like confessionals’ in positive note turns negative suddenly in the third line of the first stanza when they do not respond to ‘the glances they absorb.’

The second stanza brings in some characters in the form of the ‘children strewn on steps or road’ and ‘women coming from the shops,’ They are all parts of the ‘Loud noons of cities.’ The children described here look like the dead leaves scattered all over the streets in autumn while the shopping women
alludes to the growing consumerism in the second half of the twentieth century. The whole drama in the street comes to an end when the sick man with the ‘wild white face’ is ‘carried in and stowed’ inside the ambulance.

The women and children who are looking at the ‘Loud noons of cities,’ ‘ambulances’ and a ‘wild white face’ over the ‘Red stretcher-blankets,’ turn their attention towards their own lives in the third stanza. They ‘sense the solving emptiness/ That lies under all we do.’ Now, death becomes 'so permanent and blank and true' to everyone when they whisper 'Poor soul' each other realizing the ultimate end they will meet in life. The phrase 'poor soul' combines the sadness people feel at the sight of the sick man being carried away by the ambulance and the sadness they heavily place into their own life after realizing their ultimate end. Like what we see in "Nothing To Be Said," the joy of 'families and fashions' at last turns out to be 'ways of slow dying' (CP 138) because the 'Loud noons of cities' only signal the end of the days. This sad emotion is basic in the ultimate realization of the truth of life for Larkin:

Larkin appreciates the emotion of sadness as the basic emotion which connects us compassionately with other human beings. For Larkin, to know sadness is to realize one's humanity and the humanity of others in the midst of a highly limited human condition, a condition which strong judgement shows to be enormously brutal. 34

The ambulance can be either a positive figure which helps the sick man of the twentieth century reach the hospital and find solace in the form of medical treatment by the doctors or a negative figure which resembles the ship of death in "Next, Please." When the ambulance does not respond to those who look at them, it means there is 'nothing to be said' about the sick man which ultimately
means death. Here, we find Larkin trying ‘to render his bleak outlook as plainly as possible’ and confirming that “every imaginable pain in life . . . is as nothing compared to the “permanent and blank and true” fact of death.”

The portrayals of an urban street, the children, women and the sick man all hint at Larkin as a spokesperson of the common men, the so called ‘uncommon poet for the common man’ as Lolette Kuby puts it. He collects a street event and creates a truth out of it which is universally acknowledged. Those in the street see the sick man ‘And sense the solving emptiness/ That lies just under all we do which is ‘so permanent and blank and true.’ As the first two stanzas complete with the sick man being carried and stowed into the ambulance, the people on the street ‘whisper at their own distress’: ‘Poor soul.’ The ‘smells of different dinners’ in the second stanza become the whisper of ‘distress’ in the third stanza. When the door of the ambulance is closed, it is seen as ‘the sudden shut of loss.’ The whole drama of the sick man's life— ‘the unique random blend/ Of families and fashions’ — comes to an end ‘inside a room’ of the ambulance.

The fact that Larkin remained single throughout his life and his horrifying experiences of his parents’ marriage are reflected in the last two lines of the fourth stanza. The poem is not about the sick man being carried away by the ambulance but is more about the psychological impact his death has left to those who sympathise with him. The people in the street, their future and the emptiness of the human world at the face of death are mirrored in the pitiable condition of the sick man. As the ambulance carrying the sick man goes, ‘What is left to come’ to the rest of the people becomes clearer. It is because the ambulance is not meant only for the sick man on the street but also for all who will be sick one day though they are now healthy and wealthy. It stands in the
first line as a religious figure, a saviour to redeem the sinners, the people on the troublesome streets of life. But in the third stanza ‘the solving emptiness’ becomes ‘So permanent and blank and true’ and makes it the only ship which ‘In her wake/ No waters breed or break’ (CP 52). This becomes certain as ‘All streets in time are visited’ by this ambulance like the ‘black sailed’ ship that leaves a ‘birdless silence’ at the end.

