CHAPTER – V

HIGH WINDOWS AND AFTER

Larkin’s *High Windows*, published in 1974, is the volume which, according to Andrew Motion, ‘turned him into a national monument.’ This volume shows freer attitude of Larkin towards sex, his concern over the changing political and social condition in Britain, man’s search for something eternal that will erase the whole events of sufferings from the world, the deep sense of alienation and anxiety, etc. The volume extensively celebrates pastoral pleasures of England that are lost—dogs, ponies, wheat fields, seas, trees, rivers, etc. The success of this volume is ascertained by the exceptional sale it has made:

Sales were exceptional. The first impression of 6,000 copies disappeared within three months of publication; 7,500 copies were reprinted in September 1974, and 6,000 the following January.

This rampant sale shows that ‘this book changed Larkin’s life more decisively than any of his previous collections.’ Thus a thorough examination of this volume is necessary to establish Larkin’s true identity in English literature. This chapter will study four selected poems from *High Windows* which can represent other poems in the same volume. “Aubade” which was written after
the publication of *High Windows* is also discussed in detail. Thus five poems “High Windows,” “The Explosion,” “The Building,” “The Old Fools” and “Aubade” are studied in detail.

**“High Windows”**

This poem is the manifestation of Larkin’s sexual frustration and a commentary on the permissive postwar English society. The poem begins in a free colloquial language in the first stanza showing signs of the advancement of science and technology which made sex a game of children. The ‘couple’ in the first line is, instead of a married couple, ‘a couple of kids’ enjoying sex. The contraceptive ‘pills’ and the ‘diaphragm’ are the symbols of scientific advancement rendering religious sex into a matter of pleasure:

> When I see a couple of kids  
> And guess he’s fucking her and she’s  
> Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,  
> I know this is paradise.   (CP 165)

But this paradise becomes ‘Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless’ in the last stanza. The core issue Larkin raises in the poem becomes quite conspicuous when the last stanza is read in conjunction with the description of sex in the first stanza. The whole movement of the poem is from ‘paradise’ in the first stanza to ‘Nothing’ in the last stanza. Throughout the poem the tone is robust and satirical exposing the postwar English society inside out.

Anthony Thwaite’s collection of Larkin’s poems contains four poems written in 1967 and two of these are about the sexual freedom of his time. While Larkin is sceptical of the sexual freedom in the last stanza of “High
“Annus Mirabilis” shows the need for sexual freedom. The latter begins with:

\begin{verbatim}
Sexual intercourse began  
In nineteen sixty-three  
(Which was rather late for me)  
Between the end of the Chatterley ban  
And the Beatle’s first LP. (CP 167)
\end{verbatim}

and ends in:

\begin{verbatim}
So life was never better than  
In nineteen sixty-three  
(Though just too late for me)—  
Between the end of the Chatterley ban  
And the Beatle’s first LP. (CP 167)
\end{verbatim}

These poems show Larkin’s quest for individual freedom and at the same time the scepticism this freedom has created in human relationship. The words ‘fucking,’ ‘pills’ and ‘diaphragm’ in the first stanza of “High Windows” are the phenomenal experiences of the young men during Larkin’s time. These developments render sex into cheap physical experiences of pleasure rather than the divine experiences as portrayed in the poems of Donne. It took about two years for Larkin to complete the poem. He started writing it on 3 March 1965 and completed after several drafts in February 1967.

The earlier title of the poem is “The Long Slide” which alludes to the uncontrollable human desire and the restriction which are imposed on the individuals by the society. When these restrictions are loosed upon, individuals turn to their own ways of life. This process from restriction to freedom is ‘The Long Slide’ he meant earlier. However, causing much injury to the human
psyche ‘the long slide to happiness’ becomes ‘Nothing’ in the last line of the poem. The sex that the ‘couple of kids’ enjoy is not an outcome of divine love but a result of the quest for physical pleasure that has no religious meaning. Interestingly, Larkin is so sceptical about love’s healing quality. The notion that love is divine becomes meaningless because ‘the power to cure suffering through love is a tragic illusion.’ There is no divine meaning that we can provide to sex: ‘That’ll be the life;/ No god any more.’

Now, what is more interesting is whether the sense of alienation has anything to do with the sexual freedom of his time or is it only his sexual frustration which causes his own alienation from the rest of the world. Time and again, Larkin sees love as the ‘supreme illusion of man’ in poems such as “Deceptions,” “Faith Healing,” “Love Song in Age,” etc. ‘A sense of life lived according to love’ (CP 126) is not desirable for the lovers as ‘Time has transfigured them into/Untruth’ (CP 111). It is here that Larkin realizes the unchallengeable power of time which also nullifies the validity of a divine life. The fact that Larkin ‘loves people but not company’ makes the two kids having sex desirable. Though they are not lovers but pleasure seekers, Larkin invites them at the very beginning of the poem because in a world of reality, sexual pleasure becomes preferable to divine love.

Larkin had an ‘unspent childhood’ with less number of friends at home and at school. Again his adult life does not provide time and space for such pleasures: ‘. . . the wasted opportunities of the past and the exclusion of the future coalesce to tyrannize the present.’ The speaker ‘I’ in the poem is feeling a sense of exclusion by the fact that enjoyment and freedom belong to the new generation of the ‘couple of kids.’ The speaker cannot enjoy this freedom as
he belongs to a generation of the past. This sexual freedom is a ‘missed chance’ for Larkin and it continues to haunt him in his adulthood:

For its first four verses [of “High windows”], he creates a persona who is angrily disappointed that promises made to him as a young man have not been fulfilled. But as he speculates about the new generation’s chances of happiness he realizes that he might once have been similarly envied. The cycle of time brings round hope and frustration ceaselessly and no one – to extricate a phrase buried in the image of ‘an outdated combine harvester’ – gets their oats.7

Here, Larkin’s concern is not about the sexual freedom but is about the ‘long slide’ of moral decline the next generation is going to experience. The sexual players here are ‘kids’ whom Larkin hates a lot: ‘Children are very horrible, aren’t they? Selfish, noisy, cruel, vulgar little brutes.’8 Thus reading “High Windows” also brings in our mind the images of “This Be The Verse”:

