

## CLASS, CAPITAL, AND DISTINCTION IN PHILIP LARKIN'S *THE WHITSUN WEDDINGS*

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### Abstract

With the publication of Philip Larkin's letters, his claim to celebrate the common reader and the common English lifestyle, in contrast to modernist elitist's attitudes, was revealed to be not quite sincere. Some poems in his *The Whitsun Weddings* collection particularly depict Larkin's ambivalence toward issues of social class, habitus, and distinction. Deploying Pierre Bourdieu's theorization of society and culture, this article explores issues of social class, the embedding of characters in their social class and habitus, and forms of capital figuring in four poems in Larkin's collection. Four poems («Mr. Bleaney», «Dockery and Son», «For Sidney Bechet» and «The Whitsun Weddings») are examined to see how Larkin attaches common characters to their social space through describing the kinds of capital they possess or lack, and how, ironically, the speakers attempt to keep their distance –to mark out distinction– while professing sympathy and understanding. Thus, some light is shed on Larkin's ambivalence about common people and lower classes as well as toward the very idea of distinction.

*Keywords:* capital, culture, field, habitus, distinction, Philip Larkin, *The Whitsun Weddings*.

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\* We wish to dedicate this article to the fond memory of the late Dr. Kamran Ahmadgoli, of Kharazmi University, who commented on its first draft.

CLASE, CAPITAL Y DISTINCIÓN EN *THE WHITSUN WEDDINGS*  
DE PHILIP LARKIN

Resumen

Con la publicación de las cartas de Philip Larkin, se reveló que su afirmación de celebrar el lector común y el estilo de vida inglés común, en contraste con las actitudes de los elitistas modernistas, no era del todo sincera. Algunos poemas de su colección *The Whitsun Weddings* (*Las bodas de Pentecostés*) describen en particular la ambivalencia de Larkin hacia cuestiones de clase social, habitus y distinción. Haciendo uso de la teorización de la sociedad y la cultura de Pierre Bourdieu, este artículo explora cuestiones de clase social, la integración de los personajes en su clase social y habitus, y formas de capital que figuran en cuatro poemas de la colección de Larkin. Se examinan cuatro poemas («Mr. Bleaney», «Dockery and Son», «For Sidney Bechet» y «The Whitsun Weddings») para ver cómo Larkin vincula personajes comunes a su espacio social al describir los tipos de capital que poseen o carecen y cómo, irónicamente, los hablantes intentan mantener la distancia –para marcar distinción– mientras profesan simpatía y comprensión. Por lo tanto, se arroja algo de luz sobre la ambivalencia de Larkin sobre la gente común y las clases bajas, así como sobre la idea misma de distinción.

*Palabras clave:* capital, cultura, campo, habitus, distinción, Philip Larkin, *The Whitsun Weddings*.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the publication of Anthony Thwaite's *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin* (1992) and Andrew Motion's *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (1993), Philip Larkin's reputation as a leading poet of the Movement plunged and he «was unmasked not only as an unpleasant personality who was false and deceptive among the people he had known but also as a prejudiced reactionary who was a misogynist and a xenophobe» (Banerjee, 2008: 428). Booth (2018: 39) mentions that Larkin's letters revealed traces of racism and the «crude racist language» in his writings shocked the readers. For example, on 7 April 1968, when «Riots had followed the assassination of Martin Luther King on 4 April 1968», Larkin wrote to Eva: «[...] The news from America is bad, isn't it [?] Aren't you glad you don't live there? I shouldn't like a crowd of Negroes roaming around Pearson Park, or Loughborough» (*Letter*, 558). Booth maintains that Larkin's attitude toward other races is quite contradictory. Larkin's jazz reviews, for instance:

show moral indignation at the humiliations of the colour bar in the USA, and he enthusiastically admired the music of Count Basie, Sidney Bechet, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday. His comment that Louis Armstrong 'was an artist of world stature, an American Negro slum child who spoke to the heart of Greenlander and Japanese alike' is impeccably liberal in its universalism (Booth, 2018: 39).

Besides feeling ambivalent towards other races, another complicated fact that problematizes Larkin's poetic and international reputation is his vexed relation with modernism, especially as practiced by T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. As Banerjee (2008: 429) argues: «Their preoccupation with the 'common myth kitty' and their learned allusions and obscurity alienated Larkin. He accused modernists of making poetry forbiddingly academic and abstruse, thus frightening away the common reader». However, Larkin's relation with modernism was more complex than that. For instance, quoting John Carey, Weston (2010: 314) points out that there are two voices identifiable in Larkin's work, a «stringently demotic voice' most commonly associated with Larkin», which is «mediated by a change in 'rhythm, vocabulary, register', towards a 'sensitive, educated', even 'bardic' second voice». Similarly, referring to the-often-unnoticed allusiveness of Larkin's poetry and mentioning that Larkin's main objection to modernism was its institutionalization, Alderman (1994: 283) argues that Larkin's relation to modernism «is far more complex and problematic than he has been given credit for by his detractors and praisers». In a similar vein, Whalen (1981: 29) shrewdly observes that Larkin's poetry «is not as alien to the work of the Modernists as first thoughts tend to assume», adding that «Imagist bias» in Larkin's poetry, for example, demonstrates that the «rejection of the Modernists is really no more than a healthy cynicism about their more pedantic and cryptic gestures».

