

A Brief Comparison between W.H Auden and Philip Larkin

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Abstract: W.H Auden belongs to Key 1930s and Philip Larkin belongs to The Movement. Even though they belong to different genres of poetry, they have some similarities and differences. In the early age, Philip Larkin was influenced by W.H Auden. Through W.H Auden's poem, Larkin sought his own voice. Therefore this paper makes a comparison between W.H Auden and Philip Larkin. From this paper we will have a clear understanding on their differences as well as similarities. According to the comparison, it will help us understand the two poets more clearly.
Keywords: W.H Auden; Philip Larkin; Similarities; Differences.

INTRODUCTION

Philip Larkin was an English poet, novelist and librarian. He was widely regarded as one of the greatest English poets of the latter half of the twentieth century. Influenced by W.H Auden, Larkin's poems are highly-structured but flexible verse forms. At the same time, W.H Auden was an English-American poet. His poetry was noted for its stylistic and technical achievement, its engagement with politics, morals, love, and religion, and its variety in tone, form and content. Besides, W.H Auden belongs to Key 1930s and Philip Larkin belongs to The Movement. Even though they belong to different genres of poetry, they have some similarities and differences. From this paper, we compare the two poets from three parts. The first part, we learn about their similarities from the theme and style of their poems as well as Auden's influence on Philip Larkin. The second part, we talk about their differences from their late period poetry roads. They have some different values about the creation of poetry in some degree. The third part, we make a specific comparison through their poems. By comparing the *Funeral Blues* by W.H Auden with the *The Explosion* [1] by Philip Larkin, we argue their similarities and differences in its theme and form.

Chapter One: The Similarities Between the Two Poets

At first, we talk about some similarities between the two poets. Even though they belong to different genres of poetry, they have many similarities. They are heavily influenced by the trying modern times and avoid traditional poetic devices. The Movement poet Philip Larkin sought to create an ordinary brand of poetry. He preferred everyday pictures to sensational imagery and prioritized a friendly, colloquial tone over rhetorical complications. Larkin had little use for poetic devices, he relied upon keen observations and upon the important themes of alienation, isolation, and distance. As for W.H Auden, his exceptional intellect carries him through three periods of examining the nature of love. In his first period, his poetry chronicles the inability of modern people to find love. In his second period, he offers a solution to this inability through love enlivened by "human sympathy and, later, by religious belief" [2]. He also places dominant reliance on theme and ignores the rhetorical devices.

Even though the two poets met only twice, Auden was definitely a father figure for Larkin, offering possible answers to his own questions. Both the poets are claimed as the emblematic figures of their respective generations: Auden is regarded as the leading figure of the Oxford poets in the thirties, while Larkin as the central representative of the Movement in the fifties. Neither Auden nor Larkin could be seen as a systematic thinker. Auden claims that there is no poetry without personal experience, following by him, Larkin made a statement that poetry may make nothing happen but experience makes poetry happen. From the similarities of their minds, we can see W.H Auden had a great influence on Larkin in his early age.

In addition to this, both poets treated politics as one of many possible experiences, they were also ready to view it as raw material for their poetry. Thus, they convert themselves into actors and the voices we hear in their poems belong to fictitious personae, not to the actual poets. But, they are aware that the only way

they can write poetry of a high standard is by directing their actors in the poem. The only way they can construct literariness is by respecting the plurality of the non-literary world as endless experience. Auden was able to see his own devotion to communism from the outside; Larkin viewed his own conservative nationalism as one of the experiences that should be preserved.

What's more, W.H Auden has a great impact on Larkin. We can detect questions and dilemmas similar to the both poets. Larkin's reading of Auden's texts was centrally important in the formation of his own credo and principles. On one hand, Philip Larkin claimed that he wants to remain "himself" in his poems. He shows a high respect for experience and he holds that the actual self is a part of the experience that should be preserved in poetry. This is why Laurence Lerner refers to Larkin's most typical speakers as "Larkin playing the role of Larkin" [3]. However, Larkin comments some poems that the greatest thing is not to be different from others but to be different from oneself. He introduced this aphorism with the phrase "someone said." This is very likely that he remembered Auden's opinion. Because Auden once said that having spent twenty years learning to be himself finds that he must now start learning not to be himself. Nevertheless, neither of the two poets ever gave up "being themselves. What the reason is that there was a romantic side of both poets. They all can't help viewing poetry as a way of escaping from their actual existence. According to Auden's biography, we know that he obsessive with his daily routine from the late thirties onwards (Carpenter 279). And Larkin's life as a librarian was determined by the days he lived in. As his poem entitled "Days" said:

what are days for?
Days are where we live.
They come, they wake us
Time and time over.
They are to be happy in:
Where can we lived but days?

From this poem, we can feel that he shared Auden's inclination to stick to his daily routine.

