



Mycroft Lectures. Adapted Transcript for:

Philip Larkin's *Toads Revisited.*

(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.

This lecture includes the following areas of analysis:

1. The lecture begins by recapping the original *Toads* poem to which this poem is the sequel.
2. The poem is read through.
3. The poem is parsed, paraphrased, explained line by line in simpler English. Various complications noted, or areas of interest raised and questioned, are:
 - △ The simplicity of the sentences.
 - △ The type of people Larkin sees in the park, and the way he views them.
 - △ Why these people are not at work.
 - △ Why the things these people are doing are seen as frightening.
 - △ Pathetic fallacy.
 - △ Why the people Larkin sees are in the park in the first place.
 - △ Pronouns.
 - △ How the walk in the park changes Larkin's view of work.

- ^ The new relationship with the old toad.
- ^ Comparison with the end of George Orwell's *1984*.
- ^ Differences between the conclusions in *Toads* and *Toads Revisited*.
- 4. Explanation of perfect and imperfect rhyme and the way rhyme affects this poem.
- 5. The conclusion Larkin seems to draw at the end of the poem.
- 6. The poem is read through for a final time.

From the lecture: "There is 'us' and there is 'them'. Or more to the point, there is 'him' and there is 'them'."

Transcript for the *Toads Revisited* Lecture

Toads Revisited is the sequel to Larkin's original 1955 poem, *Toads*. It comes out in his later collection, nine years later. In 1964, he gives us this piece. Now *Toads* - the original poem - the idea behind the poem is that Larkin sees the experience of work as like a toad which squats on his life, and he acknowledges that part of the reason that he cannot get rid of the job that he has is that there is another toad inside him, which is a character flaw. So because he has the character flaw of a certain weakness - it's not so much a weakness in many ways, it's just middle-class conditioning. Because he has this, it makes him unable to leave the job he despises, but he also acknowledges that the job that he despises helps cultivate the weakness that is inside him.

Nine years later, when Larkin is a more respected and - dare we say - more famous poet, he gives us this one, *Toads Revisited*.

In this poem, it appears, at least at the start, as if Larkin has taken a day off from the job that he doesn't like doing; the 'toad' employment that he hates so much, that he sees as squatting on his life, defecating on him *with sickening poison*. And he has gone for a walk in the park.

So the way that I will teach this poem is I'll do the read-through, then I'll do the sentence-by-sentence analysis of it, and after that, I want to look at the type of rhyme that Larkin uses in this poem because it's a good poem to introduce the way half-rhyme works and it's so integral to this poem that I feel it would be remiss to not point that out to you. I'll do the read-through of the poem, analyse the rhyme, and then we'll briefly look at the differences between the conclusions that the Larkin character draws at the end of *Toads*, and at the end of *Toads Revisited*.

So here is the first read-through of Philip Larkin's 1964 poem, *Toads Revisited*.

*Walking around in the park
Should feel better than work:
The lake, the sunshine,
The grass to lie on,*

*Blurred playground noises
Beyond black-stockinged nurses -
Not a bad place to be.
Yet it doesn't suit me.*

*Being one of the men
You meet of an afternoon:
Palsied old step-takers,
Hare-eyed clerks with the jitters,*

*Waxed-fleshed out-patients
Still vague from accidents,
And characters in long coats
Deep in the litter-baskets -*

*All dodging the toad work
By being stupid or weak.
Think of being them!
Hearing the hours chime,*

*Watching the bread delivered,
The sun by clouds covered,
The children going home;
Think of being them,*

Turning over their failures

*By some bed of lobelias,
Nowhere to go but indoors,
Nor friends but empty chairs -*

*No, give me my in-tray,
My loaf-haired secretary,
My shall-I-keep-the-call-in-Sir:
What else can I answer,*

*When the lights come on at four
At the end of another year?
Give me your arm, old toad;
Help me down Cemetery Road.*

And that is just such a depressing last line. I'll lead up to why I feel it's such a depressing last line, because it is quite brilliant, and there is loads and loads going on in that final stanza. But to really appreciate it, we have to go through the poem line by line and see what Larkin gives us. So, *Toads Revisited*.

*Walking around in the park
Should feel better than work,*

Larkin tells us. He has previously told us that work is like a toad that squats on his life, defecating on him. He hates work so he thinks that going for a walk in the park should feel better than work, as indeed it should if you really don't like your job. He's in a park in England, of course. As soon as we hear the word 'should' here, we suspect that it doesn't feel better. Walking around the park should feel better than work, but obviously we suspect that it won't. The park that he's walking around, there's a lake there, it's a nice sunny day, and there's the grass to lie on. So he's not specifically selected a very unpleasant park on a very unpleasant day. There is grass, it's a nice sun-shiny day, and he's by a lake. For a man who despises his job as much as Larkin tells us he does, this should be a nice day out.