In addition to such contradictory accounts of Larkin and his poetry (in one account he has been interpreted as «too failingly human to be considered a meaningful poet»), Saladyga (1985: 10) avers that:

Larkin's work provides a vital understanding of the tenuous hold that such notions as «tradition» and «culture» have in our time. As unattractive, commonplace, disheartening, or heretical some of Larkin's observations might appear to any who firmly believe in the importance of human spirit, fine thought or artistic sensibility, it might nevertheless prove foolish or

even disastrous to ignore the warning-signals that Larkin has been sending from the Midlands.

'Tradition' and 'culture' find new reverberations in Larkin's poetry, especially in poems of *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) collection. Swarbrick (1986: 5) explains that Larkin depicts «the England of the 1950s and 1960s with its post-war urban renewal, the expansion of suburban housing, its industrial ugliness and crowded city-centers all experienced alongside the tranquil backwaters of rural solitude». Spooner (1992: 135), quoting Lodge, confirms that poems in *The Whitsun Weddings* collection «are almost documentary in style, often untransformed by metaphor». Larkin uses 'tradition' and 'culture' as curious means to address common people; he claims: « [I]f poetry is a good thing, then let as many people as possible have as much of it as possible» (Larkin, 1983: 91). However, putting the notorious revelations in Larkin's letters apart, this is not quite borne out by some of the figurations in Larkin's poems either. This is evidenced by the ambivalent attitude toward those common people and their lower-class lifestyle. One is tempted to consider the idea of celebrating Englishness and commonness in poetry as more of a posture in Larkin than a genuine gesture. This may be partly true. However, we contend, Larkin's characteristic irony cuts deeper and the desire for distinction, which in Bourdieu's account is the inner dynamic of sociality, is also treated ironically.

As Bristow (1994: 161) notes, Larkin's

rapid change of status has forced intellectuals in England to reflect carefully on how his writing unearths some of the most troubling class, sexual, and racial divisions in our postwar culture, and how Englit played a perhaps unwitting –but nonetheless cardinal– role in keeping those divisions in place.

Some of the poems in *The Whitsun Weddings* deal with the hierarchical social space in Britain and portray common characters from the middle or lower class with rather specified habitus and culture. In «Mr. Bleaney», «Dockery and Son», «For Sidney Bechet» and «*The Whitsun Weddings*» Larkin particularly displays a contradictory attitude toward high culture and lower classes. By describing these characters through their overall amount of capital, the speakers of the poems exhibit a kind of sympathy and understanding towards these lower-class characters, while,

ironically, they attempt to keep their distance –stressing distinction– by being critical or posing to be different.

To demonstrate how Larkin signifies distinction ironically in these poems, this article draws on Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus and distinction to examine these characters' positions in their social space and the speakers' contradictory attitudes toward them. Bourdieu (1984: 162) demonstrates that social space is constituted by a web of *fields* that are separate social spaces with their own «laws of functioning independent of those of politics and the economy». In other words, field is a structured social space of force where «various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field» (Thomson, 2008: 74). Bourdieu assumes that social agents, in different fields, struggle to accumulate four important forms of *capital*: cultural, economic, social, and symbolic. The «volume of capital, composition of capital, and change in these two properties over time» (Bourdieu, 1984: 114) engender social spaces of virtually homogeneous habitus and practices hierarchized from a class highly rich in terms of economic and cultural capital to the most deprived one. More importantly, social agents function through their *habitus* that are «systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures» (Bourdieu, 1977: 72). Reading more on Bourdieu (1984: 466), we find that, in addition to habitus, *taste* is also a powerful societal factor which as «an acquired disposition to 'differentiate' and 'appreciate'», classifies agents in the society. Bourdieu (1984: 56) remarks that aesthetic taste is the product of social class conditions and hence it can unite and distinguish all those living in the same social class «since taste is the basis of all that one has –people and things– and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others». «Objectively and subjectively aesthetic stances adopted in matters like cosmetics, clothing or home decoration», Bourdieu (1984: 57) holds, «are opportunities to experience or assert one's position in social space, as a rank to be upheld or a distance to be kept», which signify *distinction*.

In the light of Bourdieu's views mentioned above, this article examines each poem to detect how Larkin attaches common characters to their social space through describing the kinds of capital they possess or lack, and how the speakers attempt to mark out their distinction. Also probed is Larkin's ambivalence about common people and lower classes: while he

claims to celebrate ordinary people and their culture in contrast to modernist elitists, sometimes we see he tries to keep a distance from common culture and favors high culture. The point is that he also ironizes this high culture. To this end, four poems («Mr. Bleaney», «Dockery and Son», «For Sidney Bechet» and «*The Whitsun Weddings*») are selected which revolve on rituals qua marriage, family, and culture qua music.

## 2. SOCIAL CLASS AND DISTINCTION

Bourdieu (1990: 132) remarks that «the social space [...] presents itself in the form of agents provided with different properties that are systematically linked to each other» and oppose each other too. Moreover, «these properties, when they are perceived by agents endowed with the pertinent categories of perception... function, in the very reality of social life, as signs: the differences function as distinctive signs, and as signs of distinction, either positive or negative» (Bourdieu, 1990: 133). Agents occupy different positions in these hierarchical cultural fields and struggle to accrue power through accumulating certain types of capital and properties authenticated by those in a position of power (Webb, Schirato and Danaher, 2002: 23), so that they can promote their positions in different fields.

