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# Confronting the Nihilistic Abyss: Active and Passive Nihilists in Philip Larkin's Poetry

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**ABSTRACT**

This research serves to identify and distinguish the active and passive nihilists in Philip Larkin's poetry based on their varied responses to the nihilistic phenomenon. Although considerable critique exists in relation to the nihilistic attributes in Larkin's poetry, the differentiation of nihilists into two types - active and passive - has not been explored in depth in the current literary research on Larkin. The aim of this study, therefore, is to evaluate the markedly different ways in which Larkin's poetic personae confront the absence of meaning. As a theoretical premise, this research incorporates the Nietzschean framework of nihilism and draws on the perspectives offered by Keiji Nishitani, Ashley Woodward, and Krzysztof Michalski. A confrontation with the nihilistic abyss elicits different reactions from the active and passive nihilists evident in Larkin's verse. Passive nihilists resist any form of change that would disrupt the status quo, whereas active nihilists bravely assume the challenge of deconstructing all existing norms. Furthermore, passive nihilists in Larkin's poetry are characterized by a sense of resignation and voluntary escapism in relation to meaningless oblivion. For the active nihilists, however, all forms of escape are inherently disappointing since they recognize the ephemeral nature of transient fulfillment. By discarding all illusions and subjecting the socially sanctioned values to skepticism, the active nihilists in Larkin's verse are able to create space for self-transformation, thereby carving out a meaningful alternative to previously held values.



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## 1. Introduction

In his introduction to the book entitled, *New Casebooks: Philip Larkin*, Stephen Regan (1997) maintains that Larkin's poetry articulates "the changed ideals and experiences of post-war society" (p. 1). The post-World War II society in England was governed by a nihilistic worldview which emerged as a consequence of the: disruption of humanitarian values and a sense of failed idealism experienced during the war. Since Larkin's poetry highlights the predicament of the post-World War II era, a pessimistic refrain is evident in most of his poems. In effect, numerous critics have placed emphasis on the cynical and nihilistic attributes in Larkin's poetry. For instance, James Wood (1993, as cited in Regan, 1997, p. 5) identifies disappointment and frustration as the defining hallmarks of Larkin's poetic oeuvre. Likewise, David Timms (1973) contends that Larkin's work, when viewed in its entirety, highlights a "bleak" and "sometimes horrifying" perspective about life (p. 97). According to Maeve Brennan (2002), the major contributing factor to Larkin's nihilistic worldview was his discontentment with both life and illusion (p. 132). Both reality and illusion were equally unpromising prospects for Larkin. Brennan (2002) elaborates on this premise and asserts that Larkin was aware of the fact that despite providing temporary reprieve, illusions eventually lead to "disillusionment . . . cynicism and pessimism" whereas "reality for Larkin always" signified some form of "misery and suffering" (p. 132). It is primarily due to his dismal perspective about life that a

considerable part of Larkin's poetry addresses "the solving emptiness / That lies just under all we do" (*CP*, "Ambulances" 63). However, in addition to the emphasis on the cynical streaks in Larkin's poems, the positive aspects of his poetry have also been highlighted in the current literary scholarship available on Larkin. Peter R. King (1979) alludes to these affirmative aspects and observes that "a small number of" Larkin's poems "express a sense of fulfillment", whereas some of his "most ambitious and successful poems" such as "The Whitsun Weddings", "To the Sea" and "Show Saturday" "tentatively explore the possibility of positive meaning in life" (pp. 27, 30). However, despite offering a detailed exploration of both the pessimistic and affirmative attributes of Larkin's verse, the current scholarly research on Larkin neither presents a systematic analysis of the nihilistic predicament experienced by his poetic personae nor does it identify how Larkin's speakers respond to the nihilistic phenomenon.

This research, therefore, attempts to examine how the complex phenomenon of nihilism unfolds itself in Larkin's poetry. The pivotal focus of this study is to explore what the confrontation with the nihilistic abyss entails for Larkin's speakers and to determine how Larkin's poetic personae respond to the abyss of meaninglessness. It needs to be stressed that both nihilism and nihilistic abyss are broad terms, which due to common usage, are subject to multiple interpretations. Therefore, in order to avoid ambiguity, this research integrates the theoretical framework of nihilism proposed by Nietzsche in *The Will to Power*. Throughout this study, repeated emphasis will be placed on determining how attributes of active and passive nihilism are delineated in Larkin's poems.