Chapter Two: The Differences Between the Two Poets

Next, we compare their differences on detail. In the first place, they belong to different poetry schools. W.H Auden belongs to Key 1930s and Larkin belongs to The Movement. Auden is an English poet, playwright, critic. Just before world war two broke out, he emigrated to the United States. Philip Larkin was an English poet, novelist and librarian. He was an eminent writer in postwar England. Therefore, he was commonly referred to as "England's other poet "laureate" until his death in 1985 [4]. Influenced by W.H Auden, W.B Yeats, and Thomas Hardy, his poems are highly structured but flexible verse forms. Larkin's

public persona was earnest, solitary Englishman who disliked fame and had no patience for the trappings of the public literary life. Throughout his life, England was Larkin's emotional territory to an eccentric degree. The poet distrusted travel abroad and professed ignorance of foreign literature, including most modern American poetry.

In the second place, they both hold a value that finding something that does not change, they stepped a different road in the late period. Auden found such a value in his return to Christianity while Larkin did not find it and his poetry is about a never-ending quest. Therefore, he did not like the late Auden. After the death of Auden, he wrote a letter: "what an odd dichotomy—English Auden, American Auden; pre-war Auden, post-war Auden; political Auden, religious Auden; good Auden, bad Auden..."(*Selected Letters* 489) What's more, in a book review, Larkin wrote that Auden was "not only one of the century's major poets but one of its most complex characters"(*Further Requirements*282) From this remark, we can see Philip's attitude to Auden ranges from his admiration in the 1940s to his refusal of the thirties' poetry. It also reflects Philip Larkin always keep a controversial relationship with Auden.

Chapter Three: The Comparison Between the *Funeral Blues* and *The Explosion*

We have already made a specific comparison between the both poets. They have not only many similar arguments on poetry but also some different values about the creation of poetry in some degree.

Therefore, we make a specific comparison through their poems. At first, let's compare the *Funeral Blues* by W.H Auden with *The Explosion* by Philip Larkin. We can analyze the both poems from its theme and form. The both poems have the same theme but the different emotional tone. As for funeral blues, in the first stanza, the speaker wants everything to just stop and he asks for silence. In the second stanza, the speaker wants the whole world to know that "he is dead". The third stanza, the author uses metaphor to imply that the dead man filled every hour of the speaker's day. The last stanza, the speaker wants to blow out everything in the world except his own mourning. From this poem, we can see that this is just a really sad poem about death. There is no light at the end of the tunnel for anyone.

As for *The Explosion*, it is a reflection of disastrous day in a northern mining town. The story unfolds in eight stanzas with three lines and one final stanza of one line. The explosion is a story told in the third person. In the first stanza the impression is of a fairly detached observer, almost as if a camera is recording the events. The poem begins with a causal observation of an everyday event. The miners come

down “the lane in pitboots coughing oath-edged talk and pipe-smoke”. Underneath the normality of morning, we get a sense of something sinister and foreboding as “shadows pointed towards the pithead: in the sun the slagheap slept”. The use of alliteration and repeated “S” sounds creates a sensation of deathly anticipation as if some sinister creature is sleeping. The sixth stanza is the funeral service and it has a biblical feel. During this service the wives have a vision of their men “somehow from the sun walking towards them” in their religious imaginations the men have been transformed into “larger than life” “gold” images. The women will forever remember the men in this pure and whole form. Solemnity is replaced by a sense of hope. “One showing the eggs unbroken” is the final and most symbolic line. The eggs represent life and renewal. In the face of death we have the choice of either accept death and move forwards with life or to slide into oblivion. The image of the eggs surviving the explosion is a symbol of optimism. The wives must move on and cope with life and death. The eggs may also represent the memory and strength of the women’s bonds and love. From above analysis, we can have a clear understand about the poet’s attitude to their poems.

In *Funeral Blues*, the overstatements of last two stanzas are appropriate and very moving. The use of tragic comical images balances the poem extreme emotions. The poet does not appear as self-indulgent, but heart –rending and tragic. Conversely, Larkin’s poem deals with death and the roughness of humanity in a down to earth way. Unlike the speaker in the *Funeral Blues*, this speaker is distanced from the action and emotions of death. There is an absence of dramatic intensity. Notice how in the aftermath of the explosion rescue and grief are unmentioned. Both poems are trying to convey a sense of empathy. The speaker in the explosion shows sympathy toward the wives. He tries to give the wives a sense of optimism and transform a sad and pointless accident into an occasion of hope and beauty. The speaker of *Funeral Blues* seeks the sympathy of the reader. He needs to transfer to the reader the feelings of his loss, despair and his sense of injustice that death brings. In contrast to the end of *The Explosion* this final stanza tells us that he has no optimism “for nothing now can ever come to any good”.

CONCLUSION

From this paper, I want to introduce the two poets W.H Auden as well as Philip Larkin. I made a specific comparison about the differences and similarities between the both poets.

They belong to different poetry school. One is The Movement and another is The Key 1930s. However, Larkin’s reading of Auden’s texts was centrally important in the formation of his own credo and principles. They all influenced by the modern times

and shun the poetry devices and avoid traditional poetic devices and places dominant reliance on theme. Nevertheless, Auden’s style utilizes strong, dramatic language, which marks him as different from Larkin, though Auden’s aloof and arrogant tone create a distance similar to Larkin’s . In the late period, Auden changed his style about his poetry and Philip Larkin had a different view from Auden. All in all, comparing the both poets will offer a useful tool for the study of poetry.

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