He tells us there are 'blurred playground noises'. Larkin wasn't one of those individuals who liked children, incidentally. He was in fact one of those individuals who really didn't like children. So the 'blurred playground noises in the background' might lead

those of us who know Larkin's work to believe that there's something there that's wrong with the playground - the kids are too near it.

Beyond black-stockinged nurses

Black-stockinged in 1964 - think we're supposed to assume here that the black-stockinged nurses here are somewhat sexy. So it's a nice sunny day, he's in the park, near a lake, sexy nurses are walking past, and he acknowledges this is

Not a bad place to be.

Yet it doesn't suit me.

There's no simpler way we can rephrase this. *Not a bad place to be.* That's exactly what it means. This is not a bad place to be. *Yet it doesn't suit me.* There's something quite well done in that *Yet it doesn't suit me.* There's just the simplicity of the sentences putting across what is in fact a very simple, very obvious truth that Larkin is admitting to himself. 'This isn't a bad place to be, I should like it, yet - it doesn't suit me. The simple truth is it doesn't suit me'. And that simple truth is related in simple sentences, in simple words.

And of course we, the reader, question, 'Well, if your job is so awful, as you've told us before, what's wrong with the day out in the park?' This is what is wrong with it:

Being one of the men

You meet of an afternoon

Larkin doesn't want to be seen as one of the type of men who frequent the park on an afternoon. He is, on this day, one of them. And he looks around at the other people who are in the park on this afternoon, and he gives us a list of them. The first is: *Palsied old step-takers*. Now, 'palsied' means affected with involuntary tremors. So you can imagine the old guys who are perhaps with their Zimmer frames and they're out for a walk in the park, shaking. Larkin sees them there. 'Palsied old step-takers', the sort of older people for whom each step is an effort. Larkin doesn't want to be considered one of those.

He also sees *Hare-eyed clerks with the jitters*. I quite like this line, actually, *Hare-eyed clerks with the jitters*. If you've never seen a rabbit or a hare look really frightened, you probably don't understand what this metaphor means, but 'hare-eyed'... when a rabbit or a

hare is really frightened, it looks absolutely terrified, and it shakes at a speed that you wouldn't think is actually possible for it to shake at. And it just looks absolutely terrified. The jitters are our fears, nervous fears, nervous twitching. And Larkin says the other type of person you see in the park during the afternoon are terrified clerks. They are clerks on the verge of a nervous breakdown. And Larkin sees nothing there that he wishes to associate himself with.

Waxed-fleshed out-patients

Still vague from accidents.

I think we have to assume there must be a hospital nearby this park or an old people's home there, or something like that.

Waxed-fleshed out-patients

Still vague from accidents

People who have been involved in, let's say, a car crash, and their skin looks pale and waxed. They don't quite understand what's going on, because they've had some mental difficulties after being in a car crash, perhaps. *Out-patients still vague from accidents.* People who don't quite know what's going on so they're let out into the park for a walk around on a hot day, on a nice sunny day.

And characters in long coats

Deep in the litter-baskets

The characters in long coats, these are tramps, basically. People so financially destitute that they would eat out of the litter-bins. You can imagine the guys reaching into the bins to hopefully find half a thrown-away hamburger at the bottom. These are all unfortunate people, and Larkin looks at them and says, 'these are the sort of people you see in a park in an afternoon'.

So, to recap,

Walking around in the park

Should feel better than work:

*The lake, the sunshine,
The grass to lie on,*

*Blurred playground noises
Beyond black-stockinged nurses -
Not a bad place to be.
Yet it doesn't suit me.*

*Being one of the men
You meet of an afternoon:
Palsied old step-takers,
Hare-eyed clerks with the jitters,*

*Waxed-fleshed out-patients
Still vague from accidents,
And characters in long coats*

These are the types of people that Larkin sees in the park. And what are they doing? Larkin tells us the common factor of what all of them are doing, is they're

*All dodging the toad work
By being stupid or weak.*

The people Larkin sees in the park are too stupid to get a job, or too weak to hold down a job; this is the way he presents it. I feel a bit awkward saying things like this, it's as if I concur with his synopsis that some poor bloke who's been involved in an accident is too stupid or weak to get a job. But Larkin certainly sees these people as life's losers. None of them are wealthy, successful, happy individuals. These are all people who life has let down or hurt in some way. And these are the people he sees in the park.