The poem reaches its highest degree of pessimism in the last stanza when the poet draws a picture of how the ambulance leaves the street by leaving certain knowledge of death. The word ‘distance’ plays an important role in the last line. First, it may mean that the ambulance carrying the dead body has gone bringing normalcy to the street. It means that death has distanced itself from the street. Second, it leaves a knowledge in the first stanza that 'all streets in time are visited' by the ambulance. Thus we are able to conclude that death will visit and haunt people while they are still alive transforming every way of living into a way of ‘slow dying’ (CP 138).

The poem was written in January 1961. About four months before writing the poem Larkin wrote another poem in August 1960, “Take One Home For The Kiddies” which centres around the theme of death:

Living toys are something novel,
But it soon wears off somehow.
Fetch the shoebox, fetch the shovel—
Mam, we’re playing funerals now. (CP 130)

In October, 1961, Larkin wrote two other extremely sad poems, "Here" in which he extensively narrated his alienation and “Nothing To Be Said” in which everyone is seen as moving towards one destination, death:
For nations vague as weed
For nomads among stones
Small-statured cross-faced tribes
And cobble-close families
In mill-towns on dark mornings
Life is slow dying. (CP 138)

Such poems written in 1961 make one think of the reason why Larkin wrote so much about death in this year. Interestingly on 6 March 1961, Larkin suddenly collapsed at a Library Committee meeting and was immediately brought to hospital. However, he saw people who were worse than himself. This surely has made him realize the large space suffering occupies in life:

One good thing, morally anyway, about hospitals is that you can see so many people worse off than yourself: this makes you ashamed of any feelings of self pity or undue self regard. There is a girl of 14 just across the passage from me—don’t know what’s wrong with her, but she looks pale and thin. And then you meet awful cases being helped or trollied about the corridors. 37

Larkin’s experiences at the hospital is reflected in his poems frequently. His lifetime fear of death is also to an extent associated with his hospital experiences.

This hospital scene drawn here is interesting in the sense that Larkin was hospitalized about two months after the completion of the poem under scrutiny. He had to visit hospital for a reason or another. He had suffered from short sightedness, stomach problem, hypochondria, deafness, hay-fever, neck ache, frequent giddiness and agoraphobia, leg problems and most unfortunately cancer because of which he died in 1985. He also had the problems of stammering and depression. The illness of his mother who was hospitalized at
regular intervals and his own illness of various kinds find their place in his poems later. In a letter to his friend C.B. Cox, Larkin writes:

‘The Building’ was (as you might expect) ‘inspired’ by a visit to the hospital here about a crick in the neck which they couldn't do anything about and which passed off eventually of its own accord. Funnily enough, as soon as I had written it my mother had a fall and had to spend some time in hospital in earnest, which led to many dreary visits. Poems do sometimes have this prophetic quality: When I wrote ‘Ambulances’ I was in one myself before very long. 38

Whether it is the ‘prophetic quality’ of his poems or a mere incident, the centrality of death in his poems is again ascertained by this poem.

Since ambulances form part of the hospitals and hospital being an unignorable place in his life, poems such as “Ambulances,” “Hospital Visits” and “The Building” have enough biographical elements. However out of this personal experience, he has written many quality poems which deals with the universal theme of death.

“Dockery and Son”

Larkin once said, ‘I see life more as an affair of solitude diversified by company than an affair of company diversified by solitude.’39 However the reason why Larkin chose to remain single despite having a number of girlfriends still remains an unanswered question except some conjectures made on the basis of some events that took place in his life which might or might not have direct link to his celibacy. Some say that he is a loner by nature, a stammerer and a very shy boy who avoids company. Some say that he had an unspent childhood, always feeling an outsider in the family. Some say, the only reason
is in the diaries destroyed at the Brynmore Jones library immediately after his death in 1985; or in the letters written to Bruce Montgomery and George Hartley which are forbidden to see until 2035 and an eventual sale respectively.