A class-conscious poet from middle-class, Larkin picks up characters from middle and lower classes of society and describes them in terms of their overall amount of capital to fashion a distinction for himself as opposed to modernist elitists. Moreover, to augment this distinction, Larkin presents an accessible language and familiar social spaces in his poems to attract common readers. «Mr. Bleaney» written in 1955, right after World War II, for instance, starts in the simple language of the landlady telling us that the room belonged to Mr. Bleaney, the former tenant who worked in the Bodies. Mr. Bleaney never appears in the poem directly and is narrated through the landlady and the speaker of the poem. He is not an agent or speaker in the poem implying that he is not socially a person of importance. Larkin points at his powerlessness further through the passive structure of this sentence: «till They moved him» (line 3). Mr. Bleaney did not have any agency to decide about his job and was «moved».

The speaker's description of the miserable situation of the room strengthens the idea of Mr. Bleaney's poverty. That is, his low capital, here

mostly economic and cultural, marks him out socially. As Bourdieu (1984: 281) suggests:

The objects endowed with the greatest distinctive power are those which most clearly attest the quality of the appropriation, and therefore the quality of their owner, because their possession requires time and capacities which, requiring a long investment of time, like pictorial or musical culture, cannot be acquired in haste or by proxy, and which therefore appear as the surest indications of the quality of the person.

This explains that purchasing or owning priceless works of art is the most irreproachable technique for accumulating symbolic capital, «that is, the internalization of distinctive signs and symbols of power in the form of natural ‘distinction’, personal ‘authority’ or ‘culture’» (Bourdieu, 1984: 282). Importantly, the picture in the room is a poor one which designates Mr. Bleaney’s paucity of ‘pictorial or musical culture’ (lines 3-9):

Flowered curtains, thin and frayed,  
Fall to within five inches of the sill,  
Whose window shows a strip of building land,  
Tussocky, littered. ‘Mr Bleaney took  
My bit of garden properly in hand.’  
Bed, upright chair, sixty-watt bulb, no hook  
Behind the door, no room for books or bags

«Home for Larkin», Booth (2018: 46) writes, «was ambiguous» and «His experience taught him the fragility of home». Here, Larkin creates a kind of marginal identity for Mr. Bleaney, since human beings, as «biologically individuated bodies, they are –like things– situated in a locus [...] where they occupy a place» (Bourdieu, 1996: 11). Mr. Bleaney is generally imaged in terms of his domestic interior and furniture which are ‘indications of the quality of the person’: «Flowered curtains», «Bed», «upright chair», «sixty-watt bulb», «no hook Behind the door» constitute a kind of objective correlative to define Mr. Bleaney’s sad life in a bleak place.

At issue here is not just that, in a broad perspective, Larkin is fashioning a sense of identity for himself as the poet of the demotic and the common people but also an exposure of the very uncanny workings of

distinction. It is as if the Bourdieusian conception of distinction is somehow dramatized in Larkin's poetry. As a corollary to this, the depiction of a vulgar character who is bereft of symbolic capital and distinction should be considered in the light of the fact that, as Bourdieu (1984: 282) also remarks, artists and intellectuals have their own risky strategies of distinction like collecting the least significant objects as art. Also, when the poem was published, as a famous poet, Larkin was rich in cultural capital but low in economic capital as a librarian in University of Hull.

Larkin marks Mr. Bleaney out socially by describing his physical space (home) and types of capital he lacks or owns small amount of. As a socially marginal agent, Mr. Bleaney is distinctly different from «the dominant class» who, as Bourdieu (1984: 258) observes, «distinguish themselves precisely through that which makes them members of the class as a whole, namely the type of capital which is the source of their privilege and the different manners of asserting their distinction which are linked to it». In fact, the structure of the autonomous space occupied by the dominant class is constructed by «the distribution of economic and cultural capital among its members», which configures different lifestyles and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984: 260). The crucial point here is that «the distribution of these two types of capital among the fractions is symmetrically and inversely structured», that is, those richest in economic capital stand in opposition to those richest in cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984: 260-261). Mr. Bleaney is poor in economic and cultural capital. He possesses no objectified cultural capital; there is «no room for books» in his small room.

As an outside observer, the speaker fashions a sense of identity for himself negatively by keeping a distance through describing the deplorable situation of Mr. Bleaney, one ironically punctured by his taking of Mr. Bleaney's lodging (lines 10-14):

'I'll take it.' So it happens that I lie  
 Where Mr. Bleaney lay, and stub my fags  
 On the same saucer-souvenir, and try  
 Stuffing my ears with cotton-wool, to drown  
 The jabbering set he egged her on to buy.



