



**Mycroft Lectures.
Adapted Transcript for:**

**Philip Larkin's
*Toads.***

(Mycroft lectures always provide sentence-by-sentence parsing, paraphrasing and explanation of each poem. However, each lecture also presents extra information to enhance appreciation and understanding of the poem under discussion. As the Mycroft lectures are not read from a script, a transcript of a lecture contains the imperfections of a spoken presentation. To avoid the embarrassment of having the spoken performance thought to be an essay and being quoted as such, I have made occasional changes to the spoken lectures for the purposes of clarification. What follows is the transcript of a lecture, not an essay.)

Chronology of the lecture.

Philip Larkin

Mycroft lectures always provide sentence-by-sentence parsing, paraphrasing and explanation of each poem. However, each lecture provides extra information that will enhance appreciation and understanding of the poem under discussion. This lecture includes the following areas of analysis:

1. The lecture begins by looking at Philip Larkin's character, who he was, and what he was trying to do in his poetry.
2. The poem is read through.
3. The metaphor of the toad is explained.
4. The poem is parsed, paraphrased, explained line by line in simpler English. Various

complications noted, or areas of interest raised and questioned, are:

- Larkin's dislike of the lecturer-poet.
 - The class element in Larkin's writing.
 - How Larkin expects us to view the persona who narrates the poem in the way he addresses the working classes.
 - The self-awareness of the persona in analysing his own motivation.
 - The metaphor of the second toad.
5. A summary of the poem is then given.
 6. Larkin's achievement in the writing of the poem is assessed.
 7. The lecture concludes with a final read through of the poem.
 - 8.

From the lecture: "Larkin may not get the fame, the girl, or the money, but he gets the poem."

Transcript for the *Toads* Lecture

Welcome. I am Dr Andrew Barker and this is the Mycroft Online Lecture on Philip Larkin's *Toads*. Now, before we do the read-through of this poem, there's a statement by Larkin that I think is very useful for us to analyse his poetry through. And the statement is this:

Larkin says that for a poem to work, there are three stages that have to occur. And he says that the first of these is that the poet has the idea for the thing that he wants to express. And the second is that the poet finds a way to express that idea, and the third is the reader of the

poem understands the idea. Larkin points out that if the last one of those stages doesn't occur, then the first two might just as well have never taken place.

Now, that's quite a fun statement. However, a lot of poets are going to disagree with this. T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, for two. Larkin never liked the work of those guys anyway. And he set about writing poetry that could be understood by the people that he directed his poetry at. Because he's the real point of Larkin's statement. Whether the readers of your poems understand what you have written or not depends as much as anything on the common frame of reference you have with them. If, for example, you write a poem and it is read by a four-year-old child, it stands to reason that the four-year-old child is not going to understand what you have said, because the four-year-old child does not have a common frame of reference. Similarly, people from different cultures, different countries, may not understand the references that you are making. This is no fault of theirs and no fault of yours. But if you want your readers to understand you, you have to be very specific about appealing to a specific kind of reader. And this is what I think Larkin did.

Larkin was very careful in the poetry that he wrote, to appeal to the type of people who, in England, at least, read poetry. And the type of people who read poetry in England, from 1955 to the '70s, during which time Larkin was writing, these people are by and large middle-class, working people. Middle-class, white-collar workers. Now I'm not saying here of course that the only people who read poetry are middle-class white-collar workers. What I'm saying is that a lot of people who do read poetry are middle-class white-collar workers, and if you write about the concerns of middle-class, white-collar workers, or you situate your poetry in a world of middle-class white-collar workers, you are going to reach an audience that understands what you're talking about. And this, as Larkin points out, is very important

to him. That third stage, whereby he says, 'the audience understands what you're talking about'. If you talk about the concerns of the majority of people who read poetry, you are going to reach an audience that understands what you're talking about.