Though the reasons cited are not so exacting, reading his poem “Dockery and Son” in the light of his celibacy is of immense interest. In an interview he granted to *Paris Review* he once said:

> Yes, I have remained single by choice and should not have liked anything else, but of course most people do get married, and divorced too, and so I suppose I am an outsider in the sense you [Robert Phillips] mean. Of course it worries me from time to time but it would take very long to explain why. Samuel Butler said, Life is an affair of being spoilt in one way or another.

Indeed his statement can be considered as a strong basis for rejecting the sanctity of marriage in his time. In corollary terms, it means that human relationship got a drastic change during the second half of the twentieth century.

Larkin had affairs with a number of women, yet, his poems are filled with sorrow, defeats, isolation, death and chaos. He remained single out of his own ‘choice,’ yet he felt as an outsider in the society because of his own ‘choice.’ Now, again, why did he remain single? “Dockery and Son” could throw some light to this question.

The poem opens with a one sided conversation with the Dean giving some information to Larkin about Dockery who was his (Larkin’s) Junior at St. John’s College, Oxford, that his (Dockery’s) son was then at the college. To this information Larkin gave a nod of acknowledgement and like a pendulum, his mind started moving from present-to-past-to-present and then to future at
the end of the poem. He came to Oxford ‘death-suited’ to pay homage to Agnes Cuming, his predecessor as librarian at Hull, who died on 8 March 1962 with the funeral taking place on 12 of the same month. The poem was written in February 1963 and was completed on 23 March the same year to be the latest poem in the volume *The Whitsun Weddings* which was published by Faber and Faber as a recognition of Larkin’s popularity.

As the poet’s mind drifts back to his college days at St. John’s, he suddenly recalls Dockery, two years junior to him who shared room with Cartwright who was killed. Recalling those days brings him an emotional nostalgic saga. They met at the college, left the college, took different decisions—Dockery deciding to get married and have children and Larkin deciding to remain single—like the ‘joining and parting [rail]lines.’ The more baffling question Larkin raises in the poem is: ‘What is marriage all about?’ It brings children which means ‘increase’ to Dockery while it will mean ‘dilution’ of life for Larkin—a thing that will defame life. In the penultimate stanza the poet seems to reject both their decisions of marrying and remaining single as empty ‘innate assumptions’ in the face of death which the poet brings in at the last line of the poem. He allows his unsatisfactory life to go on because he has no option but to ‘go on’ without resisting it and tries to find solace by creating an ideal world while living in our real world:

Life is ‘unsatisfactory’. Larkin does not however offer it the resistance, as his admired Hardy does, of contrary expectations. Perhaps the only unqualified positive emotion he expresses is one that he has remarked in Betjeman, a poet he also admires: ‘a yearning for a world, as it were, unburdened by himself;’ out of this he has created pastoral worlds blessedly emptied of himself, ‘attics cleared of me.’
This is a clear indication of a self-dissociation from the normal habits of life. Larkin has indeed rejected certain norms of the existing society.

The poet thinks that those including Dockery who get married take their decision only as a ‘habit’ and not as a ‘religious’ act. People marry because they have seen others do so before them. We marry not because ‘we think truest, or most want to do’ but because it is a ‘style’ of life that makes us inclusive in a society without doing which we will be alienated. But the different ‘innate assumptions’ of the poet and his friend Dockery do not make sense at all because, for the poet, ‘life is first boredom, then fear.’ In life we will meet what we have not chosen but ‘something hidden from us chose.’ Thus the theme of the poem is ‘the disparity between reality [death] and desire [marriage].’

As such the tone of the poem is very pessimistic as it is written probably in a nostalgic haze in 1963 recalling his visit to St. John’s College, Oxford, to attend the funeral of Agnes.

Coming to the question of marriage, Larkin writes with a rejectionist attitude towards Dockery’s choice:

... To have no son, no wife
No house or land still seemed quite natural.
Only a numbness registered the shock
Of finding out how much had gone of life, (CP 152)

The reality, Larkin saw, is that time will bring age to both of them. But before ‘the only end of age’ it has brought ‘For Dockery a son, for me [Larkin] nothing / Nothing with all a son’s harsh patronage.’ ‘A son’s harsh patronage’ will ‘dilute’ life for Larkin while it will ‘increase’ the value of life for Dockery. As he considers life ‘more as an affair of solitude diversified by company,’ Larkin
was never committed to the cause of marriage with any of his many girlfriends because marriage would bring him children, family, company—all of which would dilute the sanctity of his ‘solitude.’ The only way to avoid this dilution of life is celibacy.