The implication of the speaker's distinction is undermined as he lies in the same bed where Mr. Bleaney used to lie and uses «the same saucer-souvenir» instead of an ashtray for his cigarette which signals want of cultural *savoir faire* because neither of them understands the cultural value of a souvenir. However, the speaker attempts to distinguish himself from Mr. Bleaney by avoiding listening to radio which was Mr. Bleaney's entertainment. Mr. Bleaney is a man with working class habitus and taste (as «an acquired disposition to 'differentiate' and 'appreciate'», Bourdieu, 1984, 466). He prefers «bottled sauce to fresh gravy», likes gardening while he owns no garden and gambles on the results of football matches hoping to make some money. His social connections are limited to his relatives in Frinton and his sister in Stoke, hence his slender social capital reduces his «honourability and respectability that is often essential in winning and keeping the confidence of high society» (Bourdieu, 1984: 122). It seems that the speaker enjoys no large social capital either since he has occupied Mr. Bleaney's room and position, and he might be even lonelier than Mr. Bleaney as he makes no reference to his own family or connections.

The lonely Bleaney is like the clouds «tousled» with «frigid wind», grinning and shivering with the thought of his fragile and bleak home (lines 21-28):

But if he stood and watched the frigid wind  
Tousling the clouds, lay on the fusty bed  
Telling himself that this was home, and grinned,  
And shivered, without shaking off the dread.  
That how we live measures our own nature,  
And at his age having no more to show  
Than one hired box should make him pretty sure  
He warranted no better, I don't know.

The speaker intimates that the habitus and lifestyle of a person carve out his identity as a social agent; as Bourdieu (1989: 18) notes: «groups, such as social classes, are to be made. They are not given in 'social reality'». Mr. Bleaney's stagnant habitus is the product of the social space he inhabits; low economic and cultural capital is concomitant with low lifestyle

and taste: «He warranted no better». It is true that, based on Bourdieu's views, an agent's habitus and taste signal his social class, nonetheless Bourdieu postulates the possibility of social mobility through accumulating or changing the combination and volume of different forms of capital. Pace Bourdieu, Larkin imagines no possibility for change in Mr. Bleaney's condition: «he deserved no better life». Bourdieu (2000: 134) asserts that social agents are in quest of distinction and social spaces signify their distinct position:

Social agents, and also things in so far as they are appropriated by them and therefore constituted as properties, are situated in a place in social space, a distinct and distinctive place which can be characterized by the position it occupies relative to other places (above, below, between, etc.) and the distance (sometimes called 'respectful'...) that separates it from them...

Distinction is identified by differences between the positions the agents occupy and the distance between these positions. Limning a low position and personality for Mr. Bleaney by picturing him in a fusty bed and frigid room, the speaker, despite the obvious similarity between himself and Mr. Bleaney, attempts to mark himself out as different. «So it happens that I lie / Where Mr Bleaney lay, and stub my fags / On the same saucer-souvenir, and try» (lines 10-12). Rácz (1995: 109) concludes that:

«Mr Bleaney, » therefore, is a monologue in which the speaker, struggling with his unspoken thoughts, faces the drama of his own life. Through this form a sad and solitary character is revealed. Although the other man indicated in the title may be a kindred spirit, an «objective correlative» for the speaker so to speak, the gap between the two men is also obvious and inevitable.

Moreover, the speaker's take on Mr. Bleaney's slender chance of improvement and upward social mobility is complicated by the final sentence «I don't know» which signifies ambivalence about the speaker's own status and the contemplative, brooding gesture he assumes. Complicating the issue at another level is the 'distinct' aesthetic quality of the poem. Larkin imparts a sense of distinction by keeping a distance from modernists through a simple language, close to everyday language, and regular rhyme pattern with no complex figures.

From the domestic space of Mr. Bleaney's room we move to the academic space in «Dockery and Son» (1963) where we expect to learn about the hierarchical positions in the academic field and the education capital in that field, but the speaker relocates us in the cultural field of family. Family and the education system play a crucial role in forming habitus according to Bourdieu:

Rather a person acquires a habitus, which strongly influences all subsequent actions and beliefs. The habitus is made up of a number of ways of operating, and inclinations, values and rationales that are acquired from various formative contexts, such as the family, the education system, or class contexts (Webb, Schirato and Danaher, 2002: 58).

Dockery and the speaker of the poem possess academic capital that «is in fact the guaranteed product of the combined effects of cultural transmission by the family and cultural transmission by the school» (Bourdieu, 1984: 23). Hence, the two systems of family and education figure in the poem as affecting these two characters' life trajectories. It is true that «educational qualifications function as a condition of entry to the universe of legitimate culture» (Bourdieu, 1984: 28) but the role of family cannot be ignored, and depending on the class of origin and dispositions, school, through a mechanism of «value-inculcating and value-imposing», forms «a general, transposable disposition towards legitimate culture» (Bourdieu, 1984: 23). Dockery and the speaker studied in the same education system but the fact that they made different decisions, one marries and the other remains a bachelor, signifies the importance of another factor; their class of origin and family. Dockery studied in public school which indicates he is from upper class and in pursuit of distinction and symbolic capital he continues his studies at college, marries and his son is also studying in the same college. Larkin implicitly suggests family upbringing and social class of agents devise specific set of dispositions and habitus: Dockery's son inherits social and cultural capital from his father and follows into the father's footsteps in the same college.