*All dodging the toad work
By being stupid or weak.*

I mean, it's a harsh assessment, don't get me wrong. But he opines, he believes that

the reason these people are not at work is not because they have used their *wit as a pitchfork to drive the brute off*, which is what he wanted to do himself, in *Toads*. These are people who are simply too stupid to go to work, or too weak to hold down a job. And these are the people in the park, and Larkin looks around and where previously he had thought, well, nobody actually starves who doesn't have a job and the worst-case scenario of me giving up my job and attempting to become the person I want to be, really the worst-case scenario could be seen to be not that bad. What he looks at here is a possibility that he finds horrifying. He has taken a day off work and everybody else who is not working is a person that he cannot but look down on.

Think of being them! he tells us.

The 'them' is very much in the exclamation mark after it, the horror that he seems to feel of being considered them, or living the life that these - what we may see as poor, unfortunate individuals - have to live. But Larkin says,

Think of being them!

*Hearing the hours chime,
Watching the bread delivered,
The sun by clouds covered,
The children going home;
Think of being them.*

Now, the things which these guys do that Larkin looks at, one could argue that they're not actually that bad. *They hear the hours chime* - the implication here of course is that they do nothing else but hear the hours chime. They hear the 'dong, dong, dong' but in between that, they hear nothing else. They just don't do anything in Larkin's opinion. *Watching the bread delivered*. I suppose what he means here is that, to these guys, the bread being delivered in the morning or the afternoon or whenever it happens in this town, that's an event. Watching the bread being delivered is an event to these people because their lives are just so boring. *The sun by clouds covered, The children going home*. Watching the sun being covered by clouds - this is an example of what we call a 'pathetic fallacy'. A 'pathetic fallacy' is when emotions are indicated by the weather. So whenever the sun comes out, it looks like

everything is going to be happy. If the sun is covered by clouds, that's going to indicate that these people's lives are not full of sunshine, that their lives are boring, dull, dark, unhappy. Similarly, *the children going home*. Now watching the children going home, the children might be very happy going home. But the idea is that usually if we say, 'watching the kids come out to play', that will be quite a happy moment for us. But watching the kids go home is unhappy. Incidentally, you could argue that that indicates something about Larkin's own view of children and home. Kids are happy when they're out. They don't like going home. And this may be true in many instances, but the opposite is true in many others. A lot of kids do like their homes.

Think of being them, Larkin says again. There is 'us', and there is 'them'. Or more to the point, as he looks at it later, there is 'me', and there is 'them'.

The people he sees in the park, they are

Turning over their failures

By some bed of lobelias,

Nowhere to go but indoors,

Nor friends but empty chairs.

Turning over their failures you can imagine the guy sat on a park bench next to some flowers - 'lobelias' are flowers - and he's just turning over in his hands all the things that have gone wrong, and looking at all of the problems that he has had in his life from different angles... 'If I'd done this, this would have happened.' Trying to find a way that his life could have been better by continually turning over his failures to look at them from a different angle. But it doesn't matter, because the failures have happened. That's all the guy has got to do in his life - turn over his failures, or basically, their failures, because Larkin sees everybody he meets in the park as a failure, who has nothing to do but reassess their own failure.

And they do this in the park because they have

Nowhere to go but indoors,

Nor friends but empty chairs

They've got to go out in the park to do this, because they've got nowhere else to go. The only alternative is then to go indoors, where they are on their own, and the only friends

they've got is the empty chair which is next to them. Which is to say they have no friends at all. So, to not overstate the case, Larkin is less than impressed with the lives of the individuals he sees walking around the park on the afternoon when he could be at work. And so could they, he believes.

Now seeing the unimpressive and rather unpleasant lives of these people seems to scare Larkin. And he regresses to a reassessment of his own life, of his own working life, and he says, 'No'. 'No' being 'No, I don't want that'.

*No, give me my in-tray,
My loaf-haired secretary,
My shall-I-keep-the-call-in-Sir:
What else can I answer*

Notice the pronouns here. Previously it's been, 'them', and now it's 'me', 'my in-tray', 'my loaf-haired secretary', 'my shall-I-keep-the-call-in-Sir', 'what else can I answer'. The work which he does gives him an identity which he recognises here.

Give me my in-tray? An in-tray is probably now something that younger students may not know the meaning of. An in-tray would be when you had a desk, and there would be one tray there which was your in-tray, and another tray there which was your out-tray, and your in-tray would be all of your stuff that needed to be done, and you finished whatever was put into the in-tray, and then moved it into your out-tray. So people could wake up in the morning terrified of all the work that had to be done and the size of their in-tray. 'Happiness is regulated by the size of one's in-tray', I remember reading many years ago.