In *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (2001), Vaneigem asserts that, "Active nihilism is pre-revolutionary" (p. 164) while "passive nihilism is counter-revolutionary" (p. 179). Whereas passive nihilists resist any form of change that would disrupt the status quo, active nihilists bravely assume the challenge of deconstructing all existing norms. For the active nihilist, all forms of escape are inherently disappointing and deemed as means of ensuring "temporary self-oblivion" (*GS*, 2001, p. 247).

### 1.1. Nietzschean Framework of Nihilism

In *The Will to Power* (1968), Nietzsche characterizes nihilism as a worldview arising from the realization that "everything lacks meaning" (p. 7). From a Nietzschean perspective of nihilism, human existence and its underlying variables such as "action, suffering" and "feeling" have "no meaning" and are therefore, deemed pointless (*WP*, 1968, p. 318). Despite the prevalent usage of the word nihilism and its association with profound skepticism, despair, and meaninglessness, Ashley Woodward (2002) identifies Nietzsche as "an ambiguous thinker" and suggests that "his theory of nihilism (like all his theories) is open to multiple interpretations and extrapolations" (p. 53). Existential nihilism asserts "human existence to be pointless and absurd" (Crosby, 1988, p. 30). An existential nihilist iterates that "there is no justification for life" and hence, "no reason to live" (Crosby, 1988, p. 30). Crosby (1988) claims that the popular usage of the term nihilism is derived from its existentialist interpretation (p. 8). The increasing emphasis on the existentialist definition of nihilism stems from the fact that it "encompasses the whole of human life" whereas the other types merely relate to "one of its aspects" (Crosby, 1988, p. 8). On account of its multifaceted relevance, "existential nihilism is the most basic and inclusive" and is therefore assigned primary significance amongst all nihilistic forms (Crosby, 1988, p. 8). Since existential nihilism specifically probes into the problems of existence, it is this particular interpretation of nihilism that is integrated and discussed throughout this research.

In his book, *The Flame of Eternity: An Interpretation of Nietzsche's Thought*, Krzysztof Michalski (2012) regards nihilism "as an event, or a chain of events, a historical process- and… an attitude, outlook, or position" (p. 3). According to Michalski (2012), nihilism denotes a situation involving some form of crisis (p. 5). While evaluating Nietzsche's phrase pertaining to the devaluation of highest values, Michalski (2012) proposes that this devaluation occurs "when the basic principles organizing our reality no longer organize or order our lives" and "when they no longer impose obligations upon us" (p. 3). Michalski (2012) reasons that the seeping of meaninglessness in the lives of individuals residing in the modern world is a direct consequence of the fact that God, religion, and metaphysical truths no longer serve as pivotal factors in an individual's life (p. 9). Michel Haar (1996) identifies nihilism as a sense of emptiness that originates from the conviction that there are no significant distinctions between truth, falsehood, "the good and the bad" (p. 11). Hence, "everything is equalized"- all definitions

collapse and everything becomes infested with "an undefined agony of meaning" (Harr, 1996, p. 11). Slocombe (2006) reaffirms Harr's premise and regards nihilism as a form of "thwarted idealism" (p. 17). He observes that when beliefs fail, "only the nihilistic void is left" (Slocombe, 2006, p. 17). Thus, both Harr and Slocombe highlight a unified interplay of abysmal emptiness and nihilism occasioned by the collapse and negation of ideals.