I often get the impression that Larkin deliberately lived the life that enabled him to get the poems which would appeal to many people. This may be to over-romanticise Larkin's intentions here. He could have just had that lifestyle that he had by accident, and not deliberately set out to achieve it because he knew he would get the poems that he wanted from that life. But it's not beyond the realms of possibility that Larkin's acceptance of the life that he led was deliberate, because it helped him get the poems that he wanted.

Larkin was a librarian in the University of Hull. This was far from the most glamorous and exciting job that he could have had. But he got the poems about that type of life. Larkin never complained about being a librarian. It wasn't a job that he particularly hated, but he wasn't overly enamoured with the sort of work that it was necessary for him to do. This isn't to say that he was lazy. He came from a generation who, seemingly, didn't really expect to enjoy work, and they went through it, they got the job done, they weren't overly happy about what they were doing, and from this, Larkin gives us poems about that area of human experience. The boredom of everyday life.

Larkin was, or Larkin's characters are, a very bored man, a very boring man, even his voice is boring, his look is boring. And I don't really mean this in a derogatory way. I mean that he used this boredom, this view of life, to give us these beautifully observed, wonderfully articulate poems. I think Larkin says somewhere, 'loneliness and deprivation are to me like daffodils were to Wordsworth, for things which he sees to get inspiration from'. So, with that in mind, let's look through Larkin's 1955 poem, *Toads*.

I'll do the first read-through of it now, and then we'll analyse the way Larkin views

work, ambition to get away from work, and the effects that it has on his character at this stage in his life.

So this will be the first read-through of Philip Larkin's poem *Toads*.

Why should I let the toad work

Squat on my life?

Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork

And drive the brute off?

Six days of the week it soils

With its sickening poison -

Just for paying a few bills!

That's out of proportion.

Lots of folk live on their wits:

Lecturers, lispers,

Losels, loblolly-men, louts -

They don't end as paupers;

Lots of folk live up lanes

With fires in a bucket,

Eat windfalls and tinned sardines -

They seem to like it.

Their nippers have got bare feet,

*Their unspeakable wives
Are skinny as whippets - and yet
No one actually starves.*

*Ah, were I courageous enough
To shout, Stuff your pension!
But I know, all too well, that's the stuff
That dreams are made on:*

*For something sufficiently toad-like
Squats in me, too;
Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,
And cold as snow,*

*And will never allow me to blarney
My way of getting
The fame and the girl and the money
All at one sitting.*

*I don't say, one bodies the other
One's spiritual truth;
But I do say it's hard to lose either,
When you have both.*

Toads. A toad here is being used as a metaphor for work. Work is like a toad which

squats on your life. Larkin was asked once how he came up with the metaphor of a toad for work, and he said, 'sheer genius'. Whether it is an example of sheer genius or not, I leave to you. But you can imagine the idea of it. The toad is unpleasant looking, warty, it's difficult to see a toad as attractive in any way, and it's short, fat, heavy, squat, unmovable, it's squatting on your life as if it's defecating on your life. 'Why should I let work defecate on my life?' he asks in the first stanza of this. And remember that line, because it will become very apparent if you look at *Toads Revisited* later, the sequel to this poem that Larkin is to write some nine years later.

Why should I let the toad work

Squat on my life?

Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork

And drive the brute off?

'The brute' is obviously the toad, the toad which is work. So can't he use his wit, his intelligence, his cunning, I think, is one of the connotations of wit here. Wit, intelligence and cunning - can't he use these to drive the brute work off his back? Or in other words, to stop work. Can't he get a job using his intelligence and cunning?

Use my wit as a pitchfork.

I think what he's alluding to there is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, whereby Frankenstein's monster is chased by village peasants with pitchforks. The sort of image that we see in countless horror films. Can't I use my wit to scare work away? In other words, get a job that I actually enjoy doing.

Six days of the week it soils

With its sickening poison -

Just for paying a few bills!

That's out of proportion.