Man hands on misery to man.  
It deepens like a coastal shelf.  
Get out as early as you can,  
And don’t have any kids yourself. (CP 180)

Though the kids in “High Windows” are literally shown as enviable objects to the eyes of the old, ironically sex is displayed here as a child’s play. This is an allusion to the advent of ‘permissive society’ narrated in the second chapter. Thus social and cultural shifts Britain experienced in the early second half of the twentieth century find an inevitable literary implication making itself the very basis for examining the conflict between individuals and society. The speaker ‘I’ is an ‘outdated’ adult who is outside the boundary of happiness. He is too old to enjoy the privilege granted to him by the society. Thus he only
envies the kids and cannot take the role of those kids in the sexual act. The negative image of the kids of “This Be The Verse” has got an ironical turn to take a desirable image. However, we know that the first person speaker cannot find any partnership with the ‘couple of kids.’ The words ‘Nothing’ ‘nowhere’ and ‘endless’ create an image similar to that of the ‘solving emptiness’ of “Ambulances.” While the ‘paradise’ in the first stanza becomes ‘Nothing’ in the last stanza, the ‘couple of kids’ in that paradise become ‘free bloody birds’ in the fourth stanza. The general movement of the tone is from positive to negative.

Larkin was never happy with his own life particularly because of his failed relationships. He was at odds with Monica and Maeve while writing and revising this poem in two years and faced a harsh dilemma between them. Love, for a time, seemed ‘putting yourself at the disposal of someone else, ranking them higher than yourself.’ This is to ascertain what Janice Rossen says that ‘People— and life in general— seem to have disappointed Larkin enormously.’

Again Larkin said in an interview: ‘Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth.’ Two things— his deprivation and people around him— are working in the present poem under discussion. The envied ‘couple of kids’ who are later called ‘bloody birds’ in the fourth stanza are the representatives of the undesirable people of the permissive society and the sexual picture drawn is the reflection of his sexual frustration and deprivation. Like daffodils provoke a poem to Wordsworth, sexual deprivation provokes a poem to Larkin. Actually, though he seems to love sex a lot, Larkin once wrote to his friend Sutton: ‘SEX is designed for people who like overcoming obstacles. I don’t like overcoming obstacles.’ Thus the poem’s movement from the first stanza to the last unfolds Larkin’s sexual frustration and a largely undesirable society within which he lives. Out of this, Larkin created the grim face of life:
Life is an immobile, locked
Three-handed struggle between
Your wants, the world’s for you, and (worse)
The unbeatable slow machine
That brings what you’ll get. (CP 202)

Larkin’s rejection of the existing social norms of his time is clearly seen in “High Windows.” His celebration of the ‘couple of kids’ bears an ironical sense and a love of life. The disconnection between ‘your wants’ and what the world offers for you creates a sense of alienation that is hard to bear with.

This sense of an alienated life persists poem after poem in the volume, *High Windows*. The desire for freedom proves wrong when it is realized in the postwar permissive society. The poem “High Windows” is one such poem which is symptomatic of the permissive society.

“The Explosion”

This poem is an exception to Larkin’s agnosticism which we find in poems like “Church Going,” “Faith Healing,” “Aubade,” etc. The language is soft and colloquial narrating the physical atmosphere in which the explosion takes place. However, the movement of thought is complete only when the first line—‘On the day of the explosion’—is read in conjunction with the final line—‘One showing the eggs unbroken.’ The key words here are ‘explosion’ and ‘unbroken.’

The explosion was so violent and tragic that:

At noon, there came a tremor; cows
Stopped chewing for a second; sun,
Scarfed as in a heat haze, dimmed. (CP 175)

Thus, the fearful nature of the explosion is detailed in the first part of the poem.
However, the poem takes a sudden turn from the sixth stanza where the priest projects a better life of the miners in ‘God’s house’ in heaven. This projection is strengthened again when the wives of the dead miners see their husbands ‘Larger than in life they managed.’ Thus, the poem can be divided into two parts; the first five stanzas in which the physical atmosphere of the explosion is narrated and the remaining stanzas in which the psychological effect of the explosion on the survivors is clearly drawn. The second half begins with a positive note given by the priest:

The dead go on before us, they
Are sitting in God’s house in comfort,
We shall see them face to face . . . (CP 175)

The wives of those died in the explosion, as the priest has said, see their husbands coming ‘from the sun towards them.’ The words of the priest have a positive effect on the wives.

This poem draws a clear picture of a ‘community’ of miners. They are not mere miners but a community sharing the joys and sufferings of life together. They are not merely men but ‘Fathers’ and ‘brothers.’ They love and care the ‘nest of lark’s eggs’ which is a symbol of life and continuity. Later in the last line we see ‘one [miner] showing the eggs unbroken.’ This positive end is an exception in the poetry of Larkin. Yet, whether the positive picture is a hallucination of the wives or a reality is a big question which requires our further investigation.

Interestingly, the sense of community brought in by a group of miners is revived by the image of the ‘eggs unbroken’ even after the death of the miners. Like the last line of “An Arundel Tomb”— ‘What will survive of us is love’—
the last line of this poem shows the memories of the wives who cannot forget their dear past, the joy of their family, friendship and all social gatherings. After the explosion has killed the miners, the words of the priest also hint at the death of the survivors too—‘we shall see them face to face.’ However ‘we shall see them face to face’ not in hell but in ‘God’s house.’ This notion in the sixth stanza, if read in conjunction with the last line of the poem, strengthens the positive quality of the poem. Larkin’s ‘special way of being afraid’ (CP 208) is missing in this poem as he ‘manages to modify his fear of death by merging it with a vision of after-life and thereby making the moment of death continuous with life through his faith in the resurrection spoken of in The Bible.’ If the poem is read in this way Larkin is a believer contrary to what we find in “Church Going,” “Next, Please” and “Aubade.” In an exceptional way the second half of the poem creates an ‘after-life’ atmosphere. This positive atmosphere of resurrection is associated with the familial relationships created in the first half of the poem. Thus the image of community still continues in the second half of the poem in the form of various images such as ‘God’s house,’ ‘wives’ seeing their husbands, ‘the eggs unbroken,’ etc. Larkin is known for his deep sense of alienation in poems such as “At grass,” “Mr. Bleaney,” “The Whitsun Weddings,” “Dockery and Son,” etc. However, “The Explosion” shows a rarely seen face of a sociable Larkin. Thus, Sisir Kumar Chatterjee writes about the sense of affirmation in this poem:

But, in “The Explosion,” he realises the very human need of religious communion and gives a deeply moving expression to that need. The significance of this religious communion is profound as it is integrated with the life of a community, a society based on human resilience and familial ties as suggested in the highly compressed line—“Fathers, brothers, nicknames,
laughter”—that conjures up a vibrant picture of the network and the corporation of human relationships. As the anonymous man took care of the “nest of lark’s eggs” and “lodged” it “in the grasses” so the poet takes care of these men and lodges them in their community amongst their nameless wives and families. This solidarity with the tradition of community life and its perpetual continuation is what constitutes the positive focus of the poem.14

For Larkin who sees life ‘more as an affair of solitude,’15 these ‘fathers,’ ‘brothers,’ ‘nest,’ ‘eggs,’ etc. are signifiers of an idealized life which is not realizable in the world of realities. Thus, the ‘Wives saw men of the explosion’ not in reality but in ‘a second’ of hallucination while mourning the death in the church.

Interestingly, like in “Deceptions,” the speaker poet is not part of the community of miners nor is he mourning their death. He is completely separated from them while commenting on them. He sees the miners coming, coughing, talking, smoking, chasing the rabbits, finding the nest and lodging it in the grasses, laughing in front of the tall gates, etc. Then suddenly the explosion comes killing all the miners. However these dead miners still continue to live momentarily in the memory of their wives. Unlike the victim girl of “Deceptions,” these wives’ pain is not acute as they are consoled by the priest who says that those dead ‘Are sitting in God’s house in comfort./We shall see them face to face.’ However, the raped girl in “Deceptions” shows a horrifying human experience when her ‘mind lay open like a drawer of knives’ (CP 32). In both the poems, the poet speaks as an outsider who observes the events minutely. His dissociation from the characters in his poems enables him to comment on them freely.
Another important aspect of the poem is the image of continuity brought in by the ‘Lark’s eggs’ and the men coming from the sun. Though the men are seen by the wives momentarily ‘for a second,’ this vision creates a positive atmosphere where the ‘tremor’ of the explosion is completely absorbed. In the fifth stanza the ‘sun,/ Scarfed as in a heat-haze, dimmed’ and this sun glows again in the eighth stanza where the dead miners reappear to the eyes of their wives. In the same manner the ‘lark’s eggs’ in the third stanza reappear again in the final one-line stanza. These reappearances of the ‘sun’ and the ‘eggs’ are central to the poem’s underlying meaning. The sun is an everlasting object of light which is very dear to Larkin. It appears in some other poems such as “Water,” “Solar,” “Whitsun Weddings,” “High Windows,” etc. In all these poems it is never given a negative appearance. For example in “Solar,” the sun is thus lauded:

The eye sees you
Simplified by distance
Into an origin,
Your petalled head of flames
Continuously exploding.
Heat is the echo of your
Gold. (CP 159)

It is this sun that appears in “The Explosion” and as such the return of the dead men from the sun has a wider religious meaning. Since the sun is ‘Continuously exploding’ in “Solar,” the coming of the men from the sun in “The explosion” is a symbol of continuity of life after death. This notion becomes quite manifest when we read the words of the priest in conjunction with the image of the dead men coming again from the sun.
Interestingly the appearance of the ‘eggs unbroken’ in the last stanza adds further strength to this meaning of continuity of life even after the horrifying experience of the explosion. In fact, the positive note is very strong if the poem is read in this way by providing meaning to such images of the sun and the eggs. The positive note is so strong in the last line—‘One showing the eggs unbroken’—that it forms a stanza where all preceding events are absorbed completely. We are very sure that the ‘nest of lark’s eggs’ will have an implication in future when it is carefully lodged in the grasses by one of the miners. Again it is not the egg of any other bird but of the lark which has a divine power like the ‘ethereal minstrel’ in Wordsworth’s “To a Skylark.” Another romantic poet P.B. Shelley also wrote “To a Skylark” in praise of the divine power of the bird. Thus when Larkin brings in the image of the eggs of skylark which are unbroken even after the explosion, it alludes to the divine quality of the eggs symbolizing life after death. This vision of continuity of life is an exception in Larkin’s poetry because in most poems he has written we find him as an agnostic. From the sixth stanza onwards, the poem’s positive note develops slowly and converge fully into the final line.

This poem is, therefore, characteristically a Movement poem exhibiting the positive outlook at the face of extremely negative situation. The volume High Windows ends with this poem though it has been chronologically reordered in Collected Poems edited by Anthony Thwaite. Talking of the positive note in the second half of the poem Elizabeth Spires writes:

The attitude toward death and Christian belief is very different here from, say, “Aubade” where the poet flatly asserts that religion is “That vast moth-eaten musical brocade/ Created to pretend we never die.” Not only are the dead in “The Explosion” shown as
momentarily radiant and transfigured, the possibility is offered in the highlighted sixth stanza that an afterlife awaits them. Death is presented in the context of both light and life, in the symbolic, regenerative images of the sun and unbroken eggs (the sun, for Larkin, always perceived as a source of life, as when he writes in “Solar”, “The eye sees you/simplified by distance/ Into an origin . . . ”).¹⁶

Thus, the atmosphere in which death is presented in the poem becomes very conducive for life for Elizabeth Spires to say that ‘Larkin’s artistic instincts prevail over whatever doubt and fear the subject of death held for the man.’¹⁷ Thus “The Explosion” shows Larkins changed attitude towards death and his belief in religion contrary to his agnostic tendency we find in most of his poems.

