

University of Windsor

Scholarship at UWindor

English Publications

Department of English

3-21-2024

Hell and Unhappiness in Larkins's 'High Windows'

Thomas Dilworth
University of Windsor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/englishpub>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dilworth, Thomas. (2024). Hell and Unhappiness in Larkins's 'High Windows'. *The Explicator*, 60 (4), 221-223.

<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/englishpub/86>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at Scholarship at UWindor. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarship at UWindor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.

Hell and Unhappiness in Larkins's 'High Windows'

by Thomas Dilworth

[This essay is a revision of an article entitled 'Larkin's "High Windows"', published in *The Explicator* 60:4 (Summer 2002), 221-3]

Keywords: myth, hell, heaven, church, Plato's allegory of the cave, form.

Philip Larkin said in an interview, 'to me ... the whole of classical and biblical mythology means very little, and I think that using them today not only fills poems full of dead spots but dodges the writer's duty to be original.'¹ 'Biblical mythology may mean 'very little' to him, but it seems to mean something, if only those bits of it informing contemporary colloquial imagination. One example in 'High Windows' is the word 'paradise' (line 40). And in this poem, there is another mythic bit—originally biblical—together with originally Christian but continuing contemporary imaginative cosmology. These residual mythic elements significantly influence the delicate irony between happiness and its apparent unattainability. Here is the poem:

When I see a couple of kids
And guess he's fucking her and she's
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,
I know this is paradise

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives—
Bonds and gestures pushed to one side
Like an outdated combine harvester,
And everyone young going down the long slide

To happiness, endlessly. I wonder if
Anyone looked at me, forty years back,

And thought, *That'll be the life;*
No God any more, or sweating in the dark

About hell and that, or having to hide
What you think of the priest. He
And his lot will all go down the long slide
Like free bloody birds. And immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:
 The sun-comprehending glass,
 And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows
 Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

The speaker of the poem establishes a parallel between young people of the poem's present and himself 'and his lot' (line 15) a generation earlier. He and members of his generation had liberated themselves from religion but not its behavioral constraints. Young people today have freed themselves from those constraints: the 'Bonds and gestures' of marriage and courtship, which are 'pushed to one side / Like an outdated combine harvester' (6-8). The combine harvester evokes abundant fertility, no longer pertinent in an age of effective birth control ('she's / Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm' [3]). Pleasure is the sole harvest now when two young people 'combine'. The chief image of this pleasure is 'everyone young going down the long slide / To happiness, endlessly' (8-9). The playground slide suggests childhood, here indefinitely prolonged. It is also, however, an ambiguous image: in one aspect biblical, evoking the words of Jesus; 'The way is easy, that leads to destruction and those who enter by it are many' (Matthew 7:13). This is the way to hell, necessarily (in popular imagination) downward. Allusive negativity seems canceled, however, by this being the way 'To happiness'. And hell is a place or condition already dispensed with by the speaker and his generation: 'No ... sweating in the dark / About hell' (12-13). He imagines an observer in his youth as thinking that 'He / And his lot will all go down the long slide / Like free bloody birds' (14-15). This varies the image of the long slide in a way that is more problematic because the bird simile does not work. Birds are 'free' of gravity—which they overcome by flying—and can fly in any direction, whereas people on a slide can only go down and at an angle and in a direction they cannot vary. Even if it fit the image, the simile (and the positive judgment) would have been mistaken. The speaker was free only of religious faith, not inhibition. And apropos of hell, or maybe only social disapprobation, is it solely the biological consequences of sex that precludes

it? There is sexual behaviour other than intercourse. As an Irish friend told me, 'I don't believe in hell, but I'm still afraid of it.' In any case, the new generation has apparently improved upon his achievement.

The speaker says of the sexual freedom of the young, 'I know this is paradise' (4), but his subsequent words seem to qualify his use of that prelapsarian noun. The young go, he says, 'To happiness, *endlessly*' (my italics), implying that they never arrive. If the image of the slide were not linearly teleological, 'endlessly' might be a positive modifier; but the image renders the word negative.

The final image in the poem is 'high windows' of 'sun-comprehending glass' (17-18). Whether or not these are church windows, they are probably not stained-glass windows, which admit only certain ranges of the light spectrum. Instead, these comprehend the full white light of the sun. (In a prior draft, they are said to be 'plain glass'.)² Point of view is located within the building—in what seems a negative variation of Plato's allegory of the cave. Here the liberated one who sees the light has no good news for the rest of us. Through the windows may be seen 'the deep blue air, that shows / Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless' (19-20). The suggestion is that the full, clear, uncoloured truth passes through these windows. The final adjective, 'endless', echoes the adverb 'endlessly' in line 9, implying a linkage between sexual liberation (and the speaker's atheism) with this sky-blue absence. The high windows offer a view toward where we (or at least some) conventionally go at death, when we leave the earth. The image and its modifying 'endless' might be positive, evoking eternity, since the sky is conventionally associated with heaven; but the word 'Nothing' at the beginning of the line cancels that possibility. If as far as the speaker is concerned, he has abolished hell, he has also erased heaven. If the slide down does not threaten damnation, neither does it promise real happiness. Similarly, the look up is not to heaven and allows no hope for metaphysical happiness. In an early draft Larkin expressed his own angry disappointment at this by concluding with the words 'and fucking piss'.³ Even without that brief, silly but poignant coda, the finished poem leaves us in no doubt. There will be no happiness after death, a conviction matched earlier in the poem by apparent absence of happiness before death.

One more thing. An aspect of the poem's form expresses the fluid, liminal aspect of its thinking. For the first three stanzas, which verbally seem each to come to a full stop, bridging sentences continue into the following stanza in what seems, for the initial stanza, a rhetorical

afterlife. Such hopeful indication ceases in the penultimate stanza. Formally overcoming the gaps between the stanzas, the bridging has its existential analogue in the one aspect of life that bridges the generations, and that is the absence of happiness.

¹ Ian Hamilton, 'Four Conversations', *London Magazine* 4:8 (November 1964), 72.

² Andrew Motion, Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life (London: Faber, 1993), p. 354.

³ Motion, pl. 354.