

# Larkin and duffy: the theme of death

[Life](#), [Death](#)



The concept of death and its implications are explored extensively by Larkin and Duffy, both poets agreeing that the destructive quality of death makes void of all the time and effort we invest in life. Larkin seems to demonstrate a cold fear towards this inevitability by distancing himself from the reality in 'Ambulances' and 'Dockery and Son', choosing to make resigned but philosophical points on the subject.

Duffy, by contrast, invests in a far more emotional approach and suggests how the finality can bring a strange sense of comfort amidst the devastation; this is demonstrated in the poems 'The Suicide' and 'Never Go Back' where the personas vow to never repeat their deathly experiences again, and, in the case of 'The Suicide' in particular, use death as a means to exact revenge. 'Ambulances' are described as vehicles that both literally transport the dying, and are the anthropomorphised psychopomps who help establish the transitory stage between life and death.

The fairly archaic yet idiomatic verb phrase 'borne away' and the use of determining modifiers in 'any kerb: / All streets' suggests that death is a ubiquitous and ghostly presence that transcends time and takes life indiscriminately. Thus, Larkin achieves a grave mood and an aloof tone which suggests the easy dissolution of identity and personality in the face of death. Duffy similarly presents the event of death in 'The Suicide', but unlike Larkin's distance, the persona here takes control with the modal auxiliary in 'I will write' and demands recognition from their attempted suicide: 'Famous. The delivery as an emotional dramatic monologue helps serve the speaker's appeal to victimhood, as they use a bitter and increasingly vindictive tone to justify their heinous sin of 'despair'. This cry for attention thus suggests the

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instinctive egoism of humans, much like the bystanders in ‘Ambulances’ who, despite witnessing a tragedy, ‘whisper at their own distress’. In contrast, death in ‘Dockery and Son’ incites abstract musings on the meaning of life and depicts Larkin’s autobiographical account of attending the memorial service of an old college acquaintance.

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The poem is introduced in medias res, ‘Dockery was junior to you..?’ but the disinterested speaker quickly dissolves into a nostalgic reverie as he explores the fatalistic reality that is often followed after death. The lack of consolation in living is demonstrated when Larkin attempts to revisit his past and ‘tries the door of where I used to live’, but finds it ‘Locked’; the finality in the modifier symbolises how the speaker is unable to return to a past that no longer exists, and thus remains estranged from the familiarity of the past. ‘Never Go Back’ develops on this idea further since it follows the journey of a speaker who revisits her old haunts after the end of her failed marriage. Death, here, is used as an extended metaphor, in contrast with Dockery’s literal death, but this likewise establishes a period of mourning and self-reflection as she is being transported by ‘a taxi implying a hearse’.

However, the persona suggests there is some consolation in life since she is ‘released’ by the past, the verb carrying connotations of the relief and freedom gained in knowing that the past no longer exists, whereas Larkin’s resignation towards life in sombre lines such as, ‘Whether or not we use it, it goes’, suggests Dockery’s death to be more of a call to take stock of his life and thus suggests it to be the beginning of the end. ‘Ambulances’ invites us

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to the idea that death is a private experience but this sense of intimacy can be misleading as it opens with the simile ‘ closed like confessionals’.

The sinister religious connotations suggest how the sudden belief in death has the ability to invoke regret as one realises the significance of their life; the narrator thus suggests that there is a need for secrecy at this personal revelation as he attributes the ambulance with a spectral quality by the dynamic verb ‘ thread’, provoking images of the Moirae and their threads of fate, and thus constructing the image of the ‘ traffic’ as being the fabricated flow of time.

However, the persona reminds us that death is a definite reality as he eerily juxtaposes it against youthful innocence with ‘ children strewn on steps or roads’. The verisimilitude of the ordinary urban scene also grants death a recognisable status, but at the same, Larkin demonstrates how death is inscrutable via the symbol of the ambulance: ‘ giving back none of the glances they absorb’, presenting the ambulance, and therefore, death as a mystery which provides no answers.