“The Building”

This poem forms with “The Old Fools” the core of High Windows. We are not sure at the very beginning of the poem that the building is a hospital and the vehicles are ambulances. The description of the hospital is given deftly in such a way that it is a special place which is ‘Higher than the handsomest hotel.’ The impression which the building creates in the first stanza is a listless one because it is surrounded by streets described as ‘close-ribbed’ like human skeleton and as ‘great sigh’ showing the sadness embodied in it. At the entrance of this building are seen ambulances coming after ‘All streets in time are visited’ (CP 132). This ‘close-ribbed streets’ look like a ‘great sigh’ of the earth. Thus the portrayal of the building in the first two lines as something very attractive is negated by the following five lines which describes the surrounding of the building.
The second stanza shows Larkin’s close observation of what is going on inside the building. The fact that this building is a hospital becomes clear at the end of this stanza when we learn that ‘Every few minutes comes a kind of nurse.’ The waiting room of this hospital looks like ‘an airport lounge’ in which passengers who are either going to a very far place or coming from afar are sitting. The two similes—‘Like an airport lounge’ and ‘like a local bus’—create images of a journey. The minute details—‘paperbacks,’ ‘tea,’ ‘cup,’ ‘rows of steel chairs,’ ‘ripped mags,’ ‘half-filled shopping bags,’ ‘faces restless and resigned,’ etc.—can give a clear picture of the hospital and this observation of the minute details of the hospital continues in the succeeding stanzas too. The poem’s lines describe either what is happening in the hospital or outside it. The emotional momentum of the poem becomes quite clear when the patients in the reception room are described as:

[snip]

This description of patients is immediately followed by the knowledge that ‘something has gone wrong’ with them and this ‘error’ is ‘of a serious sort.’ The seriousness of the patients is compared to the bigness of the hospital and the amount of money involved in its construction. The patients watch each other as they come to the hospital and guess their identity as if they have known each other earlier. Suddenly on seeing a patient coming in a wheelchair past the patients, everyone is silent: ‘They’re quiet.’

Having described the predicament of the patients, Larkin draws our attention to what is outside the hospital in the sixth stanza: ‘someone walking’
free from illness, ‘streets/ where kids chalk games,’ ‘girls with their hair-dos,’ etc. The desire for a life free from all illness is registered with lucidity in the seventh stanza:

– O world,
  Your loves, your chances, are beyond the stretch
  Of any hand from here! And so, unreal,
  A touching dream to which we all are lulled
  But wake from separately. (CP 192)

The ailing life inside the hospital and the freedom seen outside it are contrasted in such a way that the freedom which the world outside offers is completely ‘out of reach’ (CP 137) for those in the hospital. What they know is only the certainty of death: ‘All know they are going to die. / Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end,/ And somewhere like this.’ This ‘thought of dying’ continues to haunt until the hospital’s ‘powers/ Outbuild cathedrals.’ It is, therefore, ‘his single most terror stricken— and, indeed, terrifying— personal outcry against the intractable fact of death.’18 This fear of death is told in actual experiences clearly seen in one’s own life: ‘Larkin’s best poems are rooted in actual experiences and convey a sense of place and situation, people and events, which give an authenticity to the thoughts that are then usually raised by the poet’s observation of the scene.’19 The minute details of the hospital and its surroundings described in the poem give the effectiveness of the theme of death moving in the poem.

What makes this building more important is the revelation that all are going to die one day and this knowledge of death comes when the patients realize ‘that something has gone wrong.’ This, ‘something’ is an ‘error of a serious sort’ which they have confessed and it occurs to all— ‘women, men; /
old, young.’ When Larkin talks about the importance of the hospital to ‘outbuild cathedrals,’ we are suddenly reminded of the ‘serious house on serious earth’ in “Church Going.” Larkin, as a realist, sees the hospital as a substitute of church in postwar England characterised by the rapid advancement of science and technology. Thus the purpose of the hospital becomes more ‘serious’ towards the end of the poem when it has not only to cure our physical illness but also to heal us spiritually. P.R. King further writes:

All are ‘caught/ On ground curiously neutral’ in which everyone has the same need of attention and all are equal in their suffering. The young, middle aged and old are all represented here, and all arrive at the point at which all choice for them is ended and only ‘the last of hope’ remains. It is the point at which all illusions are finally stripped from people. They are not forced to be ‘the less deceived’ in this house of truth. They are all in hospital ‘to confess that something has gone wrong’. This choice of ‘confess’ and the poem’s insistence on the serious nature of the building’s purpose and its connection with the truth of people’s lives leads [sic] naturally to the hospital being regarded as performing some of the functions of a church in our secular age.20

Those who are in the hospital do not know each other, yet, they share a common thing—‘This new thing held in common’—which always keeps them restless. Thus they struggle ‘to transcend / The thought of dying’ so as to be able to face ‘The coming dark.’ Throughout the poem Larkin sees and listens to the hearts of the patients and narrates their suffering to prove that he has ‘a keen eye and an exact ear.’21 When the impending doom is right ahead, the patients sceptically ask themselves about their future: ‘who knows/ Which he will see, and when?’ Having raised this question, Larkin turns his eyes to the panorama of events outside the hospital. However, he knows that those outside the hospital will
also come to this ‘serious’ building when they are ‘called to these corridors’ of the hospital. The ‘kids’ who are playing, the ‘someone’ walking in the car park and the ‘girls with hair-dos’ are all subject to visit the hospital. Since ‘all streets in time are visited’ (CP 132) by the ambulance, those who are in the ‘close-ribbed streets’ will come to the hospital one day to claim ‘The end of choice, the last of hope.’

When they realize ‘that something has gone wrong,’ the building which is ‘Higher than the handsomest hotel’ will become ‘This clean-sliced cliff’ from where the ‘black-/ Sailed unfamiliar’ (CP 52) ship is awaited. Thus, to be inside or outside the hospital does not make any difference to Larkin since ‘all know they are going to die.’

This poem covers a wide range of issues already discussed in the preceding chapters. The notion that ‘life is first boredom, then fear’ (CP 153) as portrayed in “Dockery and Son” is conspicuously retold here again. The manner how one watches and waits the ‘sparkling armada of promises’ until the arrival of the ship of death has surfaced in “The Building” in the way how the poet watches and asks others to watch those outside the hospital. The comparison between the tall hospital and ‘a locked church’ reminds us of the degradation of religious institutions in “Church Going” and the ‘religious wounding’ of “The Whitsun Weddings.” The ‘close-ribbed streets’ are just like the street from where the sick man is picked up in “Ambulances” in which the horrifying death creates a ‘solving emptiness’ for each. Thus, “The Building” can represent many poems of Larkin in tone, theme and the subject matter.

