



## Contemporary analysis of Ecocriticism perspectives in works of Philip Larkin

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### Abstract

One could argue that Larkin's poetry indirectly engages with environmental themes through his contemplation of mortality, transience, and the passage of time. By acknowledging the finiteness of human existence, Larkin implicitly acknowledges the interconnectedness of human life with the natural world and the implications of our actions on the environment. While Larkin's poetry may not overtly advocate for environmental activism or address ecological concerns in the way that ecocritical writers typically do, his work can still be examined from an ecocritical perspective. By analyzing his portrayal of nature, the human-nature relationship, and the implicit connections between human existence and the environment, readers can find avenues to explore ecological themes within Larkin's poetry.

**Keywords:** Human existence, larkin implicitly, mortality, transience

### Introduction

Philip Larkin (1922-1985) was an influential English poet, novelist, and librarian. Known for his introspective and often pessimistic verse, Larkin's works capture the essence of post-World War II Britain and explore themes of love, death, solitude, and the passage of time. It would be inaccurate to categorize Philip Larkin as an ecocritical writer in the strictest sense. Larkin's poetry primarily focuses on themes of personal reflection, human relationships, and existential concerns rather than explicitly addressing environmental or ecological issues. His work is more closely associated with modernism and the movement known as "The Movement," which was characterized by a focus on individual experiences and skepticism towards grand narratives.

Larkin's poetry is characterized by its precise language, formal structure, and keen observations of everyday life. While his works often evoke a sense of disillusionment and pessimism, they also offer profound insights into the human condition and the complexities of human emotions. Larkin's poetry continues to resonate with readers for its honesty, wit, and exploration of universal themes. While Larkin's poetry may not align directly with the principles of ecocriticism, it is worth noting that some of his poems touch upon elements of nature and the environment. Larkin occasionally includes descriptions of natural landscapes, seasonal changes, and animal life within his work. These glimpses of the natural world provide context and atmosphere for his exploration of human emotions and experiences.

Philip Larkin's poetry is not often associated with explicit environmental or ecological concerns. His focus is primarily on personal emotions, societal issues, and the existential condition of individuals. However, it is still possible to apply an ecocritical perspective to Larkin's works, albeit in a more nuanced way.

**Some of his notable works include: "The Whitsun Weddings" (1964)** <sup>[5]</sup>: This collection features the

eponymous poem, which is considered one of Larkin's masterpieces. The poem describes a train journey, capturing the emotions, observations, and reflections of the poet as he witnesses a series of wedding parties along the way.

- **"High Windows" (1974):** In this collection, Larkin contemplates the transient nature of life, the erosion of traditional values, and the challenges of modern society. The poems often exhibit a sense of disillusionment and isolation, addressing themes of aging, sexuality, and mortality.
- **"The Less Deceived" (1955):** Larkin's debut collection garnered critical acclaim and established him as a leading voice in British poetry. The poems explore themes of failed relationships, disillusionment, and the tension between personal desires and societal expectations.
- **"Aubade" (1977):** Considered one of Larkin's most powerful and poignant poems, "Aubade" confronts the inevitability of death and the existential anxieties that arise from contemplating mortality. It reflects on the fear and loneliness that can accompany the early morning hours, where one's thoughts are left to dwell on the ultimate end.
- **"Church Going" (1955):** This poem contemplates the decline of religious faith and the changing role of the church in society. Larkin explores the relationship between human beings and the institutions they create, questioning the significance of religion in an increasingly secular world.

### Ecocriticism: text(s) and context(s)

Ecocriticism is a literary and cultural theory that emerged in the late 20th century, focusing on the study of literature and other forms of cultural expression through the lens of the natural world and the environment. It seeks to examine the interconnections between humans and nature, the representations of nature in literature and other texts, and the ethical and social implications of our relationship with

the natural world. Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary field that bridges literature, environmental studies, philosophy, and other disciplines. By analyzing texts in their various contexts, ecocritics seek to deepen our understanding of the relationship between humans and the natural world and encourage more environmentally conscious and responsible attitudes and actions.

