

# Philip Larkin: Selfish Man vs Selfless Nature

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## Solar

“Suspended lion face  
Spilling at the centre  
Of an unfurnished sky  
How still you stand,  
And how unaided  
Single stalkless flower  
You pour unrecompensed.”  
(lines 1-7)

“Your petalled head of flames  
Continuously exploding.  
Heat is the echo of your  
Gold.” (lines 11-14)

“Our needs hourly  
Climb and return like angels.  
Unclosing like a hand,  
You give for ever.”  
(lines 18-21)

The powerful sun stands *still*, bringing to mind how the earth revolves around the sun, the center of both the sky and the solar system, and not the other way around, emphasizing how humans aren't as important as they've seen themselves.

Larkin uses an interesting word here: *echo*. As if its heat is simply a byproduct of its existence, not the purpose. The sun is gold first—it fulfills no purpose by giving life to humans.

Hourly our needs as humans must be met, and like angels of God returning with answered prayers, the sun is the same. The purpose of this poem is to feel humbled by the sun's selflessness and power.

## Thaw

“Tiny immortal streams are on the move:  
The sun its hand uncloses like a statue,”  
(lines 1-2)

“Chalkbeds of heaven bear  
These nameless tributaries, but they run  
To earth. For here their pouring river  
reigns;  
Here, busy with resurrection, sovereign  
waters  
Confer among the roots, causing to fall  
From memory forestfuls of six-days' grief.

How easily they fall, how easily I let drift  
On the surface of morning feathers of  
self-reproach:  
How easily I forget the scolding of snow.”  
(lines 5-13)

This poem highlights, like “First Sight” that the pains of winter won't last. The melting of snow and ice “resurrects” the earth and is given religious symbolism, even though Larkin disapproves of religion.

Larkin usually fixates on the things that bring him turmoil in his poetry, yet he “forgets the scolding of snow” in this piece. This shows how great of an impact springtime has on Larkin—it makes him genuinely happy and hopeful, and he reflects this in his springtime poems.

## The Mower

The mower stalled, twice; kneeling, I found  
A hedgehog jammed up against the blades,  
Killed. It had been in the long grass.

I had seen it before, and even fed it,  
once.  
Now I had mauled its unobtrusive world  
Unmendably. Burial was no help:

The next morning I got up and it did not.  
The first day after a death, the new absence  
Is always the same; we should be careful

Of each other, we should be kind  
While there is still time.

This poem is unfortunately based on a true story, as Larkin wrote a letter describing his relationship with a hedgehog that lived near his house. After accidentally killing it with the mower, he's filled with self-hatred. The first line of the third stanza reads like he doesn't feel like the one worthy of life, because he views all of humanity as evil and selfish.

Then the last three lines encouraging kindness to others is so uncharacteristic of Larkin. He recognizes that life is fragile and short, but rarely does he include a tender statement such as this one. It takes an innocent animal's death to bring out Larkin's soft side.

## Street Lamps

“When night slinks, like a puma, down the sky,  
And the bare, windy streets echo with silence,  
Street lamps come out, and learn at corners, awry,  
Casting black shadows, oblique and intense;  
So they burn on, impersonal, through the night,”  
(lines 1-5)

“I think I noticed once,  
--T'was morning—one sole street-lamp still bright-  
lit,  
Which, with a senile grin, like an old dunce,  
Vied the blue sky, and tried to rival it;  
And, leering pallid,  
though its use was done,  
Tried to cast shadows contrary to the sun.”  
(lines 11-15)

The personification of the streetlamps in the first stanza likens them to suspicious, sketchy folk that come out at night and the danger that accompanies them. They are “impersonal,” and their shadows are black, representing death.

Larkin insults the streetlamp by describing it as a decrepit, envious, dim-witted old man. Streetlamps are a manmade object with the purpose to function like the sun at nighttime. The first stanza represents them as dangerous predators, and then as a jealous, bitter old man in the second. Man (street lamps) wants to be the best at everything, even bringing light, but is doomed to fall incredibly short.

Sprinkled throughout Larkin's extensive poetry about death, loneliness, and general anti-society are hopeful nature poems that at first glance don't sound like he wrote them at all. Upon closer inspection, though, we find that underlying these poems is the grouchy Larkin we all know.

Larkin uses nature poetry to express his association of human civilization with death, evil, and selfishness, and nature with life, goodness, and selflessness. Secondly, they serve to express his willingness to empathize with animals and inability to do so with humans.

It is to be noted that Larkin doesn't give the animals in his poems human attributes—he sooner personifies a streetlamp than a hedgehog. A striking reason for this can be found in the dates of his poems, as the majority of the poems discussed in this presentation are dated in a ten-year span from 1954-1964. The second world war was still in the British zeitgeist, and for this reason, people had been made familiar with the evils of man, and to compare animals to humans would greatly diminish their qualities.

### Works Cited

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## First Sight

Lambs that learn to walk in snow  
When their bleating clouds the air  
Meet a vast unwelcome, know  
Nothing but a sunless glare.  
Newly stumbling to and fro  
All they find, outside the fold,  
Is a wretched width of cold.

As they wait beside the ewe,  
Her fleeces wetly caked, there lies  
Hidden around them, waiting too,  
Earth's immeasurable surprise.  
They could not grasp it if they knew,  
What so soon will wake and grow  
Utterly unlike the snow

The first stanza establishes how terrible winter is, especially for the innocent and pure lamb. A “sunless” world seems much worse after reading “Solar.” Then, spring is so grand and spectacular that it is “immeasurable” and unable to grasp.

The message of “First Sight” is that misery is temporary, which Larkin expresses in a letter containing this poem. This is bold coming from the poet who writes largely about suffering, but this highlights just how much he loves springtime. Larkin even opens the door for a religious reading with the lamb, despite hating religion. Also, we see the choice of the innocent lamb instead of an innocent human baby because Larkin can't see past the evils of man to even recognize a human baby as innocent enough.

## Ambulances

“They thread  
Loud noons of cities, giving back  
None of the glances they absorb.”  
(lines 1-3)  
“They come to rest at any kerb:  
All streets in time are visited”  
(lines 5-6)

“And sense the solving emptiness  
That lies just under all we do,  
And for a second get it whole,  
So permanent and blank and  
true.” (lines 13-16)

Larkin's city poetry has a much different feel than his nature ones. “Ambulances” is about death, its inevitability, lack of discrimination, and (to Larkin) its nothingness. Death can happen to anyone at any time, and there's nothing that can be done.

City poems like this one are so bleak for a critical reason: they have people in them. In the wilderness, there are no people to die, no community to make him feel as though he doesn't belong, and no religion pushing its beliefs onto him.

## Take One Home for the Kiddies

On shallow straw, in shadeless glass,  
Huddled by empty bowls, they sleep:  
No dark, no dam, no earth, no  
grass—  
*Mam, get us one of them to keep.*

Living toys are something novel,  
But it soon wears off somehow.  
Fetch the shoebox, fetch the  
shovel—  
*Mam, we're playing funerals now.*

This poem describes a phenomenon far too common: the impulsive purchase of an animal that is ultimately neglected. Animals in stores are kept in bright cages without adequate care, living as an object—a toy—instead of living in the wild where they belong. This is all because of the inherent greediness of man, for both money and possessions.

Then the animal is adopted and soon dies due to neglect. The kiddies don't seem to mourn the loss, as the funeral is just another fun game to them. The brevity of the poem reflects how quickly the animal's life came and went. Here, Larkin again highlights man's abuse toward innocent animals.