As the patients enter the hospital, they keep their ‘homes and names/ Suddenly in abeyance.’ They ‘tamely sit/ On rows of steel chairs’ with their
‘faces restless and resigned’ as if they have been tamed by a disease. They have no more control over their own lives. The number of such patients is still on the rise and the seriousness of the disease affecting them is so high:

It must be error of a serious sort,
For see how many floors it needs, how tall
It’s grown by now, and how much money goes
In trying to correct it. (CP 191)

The height of the hospital shows the amount of suffering of the patients and the money involved. Thus, the hospital bears an ontological meaning in the daily business of the people who are suffering from different diseases.

The hospital is seen as ‘the last of hope’ by the patients while it receives them as people providing profit to make ‘many floors.’ The patients see it as a place of worship like a church. The word ‘confess’ is suggestive of a confession by a sinner while ‘congregation’ reminds one of a gathering in a church. Thus the hospital is given a religious shape while the church outside it is ‘locked’ and ignored by the ‘Kids’ and the ‘girls with hair-dos.’ Interestingly, a hospital is a symbol of science set against the ‘locked church’ in the sixth stanza. It shows that the patients prefer this hospital to the church outside though they know that ‘they are going to die.’ The relatives of the patients bring ‘propitiatory flowers’ to the hospital though these flowers are ‘wasteful’ and ‘weak.’ They believe in the healing power of the hospital:

By admitting that ‘its powers’ atleast have the potential to ‘Outbuild cathedrals’ and contravene ‘The coming dark’, he registers the legitimacy of hope at the same time as he rejects the support of the church. The hope, of course, is not that death will be everlastingly withheld from the ‘unseen congregations’
of patients, but that it will be kept temporarily at bay and that they will have time and suitable circumstances in which to prepare themselves to meet it.22

Now, like what we have seen in “The Explosion” where “the eggs unbroken’ bring a sense of relief in the final line, the ‘propitiatory flowers’ in the final line of “The Building” also suggest a sense of affirmation. This is a significant change of Larkin’s attitude towards life and death since the earlier volumes of poetry.

“The Old Fools”

This poem is also about Larkin’s obsession of old age and death. His frustration at the cruel attack of time which brings ‘the only end of age’ (CP 153) becomes more conspicuous now than earlier. As one begins to read it, he suddenly remembers “Reference Back” in which Larkin links his youthfulness to his mother’s old age and thereby lamenting over the losses caused to their lives by the passing of time:

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. (CP 106)

As the poet learns that ‘We are not suited to the long perspectives,’ he remembers the ‘losses’ and in a dejected mood laments over the unreturnable past. However the same theme is embodied in “The Old Fools” with a higher degree of anger caused by the realization that he will also be an ‘old fool’ one day in ‘a world without generative fire.’23 This world is the world of the old fools: ‘Not knowing how, not hearing who, the power/ Of choosing gone.’ It is
a precarious human condition experienced by the old after the ‘unique random blend/ Of families and fashions’ (CP 132). The psychological pang of the old people is extensively described in the poem in a contemptuous tone. The title itself strikes one at the very outset with a high degree of contempt. Explaining the reason for this contemptuous tone Larkin says: ‘It’s rather an angry poem, but the anger is ambivalent— we are angry at the humiliation of age, but we are also angry at old people for reminding us of death, and I suppose for making us feel bad about doing nothing for them.’

The first stanza contains a series of five questions, all set to show his anger to the old fools. However intention behind these questions is not a call for answers but rather it is to show his frustration. Old People reminds him of death: ‘. . . so final. And so near’ (CP 195). As he sees the old people he links his own life to theirs and releases a series of questions in the first stanza. Larkin first found the ‘bridge/ From your [his mother] unsatisfactory age/ To my unsatisfactory prime’ (CP 106) in 1955. About two decades later in “The Old Fools,” Larkin again realises the final end of life: ‘. . . the bits that were you/ Start speeding away from each other for ever/ With no one to see.’ This fear suddenly turns itself into frustration with ‘the power/ Of choosing gone.’

The pitiable condition of old people is that ‘your mouth hangs open and drools,/ And you keep on pissing yourself, and can’t remember/ Who called this morning’ until the final extinction. Having described this physical condition, Larkin draws our attention to the psychological state of the old men:

Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms
Inside your head, and people in them, acting.
People you know, yet can’t quite name, each looms
Like a deep loss restored, from known doors turning
Setting down a lamp, smiling from a stair, extracting
A known book from the shelves; or sometimes only
The rooms themselves, chairs and a fire burning,
The blown bush at the window, or the sun’s
Faint friendliness on the wall some lonely
Rain-ceased midsummer evening. (CP 196 - 97)

The ‘old fools’ are both psychological and physical failures. Their ‘unique endeavour/ To bring to bloom the million-petalled flower/ Of being here’ has failed miserably. The images of the ‘Faint friendliness’ and ‘Rain-ceased midsummer evening’ are two striking allusions in the third stanza to draw the illusions of the ‘old fools’: ‘An air of baffled absence, trying to be there/ Yet being here.’ A deep regret for losing the dear past echoes in all the four stanzas. Their failure to realize their ‘being here’ makes Larkin call them ‘old fools.’ Even when death knocks the door, they never perceive ‘How near it is’ and this ignorance is what Larkin calls ‘inverted childhood’ in the last stanza.