Now to some people that is a horrifying existence. The idea that the degree of happiness that is in your life is regulated by how quickly you can move papers from your in-tray to your out-tray. But Larkin looks at that, and he sees that as far preferable than the life of the individuals that he sees in the park. 'No,' he says, 'I don't want that life in the park.'

*Give me my in-tray,
my loaf-haired secretary.*

Now a 'loaf-haired secretary': a loaf is probably a bee-hive haircut. This is written in 1964, that's the sort of haircut that is around then, I think. 'Loaf', it means lazy as well; lazy with a connotation of stupid. Note the way that Larkin seems to be able to look down on his

secretary.

*Give me my in-tray,
my loaf-haired secretary.*

Certainly not a flattering way to describe a person who works for you. 'Loaf-haired secretary.'

My shall-I-keep-the-call-in-Sir.

Now that is the sort of thing that the secretary would say to him, 'Sir, you've got a call. Shall I keep the call in, sir?' These are the trappings of middle-class employment, I think. Aren't they? He's got a secretary, he's got work which gives him some kind of power and sense of purpose. And obviously, he would rather have that than the life of the people he sees in the park.

*What else can I answer,
When the lights come on at four
At the end of another year?*

Now, at the end of another year, when the lights come on, I think he's talking about new year's resolutions here. 'What are we going to do with the new year? How are we going to do something new with our life? How are we going to become the person we've always wanted to be?' Remember in *Toads*, he hasn't done this because he acknowledges the fact that he's simply too scared to. *There's something sufficiently toad-like which squats in me too*, he tells us. But here, something very strange happens. After the walk around the park.

Larkin comes home and says,

*What else can I answer,
When the lights come on at four
At the end of another year?*

And these final brilliant two lines:

*Give me your arm, old toad;
Help me down Cemetery Road.*

'Toad' here, the old toad, is work. Work which Larkin has previously seen as a toad squatting on his back. Work which the people he sees in the park avoid by being stupid and weak. The toad has been turned into a human being here, it has been given human characteristics, it's been anthropomorphised. The toad has also moved from his back to his arm. The toad is still a toad, of course; work is still something that is unpleasant, but it has been moved, or he has asked the toad to move - and I think we believe the toad will acquiesce - from his back to his arm.

*Give me your arm, old toad;
Help me down Cemetery Road.*

Terrific line, this one. When you unpack it, there is just so much in it. He is saying, 'although work is still a toad, is still unpleasant, it is now something that gives me a sense of purpose. It's something that helps me. It's something that I acknowledge that I will do, in fact want to do, until the end of my life.' We get the image of Larkin walking arm-in-arm with the toad, almost like a marriage ceremony, where they're going to walk arm-in-arm, down the road to death.

Give me your arm, old toad.

Now, 'old toad' is even affectionate, isn't it? It's the sort of very strange, affectionate nickname that old people used to have for each other, where a man would call his wife, 'Old Toad', or a wife would call her husband, 'an Old Toad'. This is the image I think Larkin is getting at. That he has accepted the fact that working, for him, is preferable to not working, and he actually asks the toad, which previously has been seen as something which squats on his back, to help him through the rest of his life as he walks down Cemetery Road. Now there's no way we can make this a really positive ending to the poem, because 'Cemetery Road' is the place of death, isn't it? These lines can be paraphrased as: 'I am going to work at this job that I don't like until I die, and I am actually pretty much at ease with doing so because I have seen that the alternatives to doing this are even worse.'

*Give me your arm, old toad;
Help me down Cemetery Road.*

I mean, we can say it's positive in the fact that he now obviously doesn't hate his job as much as he used to. But that doesn't mean that the job is actually something he should enjoy doing. This always reminds me of the end of George Orwell's *1984*, where Winston Smith finally acknowledges that he loves Big Brother. He's been tortured so much that he has learnt to love the thing that he had previously hated. Here it's as if Larkin at the end of the poem has been so ground down by the extra nine years that he's done at the job (since he wrote *Toads*), and by the alternatives to doing the work, that he's actually doing, that he's finally acknowledged that the job he does is actually part of his character and part of his identity, and he'd rather have that than nothing. He knows he's not brave enough to seek something else, and he knows he never has been, and the old toad-work is now preferable to him than the alternative, which is a life of no work.

Let me comment here briefly on the use of rhyme in both of these poems, because it's very definite in these poems and it's creating a definite effect of something being not quite right.

