

# Wit and humor in larkin's poems: ambulances and the building



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Larkin's poetry reflects a certain dark humor, with an often-witty conveyance of a powerful message. There is certainly control and elegance in Larkin's work; the subject matter is apposite and therefore has an impact on his reader rather than an expression of elegance in the traditional sense. There is elegance in the brutality of his messages in both 'Ambulances' and 'The Building', but to what extent are these comments powerful and relevant enough to be considered 'valued', and how far can they be said to be patterned and controlled?

A large fraction of Larkin's wit lies in the intelligence of his perspective on his subject matter. A text is undoubtedly regarded to hold literary value when the subject matter is considered serious, perhaps dealing with moral and philosophical topics of acknowledged importance. Given that both poems I have chosen question the purpose of life and the inescapable truth of death, this confirms the seriousness that renders them valued. For example, in 'Ambulances', the moral and philosophical approach he takes can relate to the way Larkin thinks of the dying patient as they experience "the sudden shut of loss Round something nearly at an end." At this point he sympathises with their fear. The symbolic use of the verb "shut" has a cruel sense of finality, metaphorically emphasizing the closure one would literally feel in an ambulance, but the possible ending of life itself. Here he is reflecting on the loss that death will bring; which "loosens" all from family and identity – the philosophy behind this is the questioning of "family" and "identity", are they all that really matters?

Comparably, in 'The Building' there is an elegant fatalism as he writes "All know they are going to die. Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end, and

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somewhere like this. [the hospital]" which evokes an emotional reaction from the reader. As I mentioned in my introduction, there is of necessity a brutality in the seemingly matter of fact message, and here the pattern and control is deliberately rigid reflecting the finality of death. As Larkin presents the inevitability of dying, he commands us to acknowledge that regardless of a person's identity or qualities, we are all going to die. In another of Larkin's poems, ' Mr Bleaney', the darkness of his subject matter recurs in his reference to " Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb, no hook Behind the door, no room for books or bags" The meagre listing of the room shows his belief that it is reflective of the emptiness of ' Mr Bleaney's life and the absence of character, similarly, the reference to " books or bags" highlights a lack of desire for furthering literature and imagination. In ' Mr Bleaney', Larkin challenges his readers to reflect on how we live.

An absence of individuality is also enforced in ' The Building', when he describes the patients as " women, men; old, young; crude facets of the only coin this place accepts". Here he suggests we are all sorted like " coins" into corresponding categories, dehumanised and instead judged upon medical notes and labels. As with most poems by Larkin, he takes a particular experience and finds a general truth in it with his witty and striking language. To be valued, the subject matter must contain themes concerning all. In ' Ambulances', the suffering of the victim becomes the model for all life lived and all deaths experienced – thus concerning all people. However the theme itself is bleak; and living, according to this, is just a rush towards death. The line "[dying] brings closer what is left to come", refers to the process of dying; becoming ill and growing old leads to the inevitability and

finality of death itself. The final line “ And dulls to distance all we are”, suggests that we are left isolated by the experience of moving towards death, distanced from all that we associate with “ our identity”. The ingenuity Larkin presents in this final line can be compared with the final line of ‘ The Building’; “ nothing contravenes The coming dark, though crowds each evening try With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers.” Larkin’s ironic wit is clear in both these final lines in which he expresses the futility of trying to ignore or mask the truth of death itself, here Lark challenges us to question “ the coming dark” and once more reflect on the way we have lived. The alliterative phrase condemns the meaningless flowers which are used as protection from the visitors inability to help the patients.

Comparatively, in both ‘ Ambulances’ and ‘ The Building’, there is a contrast between the context of the death experienced in the two. Given that ‘ Ambulances’ was written in 1961, this was at a time when the NHS was just beginning to make it’s impact felt on universal medicine. At this point in time, if one was on their journey towards death, there was no going back as their fate was inevitable; before the advent of the NHS, the majority died quiet deaths at home. The introduction of the new system of healthcare gave a sense of hope, disregarded by Larkin in ‘ Ambulances’, suggesting he did not have the same optimism as others. ‘ The Building’ was written in 1972, after a period of time when the NHS had developed greatly. This contrasts with the description of the hospital in ‘ The Building’; the language like the buildings is layered and complex, representative of the NHS which was developing. ‘ The Building’ represents the new religion of medicine as Larkin writes “ For see how many floors it needs, how tall It’s grown by now” The

used of the verb “ need” suggests a sense of urgency, as if ‘ The Building’ itself is in a race to constantly keep up with the consistent development of the new medical world.