### Texts in Ecocriticism

#### Literary Works

Ecocriticism primarily analyzes literary texts, including poetry, fiction, non-fiction, essays, and drama. It explores how these texts represent nature, ecological themes, and human interactions with the environment. Examples of texts that have been analyzed from an ecocritical perspective include "Walden" by Henry David Thoreau, "Silent Spring" by Rachel Carson, and works by contemporary authors like Wendell Berry and Terry Tempest Williams.

#### Environmental Literature

Some texts are explicitly written with ecological concerns in mind, known as environmental literature or nature writing. Authors like John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Mary Oliver have contributed to this genre, and their works are frequently analyzed through an ecocritical lens.

#### Contexts in Ecocriticism

##### Environmental History

Ecocriticism draws from environmental history to understand the cultural, social, and ecological contexts in which literary works were produced. It examines historical events, environmental movements, and shifts in attitudes toward nature that may have influenced the writing and reception of texts.

##### Environmental Philosophy

Ecocriticism also engages with environmental philosophy to explore the ethical and moral dimensions of human interactions with nature. Concepts such as deep ecology, ecofeminism, and biocentrism provide theoretical frameworks for analyzing environmental issues in literature.

#### Touch of ecocriticism in Larkins poetry

Representation of Nature: Although nature is not a central theme in Larkin's poetry, he occasionally includes descriptions of natural elements such as landscapes, seasons, and animals. These depictions can be analyzed to explore how Larkin perceives and portrays the natural world. Consider how he presents nature in relation to human experiences, emotions, or social contexts.

- **Urban-Nature Duality:** Larkin's poems often contrast urban environments with rural or natural settings. This urban-nature duality can be examined from an ecocritical perspective. Look for instances where Larkin juxtaposes urban landscapes with references to nature, and consider how these contrasting environments shape the themes and moods of his poetry.
- **Human-Nature Relationships:** Larkin's exploration of human-nature relationships is more subtle compared to explicit ecological concerns. His poems touch upon the ways in which individuals interact with and are affected by the natural world. Look for instances where Larkin

reflects on the impact of nature on human emotions, solitude, or the search for meaning.

- **Loss and Absence:** Larkin often reflects on themes of loss, transience, and the passage of time. These themes can be connected to ecological concerns and the sense of loss associated with environmental degradation. Consider how Larkin's exploration of mortality and the fleeting nature of human existence can be extended to the fragility and impermanence of the natural world.
- **Nature as Symbol:** Larkin occasionally employs nature as a symbol or metaphor to convey deeper meanings. Nature can represent various ideas such as vitality, renewal, or the cyclical nature of life. Analyze how Larkin utilizes natural imagery and symbolism to explore human experiences, emotions, or existential dilemmas.
- **Human-Nature Relationships:** Hughes explores the complex relationships between humans and the natural environment. He delves into the ways in which humans interact with and impact the natural world, reflecting on our roles as both participants in and observers of nature.
- **Ecological Awareness:** Many of Hughes's poems exhibit ecological awareness and concern for the environment. He highlights the fragility of ecosystems, the destructive consequences of human activities, and the urgent need for environmental stewardship.
- **Animal and Non-Human Perspectives:** Hughes frequently adopts the perspectives of animals or non-human entities in his poetry. Through these voices, he challenges human-centered perspectives and encourages readers to consider the experiences and perspectives of other beings.
- **Environmental Crisis and Loss:** Hughes confronts environmental crises and the loss of natural habitats and species. His poems shed light on the devastating impact of human actions on the environment, raising awareness about the urgency of conservation and the consequences of ecological degradation.
- **Myth and Symbolism:** Hughes often employs mythological and symbolic elements in his poetry to explore ecological themes. He draws on archetypes and ancient narratives to convey the significance of the natural world and to deepen the understanding of human-nature relationships.
- **Language and Representation:** Hughes's use of language is rich and evocative, capturing the sensory experiences of nature and drawing readers into a closer engagement with the environment. He explores the limitations of human language in capturing the full essence of the natural world.