«Manner», for Bourdieu (1984: 66), «is a symbolic manifestation whose meaning, and value depend as much on the perceivers as on the producer». For example, the manner of using a symbolic object is considered as a marker of class and ideal strategy of distinction and keeping distance. The symbolic object in the academic field is education capital and having a son

who also possesses this capital is an important strategy to play the game for Dockery; the speaker disagrees (lines 30-33):

Dockery, now:

Only nineteen, he must have taken stock

Of what he wanted, and been capable

Of ... No, that's not the difference.

Comparing his own state of bachelorhood with the Dockery's present situation, the speaker denies that such differences really matter; or, rather, he implies that his being a bachelor is even more natural than Dockery's marriage and fatherhood: «To have no son, no wife,/ No house or land still seemed quite natural» (lines 25-26). In other words, the speaker seeks distinction in another way: by remaining a bachelor. Swarbrick's (1986: 62) comment is shrewd:

Clearly, the visit to his old college is, for the poet, a disappointment. He is uncomfortable in his sober suit, abstractedly nodding dutiful agreement with the Dean. The phrase 'Death-suited' suggests not only his discomposure, but also a cheerless sombreness, as if he is attending the funeral of his own past (he can barely recall having to account for a night's youthful high-spirits, 'unbreakfasted, and still half-tight'). His past is remote, irrecoverable, locked up like his old room. The news, then, that a man who was his contemporary now has a son at the college is a painful reminder of how isolated the speaker is not only from his own past, but from other lives.

Comparing his life, past and present, with Dockery's, the speaker begins to question Dockery's view of life or actually dispositions (lines 32-35):

How

Convinced he was he should be added to!

Why did he think adding meant increase?

To me it was dilution.

At issue here, then, is habitus. A keyword in Bourdieusian discourse, habitus is defined as (Bourdieu, 1977: 72):

The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition) produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively «regulated» and «regular»...

Habitus functions like a structuring structure which regulates agents' cultural practices. When the speaker asks, «Why did he think adding meant increase?» (line 34) (that is, why did he think that marrying and having children constitute value?), he is, in fact, questioning the operation of habitus in Dockery's life. What is left unsaid is that the speaker's own decision to remain a bachelor, stemming from a different habitus from Dockery's, is equally to be questioned.

The speaker, in the rest of the poem, is searching for the origin of the «innate assumptions» which regulate distinct practices and life choices (lines 35-44):

Where do these  
 Innate assumptions come from? Not from what  
 We think truest, or most want to do:  
 Those warp tight-shut, like doors. They're more a style  
 Our lives bring with them: habit for a while,  
 Suddenly they harden into all we've got  
     And how we got it; looked back on, they rear  
 Like sand-clouds, thick and close, embodying  
 For Dockery a son, for me nothing,  
 Nothing with all a son's harsh patronage.

Larkin very acutely suggests «symbolic violence» in these lines; that is «the imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning (i.e. culture) upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate. This legitimacy obscures the power relations which permit that imposition to be successful» (Jenkins, 1992: 66). The mechanism of legitimizing and imposing culture functions through *misrecognition* whereby the agents

misrecognize the power relations as natural and legitimate and forget that «Culture is arbitrary in two senses, in its imposition and in its content» (Jenkins, 1992: 66). The speaker in the poem connotes that our 'innate assumptions' are arbitrary and do not come from what «We think truest, or most want to do» (line 37). Note that the modifier 'innate' is used ironically in that what is regarded to be innate is externally imposed. These assumptions start like style imposed through three processes: *diffuse education* occurring through «the course of interaction with competent members of the social formation in question», *family education*, and finally *institutionalized education* like school (Jenkins, 1992: 66). The speaker suggests these three factors activate specified habitus in Dockery's and his son's life leading to choices and practices different from the speaker's. All the speaker's pretension to distinction is again destroyed since he claims these habits snowball «Like sand-clouds, thick and close, embodying / For Dockery a son, for me nothing» (lines 42-43). According to Bourdieu's (1984: 101) formula « [(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice», the speaker is, like Dockery, practicing an internalized objective style and culture (remaining a bachelor), which ironically leads to nothingness. Notwithstanding, the cynical attitude, best manifest in the concluding lines 46-48 of the poem (Whether or not we use it, it goes, / And leaves what something hidden from us chose, / And age, and then the only end of age), accrues some kind of distinction to the speaker.

Another poem dealing with the issue of social class and distinction is «For Sidney Bechet» which involves the American jazz saxophonist, clarinetist, and composer, Sidney Bechet. Jazz reached England through American records and performers who visited England after World War I. Sinfield (1989: 159) remarks that as a social and cultural signifier, jazz «seemed to sidestep the class system»; it signified people's taste and was a rejection of the upper-class norms. Movement writers were fascinated by the «amoral, cross-cultural excitement of jazz» (Sinfield, 1989: 165). Larkin became a jazz critic and wrote articles for *The Daily Telegraph* from 1961 to 1971. His predilection for jazz seemed to be an iconoclastic gesture towards embracing subculture against the «highbrow culture» (Swarbrick, 1995: 70). Jazz, for Larkin, turned into «an epitome of the accessible, unself-conscious art that the modern world seemed to have turned away from» (Motion, qtd. in Swarbrick, 1995: 70). Moreover, his interest in jazz marks a connection with modernism. As Alderman (1994: 283) notes, jazz

was not only of central importance to many of the major modernists in all media forms (Picasso, Eliot, Stravinsky, Eisenstein), but was also often portrayed and thematized as the archetypal 'modern' music, combining as it seemed to do the primitive and the sophisticated, innovation and tradition, universal form and individual solo.

