

Philip Larkin – SEC 2012

‘Larkin’s poems often reveal moments of sensitivity which lessen the disappointment and cynicism found in much of his work.’

To what extent do you agree with this statement? Support your answer with suitable reference to the poetry of Philip Larkin on your course.

Marking Scheme Guidelines:

Candidates are free to agree and/or disagree with the statement, but they should engage with ‘moments of sensitivity’ and ‘disappointment and cynicism’ (though not necessarily equally) in Larkin’s poetry. Allow that ‘lessen’ may be addressed explicitly or implicitly.

Material might be drawn from the following:

- Acerbic poetic voice criticises/celebrates ordinary life
- Sympathetic treatment of transience, love, death
- Disillusionment reduced by touching/nostalgic impulses
- Revealing imagery can be pessimistic/hopeful/realistic
- Stoicism and indifference evident in the irony, dark humour

It is absolutely vital that you write an essay plan. Remember, it need not make sense to anyone but you. Don't waste your time writing full sentences. (I have written a very detailed plan so that you can see what I wanted to say. If I were doing it for my own purposes only, then it would be full of abbreviations, crossing out, and hastily scribbled notes.) The plan will simply be a trigger for your memory when you are writing the essay. It will also keep you focused. There is much you could say about each poem, but you must confine yourself to those points that are relevant to the essay title. If you simply write all you know about each poem, you will get a low grade. Your essay must be going somewhere. Think of it as a persuasive piece. You are trying to convince the examiner that your approach and your interpretation is a valid one.

Try to move from poem to poem in some sort of logical order. Think of links between the

poems and make sure to mention them in your essay.

When you have written your plan, double check that every point relates to the question and to your interpretation of it.

Themes: Disappointed about the changing world and loss of 'old England'. Exploitation: shows how cruel life can be when young men are sacrificed for political ends: MCMXIV; or money: The Explosion.

Cynical about love/religion/afterlife: An Arundel Tomb, Church Going

Imperfect world/exploitation/death also dealt with in At Grass –beautiful, gentle poem.

Good for conclusion of essay.

Style: Beautiful, sensitive descriptions balance sometimes bleak message. Cynicism versus gentle contemplation. Observation leads to reflection.

Introduction

We live in a time when it is easy to be cynical about and disappointed by the world in which we live. Bad news of every sort floods our television screens night after night. We may feel we have been let down by those who were in charge etc. Larkin also explores these themes and asks himself what it is all about. Is there more to life than this? Is there any hope for a better future? His sensitivity lessens his disappointment and cynicism and lends his work great force.



MCMXIV

Death is near/life is short, the world is changing, the men in the picture are unaware of this. Horror of war looms. Sensitive engagement with the men and their innocence. Beautiful, nostalgic description of idyllic world moves us. Touching details such as gardens left tidy show Larkin's understanding of the men's lack of awareness of what they were facing. While he mourns the passing of Old England and is clearly disappointed by the way the world has changed, he is heartbreakingly aware of the suffering that lies in wait for these men in the photograph.



The Explosion

Link: Again, death is near and the men in the poem are unaware of it. Like those queuing to enlist, these men are ignorant of the fact that they are walking towards death. Life is short and death can strike at any time. Sensitivity is shown in the sympathetic portrayal of the miners – image of the eggs unbroken is particularly beautiful. Although Larkin does not believe in an afterlife, he does show sensitivity towards the religious views of the miners' wives. Description of mystical vision lessens disappointment – raises hope. Eggs are another note of hope.



Church Going

Link: This poem also explores the issue of religion. Cynical opening, appears irreverent and indifferent. However, Larkin is again sensitive to others' beliefs. MCMXIV looked at change in the world, 'Church Going' imagines future change. Sensitivity in the awkward reverence shown (humour of bicycle clips also lightens mood) and understanding of people's need to believe that there is more to life than this. Gentle/thoughtful approach – does not answer our questions but recognises our compulsion to seek comfort/make sense of our lives.



An Arundel Tomb

Link: Also wonders what, if anything, will survive of us. Is this all there is? Message is bleak – love does not survive, but Larkin's cynicism is balanced by the 'sharp, tender shock' he felt on seeing statues' clasped hands. Irony of his message often being lost on those who read poem now! Like Church Going, Larkin is sensitive to our need to believe that something of us lives on or that life has a purpose. Shares that feeling for a moment. Honest.



At Grass

Link: Final poem in essay. Deals with exploitation of racehorses / death. Reminds us of MCMXIV with mention of standing 'at ease'. Beautifully sensitive, touching and even quietly humorous: horses shaking heads to say 'no'. Peaceful acceptance of death. One of Larkin's best-loved poems and deservedly so. Melancholic but beautiful and ultimately

restful.



Conclusion

Link back to introduction: Is honest and unflinching in his treatment of questions of life, death, love, changing world etc. Expresses his feelings and experiences with a lyrical beauty and sensitivity that captures the tension that exists in many of us between desire to find meaning in life and fear that it may not exist. End with Heaney's quote.

