

Analysis of 'dockery and son'



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' Dockery and Son' is a reflective, pensive and uncertain poem in which Larkin produces a sense of life drifting away and considers " how much had gone of life, / How widely from the others." Although it cannot be assumed that the narrator is Larkin, the tone, ideas and reflections in the poem support a biographical reading. The poem begins with Larkin returning to his former university and speaking with the " Dean" who mentions that Dockery who " was junior" to Larkin now has a son attending the same university. As Larkin makes his journey back on the train, he considers how young Dockery must have been when he had his son, which leads him to his later thoughts on the consequences of their different choices in life. The ambiguity early in the poem such as the precise purpose for visiting the " Dean" and being " death-suited, visitant" sets the tone for personal uncertainty of emotions as Larkin considers the purpose in his life. The narrative detail ends by the fourth stanza as Larkin conflicts with the central tenet of the poem: an attempt to understand " Where do these innate assumptions come from?" – the obsessive attachments and faith in personal purpose in life as our emotions " harden into all we've got". Larkin juxtaposes himself with Dockery, " embodying / For Dockery a son, for me nothing, / Nothing" which is the most uncertain notion of the poem as he could be showing how his choices in life do not ' embody' " adding." However, the sombre tone and repetition of nothing seem to reflect a realisation of the negative consequences of believing " adding [...] was dilution." The personal perspective of Larkin remains ambiguous " Like sand-clouds, thick and close" although a familiar finality ends the poem suggesting that life, " whether or not we use it, it goes". The language is of an ' everyday' lexis and contemplative register, almost conversational but with definite tones of

thought in phrases such as " But Dockery, good lord,...". The rhythm is uneven and often disjointed early in the poem, much like the abrupt beginning in medias res that brings the reader immediately into the situation. The second stanza begins abruptly, " Locked." and the imagery of the " Canal and clouds and colleges subside / Slowly from view" - emphasised by the euphony of the hard ' c' alliteration and ' l' consonance - are broken abruptly by " And ate an awful pie". The early broken rhythm contrasts with the later accumulation of enjambment and long sentences showing a deeper submersion in thought " Of finding out how much of life had gone." The thoughts seem to begin as Larkin " walked along / The platform to its end" and saw the: Joining and parting of lines reflect a strong Unhindered moon. To have no son, no wife, No house or land still seemed quite natural. The symbolism in these lines is moving and " lines" (similarly to the " Bright knots of rail" in The Whitsun Weddings) could be of choices and potential in life and the different routes of opportunity (with the present participle of " joining and parting" adding to the flow in the poem). The " Unhindered moon" is a powerful image suggesting certainty and a sense of destiny among the range of " lines" of life. However, the juxtaposition with the repeated " no" presents an undertone of uncertainty which is also mildly connoted in an alternative sense of the " moon" as constantly changing when juxtaposed with " natural." The continuous enjambement used in the final stanzas reflects the contradictions and complexity of Larkin's thoughts: Only nineteen, he must have taken stock Of what he wanted, and had been capable Of...No, that's not the difference: rather, how Convinced he was he should be added to! As Larkin considers in these lines how his life deviated so " widely from the others", the use of an

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ellipsis, one of three in the poem, reflects contemplation and uncertainty. The completeness of the first line of stanza five suggest an understanding of his difference that he was not "convinced" that he "should be added to". The immediate juxtaposition with the more complex lines emphasises the extent of Larkin's preoccupation as he contemplates, "Where do these innate assumptions come from?" The remainder of the poem is bound by this powerful question and is the most ambiguous. Larkin continues to use simple language; however, the syntax of the lines becomes increasingly complicated with the ambiguity of the objects in sentences that use pronouns such as "they", "those" and "it". The imagery of "Those warp tight-shut, like doors" implies that despite the opportunities in life (possibly suggested in the symbolism of doors), there is suppression of what is "truest" and an inexplicable movement towards "innate assumptions". "Warp" suggests an immense pressure, as if "doors" themselves bend under the force keeping them "tight-shut" (which is also emphasised by the sharp 't' and 's' sounds"). Larkin draws more conclusions than suggested by a first reading. An ambiguity may begin with "To me it was dilution" in which "was" is interpreted as a subtle yet significant indication that Larkin begins to sense a change in his attitude that his life "still seemed quite natural." The completeness of the line "Suddenly they harden into all we've got" is powerful; it embodies the abruptness of this change and despite the enjambment into the next stanza leaves this thought as striking in the mind of the reader. By not punctuating after "Suddenly" Larkin increases the speed of the line and makes it more conclusive than his otherwise undulating, meditative rhythm. This may be the "fear" which Larkin describes later in the poem, as he considers the transformation from the

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seemingly fond reflection " We used to stand before that desk" to how " a numbness registered" that the " innate assumptions" lamentably become " all we've got". The simile of " they rear / Like sand-clouds" is both ambiguous and a route into conclusions. The immediate connotations of " sand-clouds" is poignant, it suggests an engulfing, coarse and painful force but also undertones of natural and therefore irresistible forces (similar to " watched the frigid wind / Tossing the clouds" in ' Mr Bleaney, an equally self-reflective poem). Larkin concludes from this imagery that these " innate assumptions" ' embody' " for Dockery a son" but Larkin is less fulfilled, stating, " for me nothing, / Nothing with all a son's harsh patronage." The repetition of " nothing" adds a sombre emphasis of being unfulfilled and although the meaning of " all a son's harsh patronage" is ambiguous, the connotations are immediately negative. The phrase could possibly offer an undertone of his personal remorse as a son, having had a difficult relationship with his parents, reflecting personal anxieties of having his own son (although his comments in 1971 of ' This Be the Verse' may offer a different indication to his family attitudes). The lexis remains ' everyday' in the final lines; however, the register becomes almost euphemistic with the enigmatic - " leaves what something hidden from us chose". Grammatically, the line seems to refer to life as fleeting and leaving only the innate assumptions that " harden into all we've got" although it contains the essence of the poem of choices and opportunities introduced using the consistent devices of ambiguity and uncertain thought as part of complicated syntax. The conclusion is typical that life will bring " the only end of age." The euphemism in this phrasing is poignant as it gives a sense of inevitability and Larkin with his continued cynicism, despite some attempt

to understand the purpose of his existence, falls again to what he knows is certain and most fears.