Larkin experienced an unspent childhood and he would not have wanted to return it again to his children in the event of his marriage which might also bring ‘a son’s harsh patronage.’ His childhood experience could be a strong basis for searching the causes that made him a confirmed bachelor. Tracing the facts of his childhood Nicholas Marsh writes:

Larkin highlighted a horror of his parents’ marriage as the defining experience that left him isolated, terrified of marrying and incapable of committing himself, throughout his life. We may add that his feeling of isolation was probably also a natural consequence of weak eyesight and a pronounced stammer. Isolation and anxiety were, thus, inveterate components of his world where a ‘featureless future’ awaits him.

Larkin lived in a family where his Nazi supporting father, Sydney, always found faults with his helpless wife, Eva. Sydney treated Eva more as a servant than a wife criticizing her for every small failing and was also contemptuous of women. He also admired Hitler a lot in a country where Hitler was considered as an enemy, a dictator, anti-English and an usurper. The family was thus isolated in the country because of Sydney’s admiration of Hitler. Yet he was intellectual and clever only to make young Larkin confused and consequently he (Larkin) was deprived of the emotional bondage he should have with his parents. As a young boy he felt as an outsider even in his own family and started
thinking of the ‘importance of elsewhere.’ His childhood was thus ‘a forgotten boredom’ (CP 33) when looked back after a long time. Thus Nicholas Marsh further writes:

. . .he [Larkin] mocks the joy and passion of Dylan Thomas’s and D.H. Lawrence’s memories insisting on the emptiness of his own early years: ‘Noting, like something, happens anywhere.’46

The visit he paid to St. John’s College, Oxford, prompted him recall a series of past events and in the due course, he acknowledged ‘the shock/Of finding out how much had gone of life’ in the fourth stanza of the poem. To remain single or to get married may be at our disposal by applying our ‘innate assumptions.’ However, the choices of marriage and celibacy are not our own but ‘what something hidden from us chose’ and this ‘something’ at last will leave us ‘age, and then the only end of age.’

Thus the fear of death dominates in the last stanza belittling the question of marriage and celibacy discussed at length in the preceding stanzas by juxtaposing his life and Dockery’s side by side. The poem, Andrew Motion said, is a melancholic poem which reflects a great deal of autobiographical elements:

Bitterly funny and grievously melancholic, “Dockery and Son” is a compressed biography. It encapsulates Larkin’s views about the effect of his parents on his personality, it reports spiritedly on his undergraduate career, it grimly sketches the attitude which dominated his adult life. 47

To ascertain what Motion wrote, one may be reminded of what Larkin said in an interview when the matter of his being single is cited as being the theme of his poems:
. . . I often wonder why people get married. I think perhaps they dislike being alone more than I do. Anyone who knows me will tell you that I am not fond of company. I’m very fond of people, but it’s difficult to get people without company. And I think living with someone and being in love is very difficult business anyway because almost by definition it means putting yourself at the disposal of someone else ranking them higher than yourself. . . . I think love collides very sharply with selfishness, and they are both pretty powerful things.48

In the light of the above remark, Larkin would have found it quite ‘natural’ while having ‘no son, no wife’ and he would have been able to avoid the collision of ‘love and selfishness.’

The structure of the poem also gives strength to the theme of alienation by allowing the movement of the poet’s thought from present-to-past-to-present until the last stanza where the poet thinks of the grim future—‘the only end of age.’ The last line of the first stanza suggests the poet’s yearning for his past which was immediately negated by the word ‘Locked’ in the first line of the second stanza suggesting that he is isolated by his own past. Then he fell asleep. However in the third stanza he was awakened by the present realities (fumes, furnace glares) only to taste the ‘awful pie’ and see the ‘joining and parting [rail]lines.’ After taking stock of the past and present, he finds out the ‘shock of finding out how much had gone of life.’ This loss of life could not be consolidated by marriage, instead, marriage will make his life oppressive by ranking someone higher than himself.