Essay

Introduction

We are living through difficult times. Every time we open a newspaper we are confronted with depressing tales of exploitation, greed, suffering and death. Unsurprisingly, many of us are prey to feelings of disappointment and cynicism. We may even find ourselves in agreement with the 17th century philosopher Thomas Hobbes when he described the natural state of mankind as 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.' We may ask ourselves if there is any hope of a better future in this life or the next. Larkin explores these in his poetry and more often than not seems to find the world wanting. In 'MCMXIV' and 'The Explosion', for example, he presents us with a picture of men walking blindly into the jaws of death to satisfy the political or financial ambitions of others. 'Church Going' and 'An Arundel Tomb' dismiss the consolation of an afterlife or of love being an everlasting legacy. Although Larkin's disillusionment with our flawed world is clear in these poems, what I most admire about his work is his ability to balance his cynicism and disappointment with a gentle sensitivity and even at times a faint glimmer of hope that life may not be as futile as it often appears.

Your own essay:

Poem One:

- What is Larkin disappointed/cynical about?
- How does he express this in his language?
- What effect does that have on you?
- Were there any moments of sensitivity in the poem?
- What was he sensitive about?
- How did he express this in his language? (Think about everything from the structure of the poem to the vowel sounds and use quotes for support.)
- You said at the outset that the poem had elements of disappointment and cynicism. Did the sensitivity – however it was expressed – lessen the disappointment and cynicism in the poem?
- To what extent?
- What is your final impression of this poem?
- Which did you feel won out: disappointment/cynicism or uplift in spirits caused by moments of sensitivity? Or did you feel that it was an equal blend of both and that the moments of sensitivity just raised the poem from the realms of negativity/disappointment/cynicism?

Quotes

It is always a good idea to have a number of quotes by and about the poet in question. Keep these in a folder along with any notes on the poems.

Here are some selected quotes on Philip Larkin to start you off. You can and should add to these as you study his work.

Philip Larkin:

‘I think writing about unhappiness is probably the source of my popularity, if I have any - after all, most people are unhappy, don't you think?’

‘Life has a practice of living you, if you don't live it.’

‘Deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth.’

‘Death is no different whined at than withstood.’

‘I'd like to think...that people in pubs would talk about my poems’

‘Love isn't stronger than death just because statues hold hands for 600 years.’ (on the manuscript draft of 'An Arundel Tomb').

‘Let me remember that the only married state I intimately know (i.e., that of my parents) is bloody hell. Never must it be forgotten.’

Others on Larkin:

‘[Larkin wrote] in clipped, lucid stanzas, about the failures and remorse of age, about stunted lives and spoiled desires.’ J.D. McClatchy

‘[Larkin had] the scrupulous awareness of a man who refuses to be taken in by inflated notions of either art or life.’ Peter R. King: *Nine Contemporary Poets: A Critical Introduction*

'[Larkin wrote] the most technically brilliant and resonantly beautiful, profoundly disturbing yet appealing and approachable, body of verse of any English poet in the last twenty-five years.' Alan Brownjohn in *Philip Larkin*.

'Larkin spends a good deal of his time as a poet trying to escape his "ordinary" social self; his lyricism is his salvation, not just his work.' Andrew Motion in 'The Guardian'.

'Larkin was a person who had profound and unforgettable things to say about common experience.' Andrew Motion in 'The Guardian'.

'[Larkin] avoided the literary, the metropolitan, the group label, and embraced the nonliterary, the provincial, and the purely personal.' Alun R. Jones

'Philip Larkin has the power to make poetry out of material that might seem to be unpromising and intractable. Most of us live in urban or suburban landscapes among the constructions and the detritus of an industrial society. Larkin distills poetry from the elements that make up this society- an Odeon cinema, billboards, scrap heaps of disused cars, hospital waiting rooms, cut-price shops - which he presents without falsification or sentimentality. [He captures] in his poetry attitudes of heart and mind that seem peculiarly characteristic of our time: doubt, insecurity, boredom, aimlessness, and malaise.

Source: John Press, *The Poetry of Philip Larkin*, in *The Southern Review*, Vol. XIII, No. 1, Winter, 1977.)

Larkin is, like Tennyson, an artist of the first rank, who employs language with a rare freshness, precision, and resonance, and whose verse records with lyrical purity his experience of loneliness and anguish. He is both the unofficial laureate of post-war Britain and the poet who voices most articulately and poignantly the spiritual desolation of a world in which men have shed the last rags of religious faith that once lent meaning and hope to human lives. John Press, *The Poetry of Philip Larkin*, in *The Southern Review* (Edited for the purposes of these notes: AO'D)

‘[No living poet] can equal Larkin on his own ground of the familiar English lyric, drastically and poignantly limited in its sense of any life beyond, before or after, life today in England.’ George Dekker

[Larkin's poetry] expresses uncertainty and a feeling of rootlessness , but his mood is never one of despair, and often there is a deep yearning for an escape from futility.’ C. B. Cox

‘Because he is suspicious of any easy consolation, he is sparing of such moments, yet when they come they stream into the discursive and exacting world of his poetry with such trustworthy force that they call for attention.’ Seamus Heaney

‘At the very least there is often a tension in his poetry between his desire for a quasi-religious experience and his sense that life is a mess. This tension is essentially that of many modern people and explains why Larkin speaks so powerfully to them. His is a secular voice crying in the wilderness, suspicious yet longing for the mysterious, the mystical, the sacramental.’ Don W. King