Larkin uses a metaphoric thread related to religion throughout both poems. The philosophical nature of his word choices focus on this central metaphor; that medicine was at this time seen by many as the new religion. This is especially clear in ‘ The Building’ where a sense of hope drives people through illness, allowing them to hope this particular illness will not be a part of their journey towards death. At a time where the NHS was in its infancy, people had a new-found sense of hope. However, in both poems, Larkin shuts down the false hope seen in the new and largely unknown medical world, emphasizing his belief that regardless of any medical development, death will always remain an inevitable part of living. He asks his readers to think about death in order to live; he suggests people must accept the ‘ slow dying’ and inevitability death entails in order to make the most of every day. Taking a more direct approach in ‘ Ambulances’, there are many literal references to religion itself. For example, the description of the ambulance is “ closed like confessionals” instantly evoking a sense of secrecy and isolation for the reader. The hope linked with the “ new religion” of medicine is apparent when he says “ Poor soul, they whisper at their own distress”, showing the empathy people feel towards the patient in the poem; yet their “ own distress” proposes an expression of common vulnerability to sickness and death, something inescapable yet put aside with the idealistic hope of the new development in medical technology at this time.

Larkin's ability to shape and control language is further reflected in 'The Building' with another religious reference to the "confession". While in 'Ambulances', the vehicle taking the patient towards the inevitable horrors of death is described as a "confessional", at most a last moment to redeem oneself. In his later poem, 'The Building', Larkin mimics this simile with "all here to confess that something has gone wrong. It must be an error of a serious sort." This similar use of the word "confess" plays on this metaphor of religion; as by saying "gone wrong" suggests this is not how things are supposed to have happened. He imagines the "confession" a patient would have with a doctor regarding their health as an "error of some sort", elevating the role of the doctor to that of a priest. The clinical and scientific language highlights to the reader the trauma of illness, instead allowing them to perceive a sense of hope in medicine; this metaphorical language taken from the semantic field of religion emphasizes the point he wants his reader to understand.

With regard to patterned language, Larkin centers his poetry on this. His lack of romanticism allows him to put his philosophical themes into carefully constructed poetry, his aim was to show ordinary human emotion rather than heightened falsehoods. Larkin's elegance relies on the revelation of simple truths: his forcing his readers to face what they don't want to hear is poetic, yet expresses his incisive use of simple language. For example in 'Ambulances' "They come to rest at any kerb: All streets in time are visited." The gentle connotations of the word "rest" plays on the idea that death does not discriminate between anybody as suggested by "any kerb"; the harsh inevitability of "the coming dark" is reinforced as he says "All

streets". The elegance here lies in the word "time"; he uses this to juxtapose the immortality of time, with the finality of death. He describes ambulances as they "thread" through the veins of the cities, reminding us of the concept of human frailty and mortality which is threaded through our lives. The common mortality Larkin writes about is most evident in 'The Building'; "To realise this new thing held in common makes them quiet.", as we as readers are given a pause for thought to reflect on our physical fallibility.

The elegance in 'The Building' is reinforced by his use of grand and striking vocabulary with subtle references to "time" once again; as he says "The thought of dying, for unless its powers Outbuild cathedrals nothing contravenes the coming dark." The use of the word "dark" could be interpreted anti-religiously, proving the poem's value through its invitation to debate; in this case the "dark" is symbolic of emptiness, not the religious promise of the bright light of heaven. While I have discussed the use of "contravenes the coming dark" previously, attaching it to the "outbuilding of cathedrals" gives a grand perspective, the connotations of "cathedral" being a strong, grand and indestructible structure. His elegance lies in the blunt assertion that simply the "nothing" outbuilds "the thought" of dying. In this case it is the inability to escape and avoid death, regardless of any situation or context; that is the great unifying fact of life.

'Ambulances' and 'The Building' by Larkin continue to be considered valued texts because they contain unpalatable truths posed with a blunt elegance.

The beauty in Larkin's work lies in this ironic brutality that forces the reader to experience the harsh realizations. When talking about the subject matter, <https://assignbuster.com/wit-and-humor-in-larkins-poems-ambulances-and-the-building/>

Larkin said “ Deprivation for me is what daffodils were for Wordsworth.” In these poems the “ deprivation” is the ongoing absence of hope.