#### Examples of ecocriticism in Larkins poetry

While Philip Larkin's poetry is not typically associated with explicit engagement in environmental or ecological concerns, there are instances where an ecocritical perspective can be applied to his work. While Larkin's ecological references are not overt or explicit, an ecocritical perspective can highlight his subtle engagement with nature and the environment in some of his poems. It is important to remember that Larkin's primary focus remains on individual experiences, emotions, and the complexities of human existence. Ecocriticism, when applied to his works, can provide a nuanced understanding of how nature and the environment intersect with his broader themes.

1. **Nature Imagery:** Larkin occasionally incorporates vivid descriptions of natural landscapes, seasons, and elements of the natural world. While these descriptions may serve more as a backdrop to his exploration of human experiences, they provide glimpses into the beauty and significance of the natural environment. Larkin occasionally includes descriptions of nature and natural elements in his poems. For instance, in "The Trees," he vividly describes the changing of seasons and the resilience of trees, which can be seen as a celebration of the natural world.
2. **Human-Nature Relationship:** Larkin's poems often touch on the complex relationship between humans and the natural world. In "The Trees," for example, he reflects on the enduring presence and resilience of trees in the face of human transience. The poem can be seen as an acknowledgment of the interconnectedness between humans and the natural environment. While Larkin's focus is more on human emotions and existential concerns, some of his poems imply connections between human experiences and the natural world. In "Cut Grass," he reflects on the cycle of life and death as he observes a lawn being mowed, suggesting an underlying ecological awareness.
3. **Loss and Absence:** Larkin's contemplation of mortality and the passage of time can intersect with ecological concerns. For instance, in "Going, Going," he laments the loss of natural landscapes and species due to human activities. The poem serves as a critique of environmental degradation and raises awareness about the irreversible consequences of such actions. Themes of loss, impermanence, and the passage of time in Larkin's poetry can be related to ecological concerns. Poems like "Dockery and Son" and "An Arundel Tomb" contemplate the ephemeral nature of life and human constructions, inviting readers to ponder the broader ecological implications.
4. **Nature as Symbol:** Larkin occasionally employs nature as a symbolic element in his poems. In "The Mower," for example, the mower and the meadow can be interpreted metaphorically to explore themes of destruction, renewal, and the balance between human actions and nature. He uses the image of the mower cutting grass to convey the themes of life, death, and the cyclical nature of existence. This symbolic use of nature invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of human actions on the environment.

### Larkins poem with touch of Ecocriticism

#### "Cut grass"

"Cut Grass" is a short poem that reflects on the act of mowing a lawn. Larkin describes the process of cutting the grass and the scent it produces, noting how it evokes a sense of nostalgia. While the poem does not directly address environmental issues, it can be examined through an ecocritical lens to explore our relationship with nature and the implications of human intervention. While "Cut Grass" does not explicitly engage with ecological concerns or environmental activism, it provides glimpses of human-nature dynamics and prompts contemplation of our impact on the natural world. Through its exploration of the human-nature relationship, the poem invites readers to consider our responsibilities and attitudes toward the environment.

In the papers about old streets  
And split level shopping, but some

Have always been left so far;  
And when the old part retreats  
As the bleak high-risers come  
We can always escape in the car.  
Things are tougher than we are, just  
As earth will always respond  
However we mess it about;  
Chuck filth in the sea, if you must:  
The tides will be clean beyond.

- **Human-Nature Interaction:** The poem explores the human-nature interaction through the act of mowing the lawn. The act of cutting grass represents human intervention in the natural world. It raises questions about our role in shaping and manipulating nature to fit our desires and preferences.
- **The Cycle of Life:** Larkin reflects on the cycle of life that is symbolically represented in the cutting of grass. The act of mowing implies the temporary suppression of nature, but also the inevitable regrowth and renewal. This can be seen as a reflection of the larger ecological cycles and the resilience of nature.
- **Fragility and Impermanence:** The poem indirectly touches upon the fragility and impermanence of the natural world. The scent of the cut grass triggers memories and a sense of transience, suggesting that the beauty and vitality of nature are transient and easily lost or altered by human intervention.
- **Nostalgia for the Natural:** Larkin's evocation of nostalgia in the poem can be seen as a yearning for a more authentic and untouched connection with the natural world. The scent of cut grass serves as a trigger for memories, suggesting a longing for a deeper connection to nature and a recognition of its intrinsic value.