As we read further we come to know that Larkin’s angst is not against the old people but against old age. Old age deceives the old people and Larkin cannot tolerate this deception. In 1965, when his mother was seventy nine years old, Larkin once called her a ‘rambling fool’ and doubted ‘her sanity.’ Larkin has, as a Movemteer, such tendency of using derogatory and ironical phrases to show that he is robust at the face of an extremely chilling situation such as ‘old age.’ He asks, ‘why aren’t they screaming?’ This fear of death becomes frustration which is characteristic of his last poems such as “Aubade.” However, Larkin’s attitude changes within the poem itself from the sudden exclamation of the ‘old fools’ in the first line to calmer recognition and sharing the
predicament of the old fools in the third stanza. This is a characteristic change, an indication that Larkin becomes ‘less deceived’ in *High Windows*. The last two stanzas show the anger of the poet subsiding slowly and realizing that he will one day join the old fools in ‘a world without generative fire.’ Only at the end of the poem we know that Larkin’s ‘anger is ambivalent.’ He feels sorry for not helping the old people who are completely alienated from the rest of the world. They leave their own lives to fate and open the door of the tragedy of life. The application of the command of fate in life is always futile and final. The truth of life is a tragedy. To be truthful means to be tragic:

> We cannot help ourselves: we home to tragedy—optimism in art commonly leaving us feeling deprived of some deeper truth. Nothing is of more initial advantage to a poet than a horizon of clouds. For pathos makes us irresistibly present to ourselves, silhouettes us against a backdrop of fate, renders us final for the imagination. And to achieve it Larkin, as he now saw, had only to ‘feel’—feel simply without exaggeration. This itself meant that he had to measure ordinary life, life as we know it, with the rigour of regret. 26

“The Old Fools” conceived in September 1972 and completed in January the next year is a ‘long dreary poem that had been dragging’ Larkin for long.

The early 1970s is a turning point in his life. His protests against ‘old age, death and disillusionment’ became very strong during this period:

By 1970, however, a certain disillusionment with life was discernible which grew with the approach of his fiftieth birthday in 1972. This marked a watershed in his life and he was convinced, in spite of all the contrary evidence of the last decade, that it signaled the decline of his creative ability. 29
During this period he had to visit his mother as frequently as possible as she was growing old day by day. Later in 1977 she died. “The Old Fools” is not about being old fools but is about the realization of being befooled in a world of ‘deceptions.’ When Larkin describes the pathetic situation of the old people in the third stanza as ‘having lighted rooms’ inside which people are ‘acting,’ we know that they cannot act in the game of life and instead they are acted upon. They cannot ignore it— ‘How can they ignore it?’ This is the real predicament which ‘the less deceived’ Larkin sees in the lives of the old fools.

Larkin’s use of the harsh and dry language in the beginning of the poem hints at the rage of Larkin against death and not against those who are old:

> It is essential to recognize that the relentlessness is an aspect of sympathy not of callousness, and to notice how firmly Larkin insists at the end of the poem on his (and our) eventual identification with the old fools. 30

The harshness of the language is due to Larkin’s ‘relentlessness,’ a struggle to transcend to ‘a truer and more mature self’31 which is the third part of life. This struggle is a failure for the old people like the failure of his third novel. Though he calls the old people with a contemptuous phrase ‘old fools,’ he identifies himself with them and consequently the poem ends with the final line ‘We shall find out.’ This final line shows the characteristic affirmative note in the last line of “The Explosion”: ‘One showing the eggs unbroken’ (CP 175). Thus the poem, after relentlessly and violently reacting to the coming of old age, finds an affirmative conclusion. The alienation of the old people, the anxiety of the poet due to old age, the ignorance of the old people about their advancing age all converge into something unknown which ‘We shall find out’ one day.
“Aubade”

Of the poems written after the publication of *High Windows*, “Aubade” is the greatest poem in terms of its literary merits—theme, language, technique and clarity of the ontological question it raises. Unlike the previous poems discussed in this thesis, the speaker here speaks of his own condition. In most of his poems the speaker is an outsider who observes and comments over others. But in “Aubade” the speaker laments over his own condition:

I work all day and get half-drunk at night.  
Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.  
In time the curtain-edges will grow light.  
Till then I see what’s really always there:  
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,  
Making all thought impossible but how  
And where and when I shall myself die.  
Arid interrogation: yet the dread  
Of dying, and being dead,  
Flashes afresh to hold and horrify. (CP 208)

The first stanza itself shows Larkin’s internal crisis in answering the nagging question: ‘How and where and when I shall myself die.’ This is contrary to what the title suggests. An ‘aubade’ is a song sung in the dawn and ‘expresses regret of parting lovers at daybreak.’ But this ‘regret’ of the lovers has been turned into frustration at the sight of the ‘Unresting death.’ Day, for Larkin, means work and night means drink. Then at daybreak he ‘stares’ and sees what’s really always there: ‘Unresting death.’ As the day breaks, he learns that his death is ‘a whole day nearer now.’

As the poem progresses into the second stanza, Larkin’s ‘mind blanks at the glare’ of the daybreak, not because of ‘the good not done’ or ‘the love not
given’ in the past ‘But at the total emptiness for ever, / The sure extinction that we travel to / And shall be lost in always.’ In the first two stanzas, Larkin has conceived the ‘Unresting death’ becoming nearer and nearer day by day. In the third stanza, Larkin tries to console himself by searching some way out to avoid his fear. But ‘No trick dispels.’ Again religion is also rejected as:

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, not seeing
That this is what we fear— (CP 208)

and finally ends in ‘The anaesthetic from which none come round.’ In the fourth stanza, his fear of death becomes more unbearable and it keeps him completely frustrated:

Most things may never happen: this one will,
And realization of it rages out
In furnace fear when we are caught without
People or drink. (CP 209)

Interestingly, Larkin wants ‘people’ here unlike his hatred for company as we see in poems such as “Wants,” “Dockery and Son,” “Self’s the Man,” etc. He needs ‘people’ and ‘drink’ to face the fear of death and these two things are more important than courage:

Courage is no good:
It means not fearing others. Being brave
Lets no one off the grave. (CP 209)

Now after the realization of the inevitability of death, his fear becomes frustration because all his courage, philosophical and religious knowledge are
completely useless when the day breaks ‘to hold and horrify.’ He left the poem after writing the fourth stanza and later on 27 November 1977, wrote the final stanza.

The final stanza of the poem brings Larkin from his ‘metaphysical hangover’ to a world of reality:

Meanwhile telephones crouch, getting ready to ring
In locked up offices and all the uncaring
Intricate rented world begins to rouse.
The sky is white as clay, with no sun.
Work has to be done.