Alderman (1994: 283) also points out, in this context, the allusion to a modernist landmark:

It is surely no accident, as Robert Crawford points out, that in his poem 'For Sidney Bechet' Larkin describes the epiphanic effects of the great jazz player's soprano saxophone through an allusion to the end of Ulysses: 'On me your voice falls as they say love should / Like an enormous yes'.

Exemplifying the poet's complicated relation with modernism (fascinated by its artistic deftness and critical of its elitism), the poem rejoices over the power of great art which transcends boundaries. The iconic jazz musician is praised for the uncanny quality of his music which can affect audiences with different backgrounds, with different amounts of social and cultural capital. Sidney Bechet's own family was a middle-class Creole one from New Orleans and his music stirred the city: «That note you hold, narrowing and rising, shakes/ Like New Orleans reflected on the water» (lines 1-2). This is a music that «in *all ears* appropriate falsehood wakes», (emphasis added). Burnett (2012: 832), quoting Larkin, states that the music of the great New Orleans players was «a particularly buoyant kind of jazz that seems to grow from a spontaneous enjoyment of living». Larkin's admiration of the music produced by a middle-class Creole comes very shocking after reading his racist remarks in a letter for his mother written on 30 July 1967: «London is 'full of foreigners –chinks, wops, wogs, frogs, huns, the lot– and yanks, of course. Awful, awful'. Sometimes the contradictions in Larkin's attitudes are simply irreconcilable» (Booth, 2018: 39).

The music conjures up «for some a legendary Quarter / Of balconies, flower-baskets and quadrilles, / Everyone making love and going shares» (lines 4-6), the licentious life style of the upper-class quarters of the city, whereas for some it is reminiscent of «Sporting-house girls», working in brothels «like circus tigers», very low in terms of economic and social capital. More intriguingly, «scholars manqués nod around unnoticed / Wrapped up in personnels like old plaids» (lines 11-12). Burnett (2012: 833), quoting Leggett, holds that the word 'scholars' refers to 'the sporting-

house pianists, who were called «professors, perhaps because many of them gave piano lessons'». As the definition of *manqué* indicates, these are would-be artists who are frustrated in the fulfillment of their aspirations or talents. In other words, they have failed in accumulating the amount of capital (cultural and social and ultimately symbolic) required for the title «scholar», most probably due to a low socio-economic background. The term «scholar» is mostly associated with academia and its rigid hierarchy of distinctions (as illustrated by Bourdieu in *Homo Academicus*); as such, is it that we have an ironic jab at the institutionalization of art? The music described in the poem is one which apparently transcends boundaries and distinctions, affecting the narrator «as they say love should, / Like an enormous yes» (lines 13-14). However, things are more complex than they appear here. Note, for instance, the allusion to *Ulysses*, an iconic work of high modernism, in this context. In a poem paying homage to an iconic jazzman, the allusion to a work of high culture<sup>1</sup> could be taken to bespeak of a predilection for certain works of art.

In the poem, the responses to jazz are presented in terms of taste which according to Bourdieu (1998: 7-8) is a marker of social class rather than something inborn or disinterested:

To each class of positions there corresponds a class of habitus (or tastes) produced by the social conditioning associated with the corresponding condition and through the mediation of the habitus and its generative capability, a systematic set of goods and properties, which are united by an affinity of style.

Implied in the poem, however, is the idea that it is only the narrator who can truly appreciate this music, who has a genuine taste for this music. Although at the beginning of the poem we are told that this music «in all ears appropriate falsehood wakes» (line 3) –highlighting the illusion-inducing nature of art– we get the impression that the deep affective response of the speaker to it is different in kind from those of the listeners for whom it ‘licenses’ sexual fantasy or provides a background to «pretend their fads» or from the dry response of the «scholars *manqué*» who dispassionately «nod unnoticed». The Romantic belief in inspiration seems to underpin the depiction of art here. Nevertheless, reading the

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<sup>1</sup> Also note in this regard the highly satirical biblical allusion «priced / Far above rubies».



poem against the grain, the responses represented here are shown to be tied up with the habitus of those listening to Bechet's jazz. Thus, for instance, the reference to Storyvilles brothels, where many jazz musicians played in early twentieth century, betokens a low-class habitus, hence the pretension to appreciate the then-fashionable music to accumulate some cultural capital. Conversely, implied is that the speaker has a different habitus, one characterized by a middle-class or lower-middle-class background plus certain connections with the world of art, enabling him to 'better' appreciate art.

Bourdieu (1998: 9) postulates that «difference becomes a sign and a sign of distinction (or vulgarity) only if a principle of vision and division is applied to it which, being the product of the incorporation of the structure of objective differences..., is present among all the agents». The speaker attempts to show to be endowed with a certain taste and perception which make him distinct from others. Finally, all this must be considered in the light of the tendency in Larkin, shared with the Movement figures, to debunk pretensions at high culture. The poem intimates that this is only the speaker who resonates with Bechet's music 'naturally' or 'sincerely.' Only the speaker truly understands the inspirational quality of this art (cf. the pretensions at high culture of the working-class /lower-middle-class people in «The Whitsun Weddings»).