## 2. Literature Review

This co-existence of abysmal emptiness and nihilism is a prevalent feature of Philip Larkin's poetry. One of the reasons for Larkin's immense popularity in the post-World War II era was his ability to aptly highlight the conflicting and deteriorating set of values, ideals, and belief systems that characterized twentieth-century Britain. In his introduction to the book entitled, *New Casebooks: Philip Larkin*, Stephen Regan (1997) affirms that Larkin's poetry vividly captures "the authentic experience of a drab and disillusioned England" (p. 1). Moreover, Regan (1997) regards Larkin's "lyrical grasp of life's shortcomings" as an insightful reflection of the somber and "quietistic mood" which was characteristic "of the postwar years" (p. 1). Sadness, inconsolable disappointment and a sense of weariness are the indisputable denominators underlying the predicament afflicting the postwar male featured in Larkin's major collections. There is a repetitive insistence on the themes of failure, deprivation and isolation in his poetry and it is primarily for this reason that Eric Homberger has called Larkin "the saddest heart in the post-war supermarket" (1977, as cited in Motion, 1997, p. 32).

Peter MacDonald Smith (1989) maintains that the nihilism evident in Larkin's poetry is reinforced through a sense of alienation, detachment and disempowerment frequently experienced and voiced by his male speakers (as cited in Evans, 2017, p. 63). Another observation made by Smith (1989) is that he regards Larkin's nihilism as an aspect of his postmodernism (as cited in Evans, 2017, p. 63). He maintains that within the framework of Larkin's poetry, postmodernist attitudes manifest themselves in "the sense of one course of action cancelling out another, and neither being obviously for the best"; hence, the ensuing disappointment, "silence and nihilism" (Smith, 1989, as cited in Evans, 2017, p. 63). Smith's observation reinforces the premise that uncertainty and indecisiveness serve to fuel the nihilistic streaks in Larkin's poetry. Although a vast amount of literature exists with respect to the explicit cynicism in Larkin's poetry, there is not much significant, in-depth critical exploration of his poetry within the context of the complex nihilistic framework delineated by Nietzsche. This research therefore, attempts to examine Larkin's poetry in terms of the various elements comprising the nihilistic abyss. However, before proceeding to analyze Larkin's poetry within the context of the nihilistic dilemma, one needs to understand what the confrontation with the nihilistic abyss actually entails.

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines abyss as "a very deep wide space or hole that seems" bottomless (Hornby, 2005, p. 1). Nihilistic abyss therefore, signifies a vast, endless chasm of meaninglessness. Although the term abyss is usually assigned a negative connotation, An Yountae (2017) delineates a more promising aspect of the abyss in his book *The Decolonial Abyss: Mysticism and Cosmopolitics from the Ruins*. Contrary to the prevalent notion, Yountae (2017) proposes that the "abyss does not signify a mere lack of meaning" and views it as "a space replete with potential" (p. 2). He contends that the element of "negation" inherent within the abyss impels the self to engage in a "relentless" and "restless" struggle for "incessant self-creation and unfolding" (Yountae, 2017, p. 3). Although negating one's former worldview and accepting the abyss as a reality offers no "magical remedy", it paves way for "numerous questions and possibilities" pertaining to "a new understanding" of the self and self's relation to the world (Yountae, 2017, pp. 2-3). Based on Yountae's interpretation of the abyss, one can assert that the nihilistic abyss denotes a vast meaningless gulf that compels an individual to re-evaluate their values and the existing worldview, thereby leading to the promising possibility of self-reconstruction. In other words, Yountae's aforementioned premise serves as a ground for an in-depth examination of what the confrontation with the abyss actually entails- unimagined possibilities. However, as affirmed by Yountae (2017), "the way negation works is complex" (p. 3). Hence, there is no simple, easily identifiable antithesis to the crisis of meaning presented by the nihilistic abyss. Thus, confronting the nihilistic void leads to a perplexing question- i.e., is there a specific trajectory of transition that can facilitate one in tracing the revaluation of values occasioned by the nihilistic abyss?