Of course marriage is the core issue of many of his poems such as “Wedding Wind,” “Whitsun Weddings,” “An Arundel Tomb,” “Afternoons,” etc. Again, that Larkin remained a confirmed bachelor throughout his life suddenly
draws our attention. He fell in love first with Ruth Bowmen while he was in Wellington and got engaged; but the engagement was broken as he was not committed to it with Ruth returning the ring later. Their affair continued for seven years. In 1950, he fell in love with Monica Jones and the affair continued till the end of his life at Hull. But this affair too had not fruited to marriage despite the fact that they liked each other and continued their affair even though Larkin developed affairs with other women such as Betty, Maeve Brennan, Winifred and Patsy at different intervals of time while staying in Ireland and working at the Brynmore Jones Library, Hull. For Larkin, marriage means an act of uniting love and sex which is impossible because sex, to him, is a reality while love is always an illusion. The moment one tries to turn love (illusion) into reality, the result he finds is grief. Andrew Motion also suggests that his commitment to his widowed mother could have been a cause, if not the only cause, of his decision to remain single.

Be it his own ‘choice’ or compelled by his commitment to his widowed mother, or his love of freedom, or anything else, the poem “Dockery and Son” portrays life’s emptiness at the face of death which also nullifies the sanctity of marriage because people get married with the selfish motif of being looked after by their children when they grow old and weak. This selfishness collides with love, if one gets married, and the result it gives is grief. These factors can be assessed as the reasons of Larkin’s celibacy until the letters he wrote to Bruce Montgomery and George Heartley are opened for public inspection. This is to say that death and alienation again form the central issue in Larkin’s poetry.

The characteristics of the poems individually discussed in this chapter have shown significantly that death and alienation are two unignorable themes
Larkin carries throughout *The Whitsun Weddings*. These individual poems are all representative in their characteristic manifestation of either of the themes or both. The rest of the poems which are not given individual space for detailed examination also bear similar characteristics except few poems which are not prominent both in theme and technique.

The poem “Water” shows Larkin’s attitude to religion, his rejection of ‘going to church’ only ‘To dry, different clothes’ (CP 93). The sense of alienation is again asserted clearly in “The Importance of Elsewhere” raising a question on the feeling of his alienation in his own country. This sense of alienation is persistent while he is in Ireland but he cannot understand the reason of his alienation at Hull and finds no excuse: ‘Living in England has no such excuse’ (CP 104). In “Reference Back,” Time becomes a protagonist in the drama of life and controls the emotional movement of the poet and his mother. The world becomes an ‘unsatisfactory’ place with ‘unsatisfactory hall’ and ‘unsatisfactory room’ where time reminds the poet and his mother of their age. When the jazz record, Oliver’s *Riverside Blues*, remains unchanged for many years, the poet and his mother have changed a lot:

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Truly, though our element is time,
We are not suited to the long perspectives
Open at each instant of our lives.
They link us to our losses: worse,
They show us what we have as it once was,
Blinding undiminished, just as though
By acting differently we could have kept it so. (CP 106)
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This poem is therefore characteristic of Larkin’s concern of time as we see in poems like, “Dockery and Son,” “Next, Please,” “Days,” “Going,” etc.
“Counting” reinforces Larkin’s obsession with celibacy as in “Self’s the Man.” “An Arundel Tomb” says ‘What will survive of us is love’ (CP 111) posing himself like a romantic idealist to some extent. In “Love Songs in Age,” where his mother becomes a central figure, Larkin sadly releases the past expectations of life which are all proved wrong by the present. The case is not only for his mother but is also true for him. The knowledge of this reality haunts Larkin time and again.