Now I'm sure there are a lot of people who work six days a week and understand the sentiment that Larkin is giving us there. Six days a week, if you're working at a job that you thoroughly don't enjoy: it defecates on your life with its sickening poison, and you do it to pay the bills - that's just wrong. It's out of proportion. If it was four days a week that you had to go to work, much better. Three days a week and then you get four days off, much better. But six days a week that Larkin seems to have to work for this, for the one day off that he gets - out of proportion. And he hates his job so much, he describes the job as 'soiling his life', and it is a 'sickening poison' it soils his life with. And 'soils his life' means to defecate on him.

The third stanza he tells us:

Lots of folk live on their wits:

Lecturers, lispers,

Losels, loblolly-men, louts -

They don't end as paupers;

To live off their wits, or to live off your wit, the type of people that Larkin sees as living off their wit, they all begin with 'l'. So there is some degree of play in the way that he relates this. He's having fun with words beginning with 'l' because he likes the alliteration of

it, obviously. And he wants to say something derogatory of lecturers, we assume. Lecturers live off their wits. And this is presumably poetry lecturers in English. People like myself, actually.

Larkin didn't like the idea of the lecturer poet. He didn't like it because he thought that the lecturer poet could, after a while, only write about the idea of lecturing, and that the poet should have a real job. Whatever that job should actually be. So that it gave him knowledge and experience enough of the real world for him to write about things. And he makes a solid point there, I think. It's a hard one to argue against. It's often preferable for a poet to have a real job in order for them to have experiences from that job for them to write about in their poetry. If you are a poet lecturer, you can end up teaching your poetry at university. And you get involved in a circle whereby your external experience of the real world becomes so minimal that you don't have anything to write about. That's me paraphrasing Philip Larkin, incidentally. But I think it's one of those statements that's true except when it isn't. A lot of poets who write at universities and have financed themselves through universities have written good poetry while doing so.

But lecturers to Larkin are people who 'live off their wits'. And perhaps there's something discreditable in this, because all the other people who live off their wits are lispers.

'Lispers.' I'm not so sure what this means. Truman Capote was a relatively famous writer at the time when this poem was written. A 'lisper' is someone who speaks very much like that, (adopts lisp) has a lisp. And Capote's voice was championed, his voice was very famous. It's almost as if the lisp became part of his character and could be affected by other people. Larkin hated this type of affected behaviour.

Lecturers, lispers, losels

A 'losel' is just a loser. It's a worthless person.

Losel, loblolly-men

'Loblolly men' may mean nothing, but a loblolly boy was like a ship's surgeon's assistant. And they're always called loblolly boys. So I think the assumption there might be that if you are a loblolly man as opposed to a loblolly boy, you're still assisting a ship's surgeon when you should have a grown-up person's job.

These are the sort of people who live off their wits, and have avoided the troubles of the job that Larkin sees as defecating on him for six days a week. And he notes of these people, if they are not working, they don't end up as paupers. Beggars.

Lots of folk live on their wits:

Lecturers, lispers,

Losels, loblolly-men, louts -

They don't end as paupers;

Louts, for example, are - gangsters would be to overstate the case - but what Larkin would probably call a lout at this stage, we may call a 'wide boy' now. The sort of guys who buy and sell stuff second-hand that's often stolen, that sort of thing.

Lots of folk live up lanes

With fires in a bucket,

Eat windfalls and tinned sardines -

They seem to like it.

What Larkin is doing here is going through a worst-case scenario of what would happen if he gave up his job. He is saying, 'there are lots of folks with no money and they

live up a lane'. This is sort of a country idea of people with no money living up a lane in the country, sat round a bucket of fire and warming their hands whilst they're out of work. Tramps, gypsies, that's the sort of thing that Larkin is discrediting here. Because his point is that these people who live up lanes with fires in a bucket, they eat windfalls and tinned sardines. Tinned sardines would be very cheap food. Windfalls are - a windfall is literally when the wind blows through an orchard and it's legal to pick the fruit up off the floor. That's called a windfall. While the fruit is still on a tree, if you remove it from a tree, that's illegal and that's called 'scrumping'. But if the fruit falls on the floor, it's legal for you to pick it up.

At least I was always told that when I was a kid.