Rhyme is quite easily explained, because there are two types of rhyme. There is what we call a 'perfect rhyme', and there is what we call an 'imperfect rhyme'. The imperfect rhyme is divided into two types of rhyme, which we call a 'consonance rhyme' and an 'assonance rhyme'. It's as simple as that.

Here are examples of them.

A perfect rhyme is where the rhyme is perfect. Nothing complicated there.

So a perfect rhyme is '**cat**' rhymes with '**hat**'.

'**Cat**' rhymes with '**bat**'.

'**Cat**' rhymes with '**mat**'.

Those are perfect rhymes. No problems for anyone there.

Now, an imperfect rhyme, often called a half-rhyme, but an imperfect-rhyme is the best way to describe it I think, because that's what it is. It is not perfect. An imperfect rhyme is where we hear an acoustic connection between two words, but it doesn't sound perfect.

Remember, a rhyme is just that. An acoustic connection between words. The words sound the same.

If the endings of the words sound exactly the same, that's when we get a perfect rhyme.

If the endings of the words sound nearly the same, that's when we get an imperfect rhyme.

So, the two types of imperfect rhyme are an 'assonance rhyme', which rhymes on the last vowel. So '**cat**' rhymes with '**map**'.

I tried teaching this once, and someone said, '**cat** obviously doesn't rhyme with **map**'. Well, close your eyes and hear it.

'Cat', 'map'. The 'A' sound in them is the same. It's not perfect, I'm not saying it is. I'm saying that it is an assonance rhyme, which rhymes on the vowel sound.

'**Cat**' rhymes with '**map**'.

The other type of imperfect rhyme is what we call a 'consonance rhyme' which rhymes on the last stressed consonant.

So '**cat**' rhymes basically with anything that rhymes with a '**t**'.

'**Cat**' rhymes with '**bought**'.

'**Cat**' rhymes with '**brought**', because it ends with a 't'.

That is not a perfect rhyme. 'Cat'. 'Brought'. You hear the acoustic similarities at the end of the words.

Now, if you get perfect rhymes it often makes a poem more solid. Amongst doing other things, they can make a poem more comic, actually. And it can sometimes stamp something shut. Make a point very definitely. Imperfect rhymes usually suggest that there is something slightly 'off' in the poem itself, in what is being related. The way the poet writes the poem often imitates what he's writing about, and if there is something slightly off in the rhymes that he is using, sometimes we think there is something slightly off in the poem.

Here we get loads of this,

'park', 'work',

'noises', 'nurses',

'men', 'afternoon',

'talkers', 'jitters',
'indoors', 'chairs'...

These are all half-rhymes, and Larkin is an expert at using half-rhymes in both *Toads Revisited* and *Toads* itself.

But note the way the poem ends, with this perfect rhyme.

*When the lights come on at four
At the end of another year?*

*Give me your arm, old toad;
Help me down Cemetery Road.*

'Toad' and **'road'** are perfect rhymes.

And it's as if the Larkin persona of the poem has reached a definite conclusion by the end of the poem. This conclusion is, 'My rebellion against the job that I've done, or my acknowledgement that I want to rebel against the job that I do, but I'm not strong enough to do so, is over.' Now he just acknowledges that he's going to do that job until the end of his days.

*Give me your arm, old toad;
Help me down Cemetery Road.*

So, we'll give one final read-through to *Toads Revisited*. Hopefully after looking at it in the way that we have, it should be clear to you as I read it through now. Philip Larkin's *Toads Revisited*.

*Walking around in the park
Should feel better than work:
The lake, the sunshine,
The grass to lie on,*

*Blurred playground noises
Beyond black-stockinged nurses -*

Not a bad place to be.

Yet it doesn't suit me.

Being one of the men

You meet of an afternoon:

Palsied old step-takers,

Hare-eyed clerks with the jitters,

Waxed-fleshed out-patients

Still vague from accidents,

And characters in long coats

Deep in the litter-baskets -

All dodging the toad work

By being stupid or weak.

Think of being them!

Hearing the hours chime,

Watching the bread delivered,

The sun by clouds covered,

The children going home;

Think of being them,

Turning over their failures

By some bed of lobelias,

Nowhere to go but indoors,

Nor friends but empty chairs -

No, give me my in-tray,

My loaf-haired secretary,

My shall-I-keep-the-call-in-Sir:

What else can I answer,

When the lights come on at four

*At the end of another year?
Give me your arm, old toad;
Help me down Cemetery Road.*

Awful, awful image at the end of that poem. That was the Mycroft Online Lecture for Philip Larkin's *Toads Revisited*.

I'm Dr Andrew Barker. Thank you, goodbye.

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