Immediately after writing “The Whitsun Weddings” and “Self’s the Man,” Larkin wrote “Home Is So Sad” where the marriage of his parents became the touchstone of his judgement over marriage in life. In this poem Larkin observes that the expected fulfilment of love is always negated by frustration and ‘A joyous shot at how things ought to be’ (CP 119) is never realized: ‘What will survive of us, the poem says, is not love but the wish to love— and indelible signs of how the wish has been frustrated.’ In “Afternoons” the gradual loss of British colonies after the second world war bringing in a new world order is metaphorically expressed as:

> Summer is fading:
> The leaves fall in ones and twos
> From trees bordering
> The new recreation ground. (CP 121)

The wide-ranging themes of Larkin’s poems are quite evident in The Whitsun Weddings.

“Faith Healing” again shows Larkin’s attitude to religion as is in the poems like “The Whitsun Weddings,” “Water” and “Aubade” where he challenges the validity of religion as a saviour of those in trouble. The serene
The countryside of England becomes a lost panorama of pleasure destroyed by the first world war in many poems. Similar is the case in “Take One Home For The Kiddies” where pet animals played upon by the children are given a human shape with the image of death and mundanity of postwar life in England. Similarly “Nothing To Be Said” reorganises the drama of death again by portraying the emptiness of life at the face of death: ‘Life is slow dying’ (CP 138). In this poem any form of life, big or small, is a way of dying that even ‘birth’ becomes an evidence of death.

“Talking in Bed,” “The Large Cool Store,” “Here,” “Wild Oats,” “Sunny Prestatyn,” “Essential Beauty,” etc. portray the problem of loneliness and gender relationship in a world characterised by consumerism and mundanity. Like “Nothing To Be Said” in which death nullifies life’s all achievements, “Send No money” exposes the meaninglessness of life when threatened by time:

Half life is over now,
And I meet full face on dark morning
The bestial visor, bent in
By the blows of what happened to happen. (CP 146)

“Toads Revisited” strengthens the poet’s wish to perform his duties in life even though work isolates him from the social events and friendly ties he has in life. The poem’s whole drama at last ends in ‘Help me down Cemetery Road’ (CP 148) which conveys the inevitability of death, an obsession Larkin always has.

Thus, The Whitsun Weddings contains poems on death, alienation, time, missed chances in life and the mundanity consumerism has brought in during the second half of the twentieth century. This volume has a marked difference
from the earlier volume *The Less Deceived* in the rhetorical reasoning of human suffering. While illusion is the main cause of human suffering like in the case of the rapist of “Deceptions,” the chief agent of human suffering in the poems of *The Whitsun Weddings* is fate as is evident in the poems like “Dockery and Son,” “Nothing To Be Said,” “Ambulances,” “Love Songs in Age,” “Faith Healing,” “Arundel Tomb,” etc. The general undercurrent moving under most poems here is pessimism, a lament for the missed opportunity and the sadness at what we have got against what we have wished. The sense of being lost somewhere and the approaching death becoming clearer are asserted so prominently poem after poem.
NOTES

1 Andrew Motion, Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life (London: Faber and Faber, 1993) p. 343.

2 Ibid., p. 446.


9 P.R. King, Nine Contemporary Poets (London: Methuen, 1979) p. 43.

10 Andrew Motion, Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life, op. cit., p. 446.


“Mr Bleaney” was written in May 1955 and “Counting” is believed, according to Anthony Thwaite, to be written in September the same year. Though he puts '?' after September in his dating of the poem in his edition of *Collected Poems*, it is accurate because of the nearness of the themes of the poems.


Britain lost a number of its colonies immediately after the 2nd World War including the sub-continent of India and, thus, belittled itself in the political map of the world.


29 Ibid.


32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., p.65.

34 Terry Whalen, *Philip Larkin and English Poetry*, op. cit., p. 25


39 Larkin said this in an interview he granted to *observer* when the interviewer asked him about his being a confirmed bachelor as the theme of his poems. See Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982*, op. cit., p. 54.

40 Thirty A4 size diaries of Larkin were destroyed by Monica Jones and Betty Mackereth at the Brynmore Jones Library, Hull as per his wish. No one knew what exactly was written in it. See Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life*, op. cit., p. 522.


46 *Ibid*.