However, in this regard, the allusions to the Bible and *Ulysses* further complicate the tonal registers of the poem. Is it that the speaker has his own pretensions at high culture too? Is he ironized too?<sup>2</sup> The answer is positive if we remember, as Welz and Welz (1972: 72) observe, that Larkin employs the technique of including «built-in correctives» to «rule out over-commitment» because «in writing about life as one sees it one has to be careful not to become over-committed to one's own statements». The case becomes even more complicated if we consider the pose of simplicity /

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<sup>2</sup> Alderman's (1994: 280) shrewd comment on the ambiguous status of the speaker / observer in «Home is so Sad» applies to this poem too: «This clarity, this ability to map the co-ordinates of class and its attendant signifiers of cultural capital, is achieved by being a privileged observer, whose superior position within the system should not, however, be mistaken for a vantage point outside the system. Although Larkin consistently sets up the speaker as ruminating outsider, observing an event, object, or emotion, this position is then reinscribed within the motivating experience, refusing any such position of Cartesian dualist security and accepting the irony of bourgeois aesthetic distance».

sincerity –the mocking of high-mindedness in art and life– in the context of the overall career of Larkin and the revelations of his racism, misogyny and misanthropy after the publication of his letters in 1992 (more on this later).

More specifically, we have to make mention of the symbolic status of an artist like Sidney Bechet. The field of art, like all fields making up human societies, is one characterized by fierce competition. Agents involved strive to acquire as much knowledge and skill as possible to accumulate more cultural capital –transformable to other forms of capital (economic and social and ultimately symbolic)– whereby to distinguish themselves. Sidney Bechet is an example of legendary musicians possessing a high amount of symbolic capital<sup>3</sup>.

Distinction and class are central issues in «The Whitsun Weddings» too. The brides in «The Whitsun Weddings» are lower class. While travelling from Hull to London, the speaker depicts marriages held on a Whitsun Day in underprivileged areas. Rácz (1995: 106), quoting Janice Rossen's analysis, remarks that the train travel helps a «balance between participation and separation» since the speaker on the train «can be temporarily linked with others, without having to be part of the crowd himself». The speaker hears the noise of weddings and observes carefully the newly-weds at each station: «grinning and pomaded, girls / In parodies of fashion, heels and veils» (lines 28-29). The phrase «parodies of fashion» tells a lot about the status of these people who possess a low volume of both economic and cultural capital. It also highlights the distinction between the speaker of the poem and those he observes and comments on. He obviously has a knowledge of what is 'genuine' and what is 'fake' in matters of fashion. The non-commending depiction continues (lines 36-41):

The fathers with broad belts under their suits  
And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;  
An uncle shouting smut; and then the perms,  
The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes,

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<sup>3</sup> Another notable example of such artists of symbolic status in Larkin's poetry is King Oliver, an American jazz cornet player and bandleader, in «Reference Back».

The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres that  
Marked off the girls unreally from the rest.

The plural words like 'fathers', 'mothers', 'girls', and plural forms of accessories like 'gloves' signify the «mass tastes and values» (Swarbrick, 1995: 106). The key word here is «Marked off». The gaudy wedding paraphernalia are supposed to mark off the girls which they do «unreally»; however, the girls are 'really' already marked off in terms of their social class. Social class is marked by the agents' manners and habitus in Bourdieusian discourse: «social class [...] must be brought into relation not with the individual or with the 'class' as a *population*, [...] but with the class habitus, the system of dispositions (partially) common to all products of the same structures» (Bourdieu, 1977: 85). Bourdieu (1984: 114) elucidates that the «volume of capital, composition of capital, and change in these two properties over time» engender social spaces of virtually homogeneous habitus and practices hierarchized from a class highly rich in economic and cultural capital to the most deprived one. To the cynical speaker of the poem who nonchalantly observes the scenes, the feeble attempt to imitate the latest fashion in dress and manners (those of the higher classes) appears pathetic, even farcical, which suggests the speaker's difference and isolation from these people.

To the cynical observer, at this stage in the poem, the whole experience is rather nonsignificant and even boring, though he had expected the wedding scenes to be a change from the monotony of the snapshots of the landscape of the post-industrial England seen through the train window. There is, however, a subtle shift here to the perspective of one trying to see through the eyes of these 'common' people, to see how the wedding signifies to them (lines 48-55):

And, as we moved, each face seemed to define  
Just what it saw departing: children frowned  
At something dull; fathers had never known  
    Success so huge and wholly farcical;  
The women shared  
The secret like a happy funeral;

While girls, gripping their handbags tighter, stared  
 At a religious wounding<sup>4</sup>.