#### "The Trees" (1967)

While Philip Larkin's poetry is not typically associated with explicit ecocritical themes, there are instances where elements of ecocriticism can be identified in his work. One such poem is "The Trees," which touches upon nature and the human-nature relationship. Here is an analysis of the poem from an ecocritical perspective:

The trees are coming into leaf  
Like something almost being said;  
The recent buds relax and spread,  
Their greenness is a kind of grief.  
Is it that they are born again  
And we grow old? No, they die too,  
Their yearly trick of looking new  
Is written down in rings of grain.  
Yet still the un-resting castles thresh  
In full-grown thickness every May.  
Last year is dead, they seem to say,  
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

In "The Trees," Larkin presents a natural phenomenon—the coming of leaves on trees—and reflects on its significance. The poem begins by comparing the emerging leaves to an unspoken message, suggesting that nature has something to communicate. This initial observation sets the tone for the exploration of the human-nature relationship. Larkin goes on to describe the buds relaxing and spreading, but intriguingly describes their greenness as a "kind of grief." This line can be interpreted as a subtle recognition of the bittersweet nature of natural cycles. While the greening of the trees signifies renewal and growth, it also implies the

passage of time and the inevitability of change and loss. The poem continues with a reflection on the cyclical nature of trees, noting that they, like humans, experience birth and death. Larkin emphasizes that their annual renewal, symbolized by the rings of grain, is a testament to their mortality. This observation hints at the interconnectedness of human existence and the natural world, suggesting that both humans and trees are subject to the same cycles of life and death.

The closing lines of the poem—"Last year is dead, they seem to say, Begin afresh, afresh, afresh"—can be seen as a call to embrace the present moment and to find hope in the constant renewal of nature. This perspective resonates with an ecocritical lens, which often highlights the regenerative power of the natural world and encourages a deeper connection with it. While "The Trees" may not overtly engage with environmental activism or explicitly address ecological concerns, it provides a contemplative reflection on the human-nature relationship and the cyclical nature of life. Through its subtle acknowledgment of the passage of time and the regenerative power of nature, the poem offers a glimpse into the ecological dimensions of Larkin's work.

### "Going Going"

While Philip Larkin's poetry is not typically associated with explicit ecocritical themes, there are instances where nature and environmental elements are subtly present in his works. One such poem is "Going, Going," which can be interpreted from an ecocritical perspective. In this poem, Larkin contemplates the loss of the natural landscape and the encroachment of human development.

And that will be England gone,  
The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,  
The guildhalls, the carved choirs.  
There'll be books; it will linger on  
In galleries; but all that remains  
For us will be concrete and tyres.

Here, Larkin expresses a lament for the disappearing natural beauty of England. He mourns the loss of meadows, lanes, and the picturesque landscape, replaced by concrete and tires symbolizing urbanization and industrialization. This poem captures a sense of ecological concern as it reflects on the irreversible transformation of the environment and the potential consequences for both nature and human experience. While Larkin's engagement with ecological themes may be subtle compared to dedicated ecocritical writers, "Going, Going" offers a glimpse of his awareness of the impact of human actions on the natural world. It encourages readers to consider the importance of preserving the environment and the potential consequences of unchecked development.

### Conclusion

Larkin's poetry may not overtly engage with environmental issues, an ecocritical perspective can shed light on the ways in which nature and the environment intersect with his themes of human existence, emotions, and societal contexts. By examining the representation of nature, the urban-nature duality, human-nature relationships, loss and absence, and nature as symbol, readers can uncover the ecological dimensions within Larkin's poetry. While these instances demonstrate an ecocritical lens in Larkin's poetry, it is important to note that environmental concerns are not central to his work. Larkin's focus primarily lies in exploring human emotions, existential dilemmas, and societal issues. Nevertheless, through the analysis of nature

imagery, human-nature relationships, loss, and symbolism, readers can uncover ecological dimensions within Larkin's poetry and engage with his work from an ecocritical perspective.

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