Postmen like doctors go from house to house. (CP 209)

This stanza shows a sudden turn of the tone of the poem from frustration to a logical realization of the reality of being alive, a ‘toad’ which sits heavily over him. His ‘hangover’ ends temporarily when ‘slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.’ As ‘the uncaring / Intricate rented world begins to rouse,’ he realizes that ‘Work has to be done’ while going ‘down cemetery road’ (CP 148). Examining the final stanza, Nicholas Marsh writes:

We may see something other than stoicism, and feel that the terror of the previous stanzas hovers over this one [final stanza] as well. The speaker is grateful to everyday things (telephone calls, letters) because thinking of death is ‘impossible.’ Meanwhile, everyday things are not presented in positive terms: telephones ‘crouch’ like animals waiting to pounce; the world is ‘uncaring/ intricate rented’, a reminder of the vulgar dominions of money and work; and postmen are ‘like doctors’, bringing letters that will occupy our minds and therefore act as painkillers to dull the thought of death.
This observation of Nicholas Marsh can be linked to what Larkin said about “Aubade” in a letter he wrote to John Betjaman: ‘I think it’s amazing the way people don’t [emphasis Larkin’s] seem to worry about death. Of course one ought to be brave, and all that, but it’s never been anything but a terrible source of dread to me.’ Since ‘being brave/ Lets no one off the grave’ and religion only pretends ‘we never die,’ all attempts to reject death end in futility. However Larkin, after the frustrations in the four stanzas, becomes gentle and logical in the final stanza. The light ‘Flashes afresh to hold and horrify’ in the last line of the first stanza. But it helps the room take shape in the first line of the last stanza: ‘Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape.’ The whole drama of fear and frustration takes place from the first stanza to the fourth stanza. Once ‘the room takes shape,’ Larkin realizes that ‘Work has to be done.’

The final line of the poem— ‘Postmen like doctors go from house to house’— is suggestive of a relationship an individual creates in the ‘Intricate rented world.’ A postman brings letters from the people in distant places. The letters link the individuals by forming relationships and what one is afraid of is not only death but also the destruction of these relationships when he dies:

That this is what we fear— no sight, no sound,  
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with,  
Nothing to love or link with,  
The anaesthetic from which none come round. (CP 208)

Thus ‘The daily things we do’ (CP 213) as described in the last stanza are merely a way of relieving oneself of ‘the dread/ of dying, and being dead.’

Fear of death, logically speaking, means love of life, to remain affectionate to it even though he says ‘Deprivation is for me what daffodils
were for Wordsworth.”[^37] If the daffodils effect Wordsworth ‘an emotion recollected in tranquility,’ this ‘deprivation’ effects a rage in Larkin and the rage is released in the form of poetry. “Aubade” is no exception to it. The poem reveals ‘his awareness that the universe is ultimately empty.’[^38] The return from the ‘metaphysical hangover’ to ‘the daily things we do’ in the last stanza of “Aubade” only shows that ‘His acceptance of impending oblivion causes him to see the everyday pursuits of people, including himself, with irony and elegiac sadness.’[^39] This notion of conceiving his daily life as a heavy burden of sadness is natural because of his heavy schedule of work. He once regretted his heavy schedule and said: ‘Sometimes I think, everything I’ve written has been done after a day’s work, in the evening: what would it have been like if I’d written it in the morning, after a night’s sleep?’[^40] However, he would not have written anything different in the ‘morning’ because his ‘mind blanks at the glare’ of the sun each morning, seeing the ‘total emptiness.’ People do have remorse because of ‘The good not done, the love not given, time/ Torn off unused,’ but what irritates the poet’s mind is ‘The sure extinction that we travel to / And shall be lost in always.’ For Larkin there is ‘nothing more true’ than ‘The anaesthetic from which none come round.’ As he wakes up each morning he learns that ‘most things may never happen’ but death will.

In the final stanza, as the poet sees the coming of the ‘Intricate rented world,’ the whole world wakes from its slumber: the ‘telephones crouch,’ ‘locked up offices’ are also set for their normal functions. The penultimate line shows a strong positive feeling of the poet contrary to the dreary mood depicted in the preceding lines. The ‘postmen’ and ‘doctors’ are so active and carry out their duty by going ‘from house to house.’ Thus the ending of the poem is, like the positive note in the last line of “The Explosion,” comparatively

[^37]: A reference to William Wordsworth, a British romantic poet known for his poems about nature and individual emotions.
[^38]: A reference to Philip Larkin, an English poet known for his works that often explore themes of mortality and everyday life.
[^39]: A reference to Larkin’s acceptance of mortality and its impact on his perception of daily life.
[^40]: A quote from Larkin that expresses his regret for not writing in the morning after a night’s sleep.
affirmative and it places the reality of everyday life above the fear of death extensively narrated in the poem. The ‘priest and the doctor’ are ‘running over the fields’ in “Days.” They cannot answer the ontological question—‘Where can we live but days?’—and fail to redeem the troubled people. But the doctors and the postmen in this poem serve their purpose to relieve people of the pain of death. Thus, “Aubade” shows Larkin’s unusual characteristic of being brave at the face of death. In “Days,” “Next, Please,” “Nothing to be Said,” “Ambulances,” “Dockery and Son,” “Myxomatosis,” etc. Larkin is completely a pessimist. But, here, he becomes robust and can stand up against the cruel attack of time.

High Windows, Larkin’s last volume of poetry, shows his relentless tussle with death and alienation once again and significantly his attitude has changed since The Whitsun Weddings. In the earlier volumes he is a pessimist, now he is a robust English ready to face anything and willing to carry on his own life though his awareness of death and alienation still persists.

All the twenty four poems in High Windows are dense with the theme of either death or alienation or both. The themes and subject matter of the poems in the preceding two volumes still continue to work in the poems of this volume too: ‘A fundamental lugubriousness marks, and mars, much of Larkin’s writing despite its colloquial ease and half-confessional naturalness.’ In “How Distant” ‘an adventure locked in the past’ haunts Larkin keeping him aloof from others: ‘It shows all the competing parts of his personality in a deadlock: the impulse to love and the yearning for self-sufficiency; the need for sex and the disgust at admitting it.’ Similarly the trees in “The Trees” become a symbol of grief even in spring: ‘Their greenness
is a kind of grief” (CP 166). In “Aannus Mirabilis,” Larkin again feels sorry because he finds himself too old to enjoy the freedom brought in by the year 1963. This poem is symptomatic of the sexual freedom of the postwar English society which is reflected in poems like “High Windows,” “This Be The Verse,” “Vers de Society,” etc.