The skeptical tone is operant still. But when the newly-wed get aboard the train and the train departs there is yet another shift in tone. Swarbrick (1986: 51) illustrates this nicely:

He is now aware of how all these newly-wed couples are sharing this journey and is struck by the thought that for a brief moment each of these couples is united in a common experience. It is an experience which now partly includes the speaker; no longer a spectator, he has become closer to a participant, and this is shown in his use of the first person plural, 'We hurried towards London', and in his anticipating what the dozen couples will say of this journey in the future. The landscape they watch is one he watches too, and although 'none / Thought of the others they would never meet / Or how their lives would all contain this hour', the poet himself escapes this self-absorption and becomes their representative in recognising and memorialising this moment for them.

The poem is thus complex in tone, starting from haughty nonchalance and suspicion to one of sympathy and involvement. The issue of tone in literature is related to attitude (mostly, that of the author surrogate towards the subject matter / characters / himself / the reader). In this regard, the poem's subtle shifts in tone are highly significant. Taste which to Bourdieu is a social marker rather than something innate is also all about having the 'right' tone (in speech, conduct, dress and manners). Articulation of taste is of course a matter of habitus, the deep structure of the social agent's behavior. As such, Larkin's poetry uncannily registers the operations of habitus and social class, the distinctions which mark people socially. Arguably, this poetry also intimates a desire to ignore or transcend these distinctions in moments of sympathy and commonality.

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<sup>4</sup> Peschmann (1975: 54) links this tradition of marriage to another one, that of religion and church: «Such 'celebration' has a religious significance –in the marriage service itself, in the Pentecostal season, in the 'religious wounding' at which the girls stare, and in the mothers sharing their secret 'like a happy funeral'– the funeral [...] of their own productivity –which is yet 'happy' as the younger generation takes on that responsibility; but even more celebratory of the new, fructifying power that will descend on the young married couples like an arrow shower».

In post-war England social class division manifested itself more pronouncedly in dressing styles, speaking skills/manners (linguistic capital in Bourdieu's terminology), education level and recreations (Quinault, 2001: 4-5). Investigating the living conditions of the working class after World War II, Brooke (2001: 773) similarly observes that in «Britain during the 1950s, working class living standards were undeniably improved by full employment and comprehensive welfare provision» which led to a change in their way of thinking and ethos. Due to these standard changes, the working class to a great extent lost their communal identity because they were thrust into middle-class values and lifestyle while they were still lower class in terms of «occupation, education, speech, and cultural norms, while [...] middle class in terms of income and material comforts» (Brooke, 2001: 773). Larkin delineates miserable characters in poems in which the «nicked, commercial world, far from being ignored, is repeatedly attacked; its vulgarity, its cold-heartedness, its cheap ideals, its chaotic mobility, its senselessly accelerated changes, its self-centered, confused, lonely people exposed» (Kuby, 1970: 9).

### 3. CONCLUSION

Movement poets assumed the role of harbingers of change in the cultural world of post-World War II British society. Larkin's *The Whitsun Wedding* registers many of the socio-cultural changes of the era. The Movement defined itself mostly apropos modernism and its supposed elitism. As such, Pierre Bourdieu's theorization of culture as hierarchical and the concomitant concepts of taste, capital, field and habitus provide an apt perspective through which to explore the figurations of social class, lifestyle, everyday experiences and rituals in the 1960s England in arguably one of the most representative works of this literary movement – *The Whitsun Weddings*. A hallmark of the poems in this collection is the uncanny way in which they locate characters in particular social spaces in terms of their practices and habitus. Welz and Welz (1972: 69) hold that: « [d]efining one's own existence is an act of self-defence, implying a rejection of all those facts of social life that tend to impede individual happiness and cause suffering». Poetic characters in Larkin's poems hardly question those social facts like class system, distribution of capital and habitus (imposed or acquired) which impede their happiness. To

show the fundamental problems of the new social system after WWII, Larkin «never explicitly blames common habits or given institutions, but concentrates on the human suffering caused by them» (Welz and Welz, 1972: 69).

Discussing the relevance of Bourdieu's work to contemporary art, Rivkin and Michal (2004: 1807) argue that the «picture of idealist aestheticism» Bourdieu presents of the world of art «connects to high modernism» and has «much less relevance now that the clear markers between high and low have dissolved». The vexed relation with modernism in Larkin's literary career is all about hierarchy as culture is, in Bourdieu's vision, all about distinguishing between positions in the social hierarchy. Among other things, Larkin's poetry dramatizes how distinctions mark people socially. It also depicts moments of sympathy and commonality which seem to signify a desire (or a gesture?) to debunk distinctions. Larkin promoted himself, and came to be recognized by many, as the poet of the common man, as «Laureate of the Common Man, » in Peschmann's 1975 essay of the same title (1975: 58). «For three decades, » observes Bristow (1994: 158), «Larkin's mockery of anything that smacked of high-mindedness in art proved to be his most endearing feature –until, that is, his letters appeared»<sup>5</sup>. Ironically, revelations of his many prejudices –his firm belief in and stake in distinctions, in a sense– after the publication of his letters seem to signify that the mockery of distinctions, or pretensions at distinctions, was a strategy of accumulating social and symbolic capital for Larkin. However, more is at issue regarding distinction in Larkin. Larkin's characteristic irony cuts deeper and, among other things, provides insights into the intermeshed workings of class, habitus and distinction constituting the inner dynamic of human societies.

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<sup>5</sup> Bristow (1994) discusses the issue in reference to Larkin's use of obscenity in some of his poems.

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