Michalski (2012) contends that "the revaluation of values occurs only when our lives cast off the burden of the illusions that weigh them down" (p. 10). The keyword in the aforementioned phrase is casting off the burden of illusions. Thus, whereas the justification of nihilism entails comprehending its genesis, the sloughing off of illusions regarding existence demands that one trace its progression and subject each existing illusion in one's life to strenuous skepticism and negation. Hence, one can infer from Michalski's observation that the inception of nihilism is followed by some sort of progression. However, despite hinting at this developmental phase, Michalski does not elaborate on it in detail. Woodward (2002) alludes to the aforementioned phase of progression and goes one step further. He contends that after confronting the death of God in its entirety, one reaches a stage where "transcendent sources of value are . . . lacking" and in the absence of these values, the world seems valueless (Woodward, 2002, p. 55). He then goes on to define active and passive nihilism. Passive nihilism consists of resigning oneself to a meaningless world whereas active nihilism aims at destroying what "remains of the traditional categories of valuation" (Woodward, 2002, p. 55). Carr (1992) makes a similar claim and highlights that as the condition of nihilism becomes "more pronounced, two responses to it become evident"- active and passive (p. 42). This progression and development of nihilism into active and passive forms establishes the missing link between the genesis of nihilism and its overcoming.

Brendan O'Donoghue highlights the intermediate phase between origin of nihilism and its overcoming as well (2011, p. 190). To make Nietzsche's nihilistic phenomenon more intelligible, Donoghue (2011) identifies active and passive nihilism as two significant forms of nihilism (190). He emphasizes that the key differentiating factor between these two forms is "a difference in strength of will" (Donoghue, 2011, p. 190). Active nihilism is marked by an increased strength of will whereas the hallmark of passive nihilism is a decreased strength of will (Donoghue, 2011, p. 190). Based on the contentions made by Woodward, Michalski, Carr and Donoghue, one can assert that confronting the nihilistic abyss involves understanding its genesis and progression. Although the aforementioned researchers have placed considerable emphasis on unfolding the nihilistic crisis, certain question marks loom over their respective interpretations. For instance, Michalski's analysis makes no subtle or explicit reference to either active or passive nihilism. Similarly, in Woodward's and Donoghue's critique, the intermediate phase comprising active and passive nihilism is not afforded an in-depth evaluation.

Although Woodward (2002) establishes a correlation between active nihilism and the dissolution of values (p. 56), he does not offer a coherent explanation as to how an active nihilist transitions from a phase of non-existent values to the formation of new values. Donoghue (2011) on the other hand, merely makes a passing reference to the differentiation of nihilism into active and passive forms (pp. 175, 190). Thus, from the viewpoint of Woodward and Donoghue's critique, the phase of progression within a nihilistic framework remains somewhat ambiguous and incomplete. The only incontestable deduction one can draw from their analyses is that the developmental stage of nihilism constitutes active and passive nihilism. Once the nihilistic symptoms become pronounced, the progression of nihilism becomes evident and it transitions to a subsequent stage. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* terms progression as "the process of developing gradually from one state or stage to another" (Hornby, 2005, p. 1206). The genesis of nihilism is followed by the stage of progression in which active and passive nihilists are differentiated on the basis of their radically different responses to the nihilistic phenomenon. This point is reiterated by Reginster (2006) who argues that "the active and passive forms of nihilism constitute different *responses* to the loss of meaning" (p. 29).

In his essay, "Mind the Gap: Reconsidering Geography's Twentieth Century Technological Settlements", Francis Harvey (2015) offers a comprehensive explanation of passive and active nihilists. He asserts that passive nihilists adopt a passive approach toward nihilism and adhere to the conviction that "the void at the heart of" their "former metaphysical beliefs, along with the absence of meanings and values, can be ignored" (Harvey, 2015, p. 202). Thus, in a way, passive nihilists close "their eyes" to the nihilistic abyss and instead focus "on their pleasures" or the mundane aspects of existence (Harvey, 2015, p. 202). Therefore, passive nihilists can be regarded as paragons of conformity. Instead of addressing the implications of the nihilistic abyss, they evade the meaningless void altogether. Active nihilists on the other hand, acknowledge "the void at the heart of" their "former metaphysical beliefs" and "see it as the beginning of a strengthened… power of the spirit that creates new

interpretations and values" (Harvey, 2015, p. 202). Hence, active nihilists actively confront the challenging implications of the nihilistic abyss. After experiencing the devaluation of highest ideals, active nihilists venture out to explore the validity underlying all values. Thus, they subject their habitual patterns of thinking and everyday patterns of existence to extreme skepticism. The defining attribute of active nihilists is that they seek no form of escape from nihilism.