As in the earlier volumes, however, High Windows shows ‘Larkin’s talents work hand in hand with a wry and sometimes tenderly nursed sense of defeat.’43 “Sad Steps” clearly shows this ‘sense of defeat’ as the speaker realizes that the moon ‘Is a reminder of the strength and pain/ Of being young:’ Thus, the essentially romantic moon becomes an object of fear at which ‘One shivers slightly, looking up there.’ In “Posterity” Larkin hits at his imagined biographer, Jake Balokowsky, who is doing a research only to get the scholarship to make his living comfortable. This poem exposes the possible future of a generation characterized by consumerism. “To the Sea,” unlike “The Old Fools,” expresses the necessity of ‘helping the old’ and the ‘drag of social responsibilities.’44 In “Dublinesque,” Larkin comes to the cruel attack of death while describing a funeral and the same subject is dealt with in a lucid style in “Cut Grass” too.

Alienation again surfaces in “Vers de Society” exposing a life time conflict between the individual and the society and his failure to resolve the conflict. The poem begins with an invitation from a friend Warlock-Williams to join a party along with ‘a crowd of craps.’ For a moment Larkin thinks that ‘All solitude is selfish’ and ‘Virtue is social’ and at last he replies that:

Only the young can be alone freely
The time is shorter now for company,
And sitting by a lamp more often brings
Not peace, but other things.
Beyond the light stand failure and remorse
Whispering *Dear Warlock-Williams: Why, of course*— (CP 182)

The poem, as in “Dockery and Son” and “Self’s the Man,” is a ‘debate between ourselves as social and sociable beings and each self as a prisoner in his solitude.’ Along with this endless debate, Larkin learns that ‘night is falling, time is passing, old age is coming on within; and solitude (good) is becoming loneliness (bad).’ This situation compels him to respond to the invitation as ‘Dear Warlock-Williams: Why, of course—’ in a poignant mood. This poem is exceptional because ‘Its subject is the terms on which the isolated individual may become socially available’ [emphasis mine]. His contempt for the ‘crowd of craps’ dwindles towards the end of the poem when he realizes the shortness of his life.

The sense of alienation still continues to haunt poem after poem in *High Windows*. In “Living” all the three characters in the three sections of the poem are so isolated and unhappy with the lives they are leading. When the light house keeper can hear human voices only through the radio, his angst is so immense. In “In times when nothing stood,” the unidentified ‘she’ looks omnipresent:

In times when nothing stood
But worsened, or grew strange,
There was one constant good:
She did not change. (CP 210)

This ‘she’ who ‘did not change’ is suggestive of a belief that there is something which is more powerful than time.
Most poems Larkin wrote after “Aubade” are short and dense with the images of death and old age. In ‘Winter Palace” the pathetic sight of old age is so conspicuous as Larkin describes it as ‘starting to give offence by forgetting faces,/ And swearing I’ve never been in certain places’ (CP 211). In “The Mower”, written in 1979 on the occasion of his killing ‘A hedgehog jammed up against the blades’ (CP 214) of a mower, Larkin unfolds his love of life by mourning the death of the animal. Having learnt the death of the animal he generalizes the need for human relationship:

Next morning I got up and it did not.
The first day after a death, the new absence
Is always the same; we should be careful
Of each other, we should be kind
While there is still time. (CP 214)

This love of life and company is central again in poems such as “New eyes each year” and “Long lion days.” This tendency of satisfaction with ‘Whatever was sown/ Now fully grown’ (CP 219) is characteristic of his last poems.

Thus, *High Windows* shows Larkin’s sudden turn towards life even after becoming old with ‘age and the only end of age’ quite imminent. The last lines of the poem “The Explosion” — ‘One showing the eggs unbroken’ — and “Show Saturday” — ‘Regenerate union. Let it always be there’ — are characteristics of the affirmative voice of Larkin. This is same in “Aubade” when he says: ‘Work has to be done./ Postmen like doctors go from house to house.’ This is to say that Larkin is more affirmative towards the end of his life and his last poems are dense with a sympathy towards life.
NOTES


2 Ibid., p. 445.

3 Ibid., p. 446.


5 Ibid.

6 Andrew Motion, Philip Larkin (London: Methuen, 1982) p. 81.

7 Ibid.


9 Ibid., p. 54.


14 Ibid.


17 Ibid.


20 Ibid. p. 39-40.


22 Andrew Motion, Philip Larkin, op.cit., p. 61.


25 Philip Larkin is quoted by Alan Bennett to have said, ‘My mother is such a bloody rambling fool that half the time I doubt her sanity.’ When Larkin made this remark in 1965, her mother was seventynine years of age. See Alan Bennett, “Alas! Deceived,” Philip Larkin, ed. Stephen Regan (New York: Palgrave, 1997) p. 226.

26 Calvin Bedient, Eight Contemporary Poets, op.cit., p. 74-75.


29 Ibid., p. 13.

31 Larkin believed that life has three stages; the first is innocence, the second its loss and the third the struggle to return to a truer and more mature self. See Maeve M. Brennan, “Philip Larkin: a biographical sketch,” *op.cit.*, p. 6.


33 The date of completion of this poem is written as 29 November 1977 in *Collected Poems* edited by Anthony Thwaite. However the final stanza of this poem was written on 27 November 1977. See Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A writers’ Life, op.cit.*, p. 468. This date is also ascertained by Henry Austre’s essay “Larkin’s ‘Shakespeherian Rag’: A Reading of ‘Aubade,’” *The Literary Criterion* Vol. XL. 3-4 (2005) p. 135.

34 Kingsley Amis, a close friend of Larkin, said that ‘when that ineffable compound of depression, sadness, anxiety, self-hatred, sense of failure and fear of the future begins to steal over you, start telling yourself that what you have is a [metaphysical] hangover.’ The hangover is quite conspicuous in the first four stanzas of “Aubade.” Amis is quoted to have said so in Henry Auster, “Larkin’s ‘Shakespeherian Rag’: A Reading of ‘Aubade,’” *The Literary Criterion* Vol. XL. 3-4 (2005) p. 131.


39 Ibid.


46 Ibid.