And there are guys who live off windfalls, and they eat tinned sardines and they're very poor, but Larkin is looking at them and he concludes, or he adds to the observation,

Their nippers have got bare feet,

Their unspeakable wives

Are skinny as whippets - and yet

No one actually starves.

So their nippers are their children, these are the sort of people who Larkin believes can't afford shoes for their kids' feet, their unspeakable wives. 'Unspeakable' is a sort of upper-class, English way of saying, 'unspeakably bad'.

'What was that man like?'

'Oh, he's an unspeakable individual.'

Meaning you don't say anything about someone unless you can say something nice, and he's so awful you don't speak about him. So 'their unspeakable wives' means that their wives are so horrible and they are as skinny as whippets. Whippets are racing dogs, like greyhounds;

often owned by the sort of people that Larkin seems to be discrediting here.

Their nippers have got bare feet,

Their unspeakable wives

Are skinny as whippets - and yet

No one actually starves.

And 'starves' is emphasised. What he means by 'no one actually starves' is that their life is not that bad. It's not as if they're actually starving to death. 'So if I was to give my job up and the worst thing was to happen, and I had to live like the poor people that I see around me, I wouldn't actually starve to death.'

Ah, were I courageous enough

To shout, Stuff your pension!

But I know, all too well, that's the stuff

That dreams are made on.

So what he says here is that he wishes to be brave enough to say, 'stuff your pension'. The pension is what you get at the end of a job. Once you've done your job and you've got - I think during Larkin's time, you'd be 65 years old. So you get to 65 years old and your job is finished and the state gives you a pension, enough to live on during your old age. And one of the reasons you continue in a job you don't like is to get a pension at the end of the job to help you exist in your old age. Larkin says, 'I wish I was brave enough to shout to my boss, "stuff your pension, I don't want to work here any more."' But he knows that he's not going to do that. He says, 'that's the stuff that dreams are made on'. Dreams, for Larkin, are made on

the idea that he could stop work and go and do the type of work that he wants to do.

So I'll read the poem through again up to that point, so we can see the sort of man Larkin is portraying himself as in this poem, which is written in 1955, incidentally. So you put it in the social context of England in 1955. Employment was not perhaps the same as it is now, and people were expected to have a job for life.

Why should I let the toad work

Squat on my life?

Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork

And drive the brute off?

Six days of the week it soils

With its sickening poison -

Just for paying a few bills!

That's out of proportion.

Lots of folk live on their wits:

Lecturers, lispers,

Losels, loblolly-men, louts -

They don't end as paupers;

Lots of folk live up lanes

With fires in a bucket,

Eat windfalls and tinned sardines-

They seem to like it.

*Their nippers have got bare feet,
Their unspeakable wives
Are skinny as whippets - and yet
No one actually starves.*

*Ah, were I courageous enough
To shout, Stuff your pension!
But I know, all too well, that's the stuff
That dreams are made on:*

And I often wonder, at this point, how Larkin expects us to see him. Because he certainly doesn't come across as a particularly pleasant individual. He's derogatory to the lecturers, lispers, losels. 'Lispers', incidentally, could even be homosexual poets. I read once that that's what he's addressing in that. Homosexual poets lisp as an affectation, which Larkin found particularly unimpressive. When he says things like, 'they don't end as paupers, they seem to like it, no one actually *starves*' - there's a very upper-middle class English dismissiveness about the way he speaks here of what are essentially the working classes that he's addressing. 'But they don't starve, do they? They don't end as paupers. They seem to like it.' This is the kind of sentiment that Larkin is either adopting, or that Larkin actually felt.

The unpleasantness that seems to manifest itself in the narrator of this poem, be it Larkin or be it a Larkin persona, manifests as great self-awareness. The guy realises a lot about himself and he seems to accept it. He says, *For something sufficiently toad-like squats in me, too.*

So there's one toad that squats *on* him, that is work. But not only does he have the

toad work squatting *on* his life, he has something sufficiently toad-like that squats *inside* him too. And he says of this second toad:

Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,

And cold as snow

I don't usually bother to point out mere alliteration, because anybody can notice that a couple of words begin with the same letter. But doesn't *Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck* work very well? You can hear the weight of it and the thud of the beat.

Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,

And cold as snow

'Hunkers' are shoulders. If you've ever heard the phrase 'to hunker down', it means to squat over like that. To hunker down. People are often described as hunkered over the steering wheel, for example. So it's that image. And what Larkin gets out of the image is the idea that the toad is poised over you, holding onto you, hunkering onto you.

Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,

And cold as snow

Now, 'cold as snow' is the simplest and possibly the oldest of similes, and yet when we hear the 'as cold as snow' in this, somehow it works. I'm not going to claim that it's a great simile, or an original simile, because obviously it isn't. It's a clichéd simile. And yet don't you think that it works because we believe that Larkin has earned the right to use it as a simile?

And if he is using a simile as obvious as 'as cold as snow', there must be a reason for it. What it does, for me, apart from the fact that it sounds great with heaviness in 'cold as snow', the 'o' sounds in it work very nicely. But the other thing I think it does is it shows that, or it gives the impression that, the toad has oppressed Larkin so much, he can't be bothered to come up with a better simile.

*Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,
And cold as snow*

The oppression of the toad has reduced his artistic originality so that he's thinking in clichés like that. Added to which is that this particular cliché does actually work. I don't think it's unfair of us to have it for ourselves both ways. The cliché works and it is a cliché caused by the oppression of the toad's existence.

And then after 'cold as snow', we get one of the rare pieces of enjambment in the poem. Enjambment is when a stanza doesn't end with a full stop, it runs on into the next line. So when we read,

*Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,
And cold as snow,

And will never allow me to blarney
My way of getting
The fame and the girl and the money
All at one sitting.*

The thing which will not allow him to blarney his way to getting the fame and the girl and the money all at one sitting, that is the second toad, the thing which is sufficiently toad-like which squats in him, too. So let's see what the second toad prevents him from doing. And then let's speculate on what that second toad is.

Is it something that won't let him get fame? It won't let him get girls, and it won't let him get money. It won't let him get what he wants. Now, to 'blarney' means to speak, and to speak well and eloquently. In Ireland, there's a thing called the Blarney Stone. Whoever kisses the Blarney Stone is supposed to be able to be a good speaker. And Larkin here wants to be able to use his voice to get fame, the girl and the money. But he is prevented from doing this because there is something sufficiently toad-like that squats inside him. And what that is, the toad that squats inside him, is a character flaw. It's a character flaw that makes him afraid to leave his job. It's a certain weakness, a timidity of character, an inability to go out and seize the new day. And Larkin knows he has this. He acknowledges it.

For something sufficiently toad-like

Squats in me, too;

Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,

And cold as snow,

And will never allow me to blarney

My way of getting

The fame and the girl and the money

All at one sitting.

He knows he won't get what he wants because of the timidity of character. The

character flaw that causes him to not be able to leave his job. And he comes up with a quite complicated final stanza, in which he tells, us:

I don't say, one bodies the other

One's spiritual truth;

But I do say it's hard to lose either,

When you have both.

So, the second half of that stanza first. What are the two toads that he's talking about?

One is the toad work that squats on his life, and the other is the character flaw that makes him too weak to leave the job he doesn't like. And he tells us, 'it's hard to lose either of those if you have both of them'. It's hard to leave a job that you don't like, if you have a timidity of character. And it's hard to get rid of your own timidity of character if you have a job you don't like. It's hard to lose either when you have both.

But prior to this, Larkin has told us

I don't say, one bodies the other

One's spiritual truth;

And I think this is a very complicated line. Well not complicated, it's not beyond our capabilities to explain it, but it requires us to look at it very carefully. 'Bodies' in this instance means, 'give shape to'. It means 'creates'. So what Larkin is saying is, 'I don't believe that one of these toads creates the other toad'. He is saying, 'I don't believe that my hatred of my job is created by my timidity of character. And I don't believe that my timidity of character is

created by my hatred of my job.'