Passive nihilists serve as antithesis to their active counterparts. Alan Schrift (1990) classifies passive nihilism as a form of "incomplete nihilism" (pp. 55-56). Nietzsche proposes that individuals suspended in incomplete nihilism attempt "to escape nihilism without revaluating" their values (*WP,* 1968, p. 19). Furthermore, Donoghue (2011) argues that in the stage of incomplete nihilism, people seek "out methods of self-intoxication in order to avoid 'complete nihilism'" (p. 196). Self-narcotization can be likened to a state of forgetfulness- a forgetfulness of the horrible emptiness underlying existence. Indulgence in music, banal enjoyment, workaholism, and an unwavering commitment to human beings are some of the means of self-intoxication highlighted by Nietzsche (*WP*, 1968, p. 20). As opposed to passive nihilists, active nihilists undergo a critical revaluation of all values. The prevalent hallmark of active nihilists is that under no circumstances, do they resort to self-deception. Such individuals do not want to be deceived because "deception is not an alternative" (*GS*, 2001, pp. xvii-xviii). Nishitani (1990) also maintains that active nihilists "cannot suffer subtle deceptions or self-deceptions with indifference" and ceaselessly try "to break them down" (pp. 44, 82). Moreover, the negation of values exercised by active nihilists marks a significant progression. It is during this phase of negation of values, that all illusions are cast off. These illusions primarily revolve around human relationships, one's vocation, and a conformist lifestyle.

## 3. Research Methodology and Objective

With respect to Larkin, there is not much scholarly research on the streaks of active and passive nihilism in his poetry. The only observation remotely associated with this premise is made by Edward Lucie-Smith. Although Smith (1975) does not use the term active or passive nihilism, he nonetheless identifies Larkin "as a perceptive nihilist who was popular because he depicted Britain as it really was and who dealt with its limits without much complaint" (as cited in Evans, 2017, p. 40). Smith (1975) therefore, regards Larkin as a reflective nihilist who adopted an attitude of acceptance with respect to the massive degradation in Britain (as cited in Evans, 2017, p. 40). With the sole exception of this brief analysis made by Smith, the predicament of active and passive nihilists has neither been addressed nor discussed within the context of Larkin's verse. This study, therefore, attempts to explore if the plight of active and passive nihilists can be traced in Larkin's poetry. In addition to identifying the active and passive nihilists, this research seeks to examine how these two kinds of nihilists respond to the nihilistic predicament within the framework of Larkin's poetry.

Most of the poems discussed in this research span a timeline of almost three decades - with the first collection, *The North Ship* published in 1945 and the last collection entitled, *High Windows*, published in 1974. Keeping in view this vast array of Larkin's poetry, one is impelled to address the following perplexing question: is there any form of coherent link between the different poems included in this research? On close observation, a thematic pattern emerges in Larkin's poetry with respect to the active and passive nihilists. The phase of differentiation primarily explored in this research, features poems that thematically highlight the dialectic of conformity and individuality. It is noteworthy that the thematic interplay of conformity and individuality serves to highlight the extreme negation of the status quo displayed by Larkin's active nihilists during the phase of differentiation.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Passive Nihilists in Larkin's Poetry

In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl (2006) identifies the existential vacuum as a form of neurosis and regards it "as a personal and private form of nihilism" (p. 129). Neurosis entails anxiety, depression, frustration, and a sense of despair regarding one's existence. This sense of despair generates feelings of worthlessness within the neurotic individual thereby making him achingly aware of the existential vacuum underlying his life. Hence, a person encountering the nihilistic dilemma is inevitably compelled to confront the meaninglessness of his existence.

After a painful confrontation with nihilism, the nihilists in Larkin's poetry adopt two strikingly different responses to the nihilistic phenomenon. Because of the stark difference in terms of addressing the nihilistic crisis, the nihilistic subjects portrayed in Larkin's poetry cannot be regarded as a homogenous group. On the contrary, based on their active and passive manner of confronting the nihilistic abyss, the nihilists depicted in Larkin's poems can be classified as active and passive nihilists. On encountering the valuelessness of life in all its stark nakedness, the passive nihilists display an innate compulsion to resort to self-narcotization - a form of escapism and voluntary numbing. According to Michalski (2012), people resort to self-narcotization in order to find some semblance of order in their lives and to fashion the "world anew" (p. 5). In order to escape the "tortured tension" that successively increases over time, a self-narcotized individual thrusts himself "restlessly, violently" and "headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect" (*WP*, 1968, p. 3). Hence, absence of reflection and an impulsive preoccupation with pursuits or actions that bring about a dulling of pain are the two defining hallmarks of the passive nihilists.