Similarly, ‘ The Suicide’ provides as an example of how death can be cryptic as the persona presents a gothic scene breathlessly. The irregularly long opening line coupled with the pathetic fallacy in ‘ bitter moon’ and ‘ smudgy clouds’ conveys the speaker's rambling tone and her disorganised state of mind as she appears to plan her own death. These imagined, celestial characters provide a parallel with her emotional reality through the repeated vowel and consonant sounds in ‘ gleam’ and ‘ glee’, thus drawing attention to the sandwiched non-sequitur of ‘ I dress in a shroud. The deliberate

caesurae and the ending rhyme ' me' suggests she is preparing for and welcoming her death, a stark contrast with the ' ambulances' which ' come to rest at any kerb' and are the intruders that disturb the normality of everyday life. The reassuring universality of life is also missing in ' The Suicide', as the persona twists images of innocence such as with the modifier in ' the horrid smiling mouths', and conveys her contempt, much like the case of betrayal by her loved one.

Duffy thus attempts to establish a personal relationship with death which is arguably seen as unnatural, whereas Larkin suggests that it is perfectly acceptable for death to transcend life and for our understanding of it to remain little. Larkin's ' Ambulances' continues its cool narration which helps create an ironic quality to the scene when the speaker suddenly launches into the description of death in the second stanza, all whilst sustaining the organised verse form.

Life is seen to quickly dissolve into the image of the ' wild white face atop red stretcher blankets', the elongated effect of the alliteration serving as the only definite point of transition. Otherwise, the face isn't given any attention as ' it is carried in and stowed', the pronoun ' it' dehumanising the person and the use of verbs which carry connotations of luggage also demonstrates how our bodies are only perceived as vessels for our souls, and that without them, we are powerless.

The witnesses, ie the children and women, show to have realised this reality. The epiphany delivered slowly in ' And sense the solving emptiness' uses the present continuous to suggest that this experience is universal, but the

delivery in gentle sibilance conveys the hushed voice of the speaker as he establishes the event as a quiet memento mori. The obscurity thus suggests the unwillingness of facing the realisation that everything is pointless in the face of death.

This is further demonstrated by the polysyndetic listing of ‘so blank and whole and true’, each adjective stressed as the persona makes an effort to capture the moment of realisation before it is lost. Paradoxically, these fatalistic descriptions also carry a sense of nihilism and indifference as Larkin here chillingly injects realism into the scene when he remind us of how we lose our humanity in death. Power and identity are also recurring ideas in ‘The Suicide’ as Duffy’s persona realises that death is a means of achieving recognition and establishing control when she feels trapped and isolated by life.

This is denoted by the speaker declaring ‘my body is a blank page I will write on’; the modal verb ‘will’ and the monosyllabic lexis conveys the persona’s certain tone as she describes how her romantic notion of death will leave a clear message for the intended left behind. Similarly, Larkin also shows how death can leave revelations for those left behind, except Duffy here provides a specific example with the possessive determiner in ‘my body’.

The use of the personal perspective conveys the speaker's isolation which is reiterated by the repeated syntactical structure of ‘Nobody’; this suggests her lack of recognition in life and how the preservation of it, ‘eyes in the glass like squids’, is deemed unnatural which is mirrored by the sardonic ‘

Sexy' that summarises the simile. By comparison, both poets indicate that death is a natural state due to the futility in living except Larkin suggests that this is a sudden realisation whereas Duffy demonstrates how the drawn-out angst of death is felt on the condition of being alive.

The outer enclosed rhymes that contains the intertwining rhymes in 'Ambulances', such as the passive-sounding 'air' and 'there', captures Larkin's conclusion of how death is the inevitable fate that overshadows our lives. The harsh sibilance in 'the sudden shut of loss' conveys the finality of the end but this ending remains dynamic, as the assonance invokes the sighing sound of the narrator as his summary of life, 'unique blend of families and fashions' is chased into the final verse where it is unravelled, the dynamism evoking the sense of continuity of time.

The noun phrase 'exchange of love' denotes how life is a contractual obligation but is only temporary as the endgame is 'to lie unreachable inside a room' which connotes the undeniable loneliness in death. However, Larkin persists in remaining vague as he describes death with the euphemism 'what is left to come', thus establishing how death remains as an unspoken truth in society. Similarly, Duffy shows how the concept of death governs people in 'The Suicide' where the persona's increasingly vindictive mood culminates into unrepentantly spitting out imperatives to the readers: 'Fuck off. Worship.'