I'll read it again.

I don't say, one bodies the other

One's spiritual truth;

Which means, 'I do not believe that my hatred of my job is created by my timidity of character, my character flaw, and I do not believe that my character flaw is created by my hatred of my job. But I do believe it is very hard to have a stronger character if you have a job you really hate. And I do believe it's really difficult to get rid of a job you really hate if you have that timidity of character.'

I sometimes hear that final line, incidentally, the *I don't say, one bodies the other one's spiritual truth;* as if he's addressing a psychiatrist. It's the way a psychiatrist would say to him, 'the reason you don't like your job is because you have this timidity of character'. And Larkin is saying, 'No, I don't really think that's the case. It's just difficult for me to get through that job, while I have these feelings about it.'

This particular poem was written very early in Larkin's career. In 1955, when he was 33 years old. Later on in his career, some nine years later, Larkin is going to write a sequel about this poem called *Toads Revisited*, where he will speculate on what would happen if he was free to leave his job and he was free to do what he wanted to do. And we'll look at that poem in another Mycroft lecture.

The idea behind this poem is that Larkin has a job he despises doing, but he realises that he is too cowardly to leave that job. And because of this, he will never get the things that he wanted. And yet... and here is the big 'and yet' for this poem.

Remember it is written early on in his poetic career. Larkin, as I said earlier, wanted to be a poet who was understood by people, so he wrote about and for the people who lived this sort of life, primarily because a lot of people who read poetry live - if they don't live this sort of life, they have days like this. We all have days like this.

Now, Larkin may not get the fame, the girl, and the money. But what he does get is the poem. The interrogation of the experience that he does in this poem, in *Toads*, gets the poem which we read. And the poem itself has become justifiably famous. When Larkin says he won't get the fame, well actually he did get the fame. He won't get the girl? Well Larkin had a lot more women than a lot of people give him credit for. And Larkin's financial needs were relatively slight. He wasn't one of life's big spenders. So we could argue that the poem demonstrates that he got the poem; not only that, later on in his life, he got the money; the girl; and certainly the fame. As far as a man for whom deprivation and loneliness are as daffodils were to Wordsworth would wish to have those things.

Okay, I'll read the poem through one more time.

This is Philip Larkin's *Toads*.

Why should I let the toad work

Squat on my life?

Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork

And drive the brute off?

Six days of the week it soils

With its sickening poison -

Just for paying a few bills!

That's out of proportion.

Lots of folk live on their wits:

Lecturers, lispers,

Losels, loblolly-men, louts -

They don't end as paupers;

Lots of folk live up lanes

With fires in a bucket,

Eat windfalls and tinned sardines-

They seem to like it.

Their nippers have got bare feet,

Their unspeakable wives

Are skinny as whippets - and yet

No one actually starves.

Ah, were I courageous enough

To shout, Stuff your pension!

But I know, all too well, that's the stuff

That dreams are made on:

For something sufficiently toad-like

Squats in me, too;

Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,

And cold as snow,

*And will never allow me to blarney
My way of getting
The fame and the girl and the money
All at one sitting.*

*I don't say, one bodies the other
One's spiritual truth;
But I do say it's hard to lose either,
When you have both.*

That was the Mycroft Online Lecture on Philip Larkin's 1955 poem, 'Toads'.

I am Dr. Andrew Barker. Thank you, goodbye.

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Some Other Notes

1 Larkin's use of *The stuff that dreams are made ON*, rather than the more traditional the stuff that dreams are made OF. We must presume that Larkin wishes to suggest that dreams are constructed, built, on the ability to reject middle class values, rather than being the rejection of middle class values being the actualization of a dream in itself.

2 I quote Larkin in this lecture as saying "Desperation and loneliness are to me as daffodils were to Wordsworth." What Larkin actually said was "*Deprivation* is to me as daffodils were to Wordsworth." Larkin means that he is inspired by deprivation, though we

may feel free to decide how far Larkin was saying this with his tongue in his cheek.