

## Aubade

“Aubade” was composed in 1977 and published in Larkin’s *Collected Poems*. There is a speaker who introduces himself in the first line: “I work all day, and get half-drunk at night”. The poem is set in the small hours waiting for dawn. The title is ironic since an “aubade” is traditionally a poem in praise of dawn, generally involving two lovers who must part, or urging a lover to wake. Larkin’s “Aubade” provides a bitter slant on the tradition, focusing on the bleak thoughts of death as dawn approaches. If daylight brings relief to this pessimistic speaker, it is only because “Work has to be done.”

The rest of the poem, however, is in Larkin’s late manner: there is none of the amused self-mockery and self-doubt of the earlier speakers, none of their ambivalence. Such character ironies are absent, giving us no reason to suppose that there is a distinction between the speaker and Larkin himself. Also typical of the later manner is the tendency to definitive or aphoristic lines. So, in a line that has become famous, religion is “That vast moth-eaten musical brocade” and death “The anaesthetic from which none come round” or “no different whined at than withstood”. The twentieth century began in the shadow of hugely influential determinist thought from the second half of the nineteenth: Marx, Darwin and Freud were perhaps the giants of this intellectual change. Larkin’s relation to determinism was uneasy. For most of his life, Larkin expressed no interest in politics or social theory, and when he did his views were erratic but predominantly right-winged. On the other hand, his poems often leave an uncompromisingly determinist effect behind them. Lacking irony and seeking definition, the poet has no need to create tension between shifting conversational dictions, and a complex form, as he did in poems like “the Whitsun Weddings”. Instead, the rhyme-scheme (ABABCCDEED) is regular and firmly used, there are fewer enjambments, and each stanza terminates in a full-stop.

The subject of “Aubade” is declared in the first stanza: “Unresting death”. The poem is one of the few major works to appear after *High Windows*, Larkin’s final collection, and makes one of a group of sombre orations which cemented Larkin’s reputation for pessimism and morbid subject matter. “Aubade” certainly is about continual thoughts of death; but there is a danger in stereotyping Larkin as this gloomy middle-aged speaker, even if this character is not satirically undercut. If we approach “Aubade” with the same care as we approach other poems, we will realise more exactly what it is about death that occupies the poet.