The speaker here shows an awareness of the readers' voyeurism who are compelled to follow her path to self-destruction and watch her play god as she 'lies under the lightbulb', literally suggesting the exposure to truth and

figuratively conveying a sensual submission to her 'lightbulb' moment of self-inflicted death. However, we see the persona's captivation is to the point of delusion. The dismissive tone and metaphor for life in 'Who wants / a bloody valentine pumping its love hate love?' offset by the deviantly collocated 'bloody' alongside the iambic dimeter, attributes the sound of two heartbeats to her confused valentine's 'love hate love'. Duffy thus suggests that reflecting over the fragility of life can drive a person to madness and, as Larkin suggests, there is a conservative view that promotes the secrecy of death, indicating how people fearfully deny death in their lives due to its ability to expose human frailty which may be seen as an uncomfortable consequence of death.

Structurally, Duffy's haphazardly contained verses and the speaker's punning cliches such as 'I take out the knives' create a more heartfelt cognisance of death as something looked for and desirable, whereas Larkin's standardised verses convey his reliable but frigid outlook on the subject. 'Ambulances' indicates that death is a passive presence; the echoing alliteration in 'dulls to distance all we are' and the collective pronoun 'we' concluded that death is the unavoidable fate universal to all of us and, that in death, we are all equal.

Likewise, 'The Suicide' reflects how death can leave a resounding impact except, specifically, death's legacy can be a notoriety caused by the decision to unnaturally decide your own death, instead of letting it take you, as suggested in 'Ambulances'. The shocking irony in 'This will kill my folks' thus suggests how death can become an act of spite when we wilfully



plot our own demise instead of allowing death to take its own course.

Larkin's 'Dockery and Son' suggests there is a sense of tediousness in death rituals as the persona abruptly cuts off the Dean in the opening lines of the poem with a heavy caesura.

Instead, he teases the readers with reminisces of 'our version' of the mischief he took part in with friends in the past. This emotional detachment from his old acquaintance's death is defended by the transitive modifier 'visitant', proposing his apathy is appropriate with the neologism 'death-suited'. This avoidance of the death is further demonstrated by focusing on the comforting familiarity of the surroundings: 'A known bell chimes'.

However, this comfort remains unreachable, announced by the speaker with the modifier 'Locked' as he revisits his old halls of residence.

The polysyndeton in 'Canal and clouds and colleges subside slowly from view' support the adverb 'slowly' as Larkin illustrates this gradual passing of time and how the illusion can make one forget that life is limited, the persona thus showing how the event of death can provoke us to want to revisit the past. In 'Never Go Back', the speaker similarly explores the relationship between time and death, except here, death is used as a metaphor to describe loss as time itself is personified 'left pining till it died'.

Duffy thus suggests the human desire to enjoy more of life before death takes us, whereas Larkin's numerical references to time '43', 'twenty-one' quantifies life and suggests a more practical view on the finiteness of time. The persona likewise revisits the past after the end of her marriage, as the narrative begins with the familiar scene of 'where the living dead drink all

day', the oxymoron 'living dead' indicating how people live unfulfilled lives while the hard alliteration delivers a heavy droning sound that lends a mechanical quality to the scene.

This conveys a sense of disillusionment with the social activities she used to enjoy, in contrast with 'Dockery and Son', where the speaker recalls the past with nostalgic reverence as he anecdotally reveals how Dockery used to share 'rooms with Cartwright who was killed'. Both poets therefore demonstrate how death and loss can trigger retrospections of the past, Duffy arguing for the case of pain and abandonment in loss with the image of 'a limping dog', whereas Larkin avoids such sentiments with the trailing ellipsis in 'How much . . . How little . . .', the unfinished thoughts enacting Duffy's convincing view on how the best emotional response to death is to 'never go back.' The persona in 'Dockery and Son' begins to show an awareness of how life is ultimately a journey towards the final destination of death. The train station used symbolically as 'the joining and parting lines' similarly imply the different crossroads existing in life and how companionship allows our roads to briefly overlap.

However, the antithesis of the nouns 'numbness' and 'shock' suggests there is a sense of confusion when the speaker draws comparisons between Dockery's accomplishments and his own, and ponders on the moment he strayed 'widely from the others'. Therefore, the syndetic list of repeated negatives 'no son, no wife, no house or land' should depict the speaker's failure of attaining any adult achievement, yet the nonchalance in 'still seemed quite natural' suggests that Larkin hadn't quite moved on from

his time in university, the adverb 'still' indicating the speaker's struggle to come to terms with ageing and the flow of time.

There is thus a sense of dread when Larkin contemplates the 'strong unhindered moon'; the pathetic fallacy suggests the feebleness in differentiating our individual lifelines since we are all doomed to the 'only end of age', the adverb 'only' stressing the absoluteness and lack of choice in death.

Duffy's 'Never Go Back' also demonstrates an emotional resignation to the choices made as 'the house', which personifies the past, 'prefers to be left alone' amidst the overwhelming images of death; the verb 'prefers' suggests it has no intention of recovering from the metaphorical 'cancer' which spoils the glowing memory of it being 'where you were one of the brides'. The house instead reprimands the persona with 'You shouldn't be here', the negative modal verb 'shouldn't' warning against the attempt to reconcile with the past.

The speaker is thus unable to bitterly ruminate the past and abstains from comparing her life to others, ie her ex-husband, alternatively, allowing 'objects' (which pertain to the past) to symbolise life itself, and demonstrates how they can symbolically 'fill a room with pain' after the end of their use. This passiveness of the persona is also missing in 'Dockery and Son', where Larkin intentionally uses Dockery's death as a means to appraise the value of his own life.

Rather, the use of the second person narrative in 'Never Go Back' becomes increasingly significant as the speaker captures the suffocating quality of death, recreating the past through syntactic parallelism in 'all the lies . . . and all the cries', and the soft assonance in the pictorial image of 'draw your loved body in blurred air' conveying this ghostly effect as Duffy places the readers in closer proximity to death. Comparatively using the first person perspective, the speaker in 'Dockery and Son' is more prone to deviate from Dockery's unfortunate death and instead focuses on the bleakness of the mundane: 'And ate an awful pie'.

Therefore, both poets present life as a journey that is met with death, yet Larkin demonstrates how death can be used comparatively when we realise our own expiration date and consider the wider meaning of our lives, whereas Duffy indicates how grief can distort the past and how this can, in effect, emotionally paralyse a person. 'Dockery and Son' begins with a simplistic but regular alternating rhyme scheme which suits Larkin's familiarity with his alma mater.

The steady fall of sounds such as 'give' and 'live' capture the persona's feelings of bittersweet nostalgia but this gradually evolves until the final syntactical structure of ABBCADDC, which creates the suitably dense texture demanded, as Larkin moves from describing his literal surroundings to attributing philosophical thoughts to death's rendition of life. The speaker derogatorily muses that our acquisitions aren't as valuable as society's 'innate assumptions' perceive them to be, since they are superficially denounced as a 'style' that tragically 'harden into all we've got'.

There is thus a sense of futility in life inspired by the news of a young man's death, as Larkin concludes that even our choices are obscurely decided by 'something hidden from us chose', the vague pronoun 'something' suggesting how the workings of life is beyond our comprehension while death remains a certainty that levels everyone in due time. 'Never Go Back' similarly concludes with the idea that life is governed by a mysterious entity, except here, it is explicitly denoted as greed and human desire.

The crude images of the 'sly sums of money' and 'a drenched whore' connote a sense of the decay and degeneration found in society's apparent hedonism. This enables death to run in parallel with life, as even the associated taxi driver is described by the cliché 'looks like death'. Ironically, the speaker demonstrates how this illusion of life, and its false evolution, allows possibilities to remain open; the hollow sounds in the pronoun 'nowhere' and neologism 'nowhen' dissolves the significance of time and space, and instead grants importance to the present by the homely image of 'the fires and lights come on wherever you live'.

By comparison, Larkin suggests a sense of entrapment by the facade as 'what we think true . . . warp tight-shut'; the harsh syllables in the modifier 'tight-shut' elicit a sense of urgency as the speaker realises he is running out of time to achieve what he wishes, yet the possibilities remain cut off in 'Dockery and Son' due to the speaker's acute awareness of death. In conclusion, Larkin and Duffy both demonstrate the omnipresence of death in our lives.

Larkin uses his unassuming observations to describe death as an inescapable component of everyday life, thus suggesting that his point of enlightenment in 'Dockery and Son' marks too as a pessimistic beginning of the end. Duffy chooses to manifest death in everyday components of life, normalising death, and instead, offers the view in 'Never Go Back' that death provides a chance to understand that the past is gone, and also as a catalyst for hopeful beginnings. However, despite these contrarian views, both poets agree that death remains the undeniable ending to our lives