It needs to be stressed that nihilistic vacuum is more pronouncedly experienced by an individual who feels alienated from the surrounding world. In order to minimize the anguish generated by the nihilistic void within him, the alienated individual resorts to mundane pleasures and carnal diversions. This dilemma of blindly striving after banal pleasures is aptly highlighted by Rudolf Steiner in his book *The Philosophy of Freedom: A Modern Philosophy of Life Developed by Scientific Methods*. Steiner (1916) proposes that "the ceaseless craving for satisfaction which yet is ever beyond reach" is one of the fundamental characteristics of modern existence (p. 239). However, Steiner (1916) regards transient satisfaction as being illusory or phantom-like. He argues that "satisfaction, when it occurs, endures always only for an infinitesimal time. The whole rest of our lives is unsatisfied craving i.e. discontent and suffering" (Steiner, 1916, p. 239). As asserted earlier, passive nihilists are markedly different from active nihilists. A passive nihilist embraces self-preservation instead of self-affirmation and willfully adopts a "pleasantly undemanding and unreflective way of life" (*GS*, 2001, p. xiv). Since a passive nihilist is terrified of leading a precarious existence, he renounces himself to the herd-instinct and embraces the dictum of the majority. Passive nihilism thus, serves as a genesis for the conformist breed of last men. The last man according to Nietzsche is "the contented, unadventurous, philistine product of a" culture that despises self-reflection (*GS*, 2001, p. xiv).

In Larkin's poetry, the predicament of passive nihilists is highlighted in poems that offer an in-depth exploration of the dialectic of conformity and individuality. The conformist characters portrayed in poems such as "Self's the Man", "Dockery and Son" and "Schoolmaster", epitomize the escapist attitude of passive nihilists. For example, the pitiful plight of Arnold in "Self's the Man" can be regarded as an apt portrayal of settling for an undemanding life. Between wasting "his life on work" (*CP*, 2014, p. 58) and remaining preoccupied with trivial pursuits such as paying for "the drier / And the electric fire" (*CP*, 2014, p. 59), putting "a screw" in the wall (*CP*, 2014, p. 59) and painting the hall (*CP*, 2014, p. 59), Arnold "has no time at all" (*CP*, 2014, p. 59) to reflect on his unadventurous existence. Similar to Arnold, Dockery also succumbs to the "Innate assumptions" (*CP*, 2014, "Dockery and Son" p. 66) that convince him that "he should be added to!" (*CP*, 2014, p. 66) and consequently transitions from a "capable" (*CP*, 2014, p. 66) "High-collared public-schoolboy" (*CP*, 2014, p. 66) to a contended, commonplace individual whose only redeeming grace is his son. Both Arnold and Dockery serve as prototypes of the last men. Instead of confronting the crisis of nihilism and dwelling on what they "think truest, or most want to do" (*CP*, 2014, "Dockery and Son", p. 66), Arnold and his counterpart preserve themselves by opting for a premature, uncontested abandonment to the mundane rituals of existence. Their "warp[ed] tight-shut" (*CP*, 2014, p. 66) premises about life "harden into" (*CP*, 2014, p. 66) unalterable habits. Like all last men, they settle "for too little" (*TSZ*, 2006, p. xx). Hence, their lives signify complacency, "surrender and resignation" (*TSZ*, 2006, p. 233). Thus, for Arnold and Dockery, the response to nihilism entails surrendering oneself to mundane existence without prior questioning or hesitation.

The symbiotic relationship between passive nihilism and self-numbing has been highlighted by Fred. J. Evans (1993) who argues that "passive nihilism preserves itself by self-narcotization" (p. 23). When faced with overwhelming emptiness, the passive nihilist "longs for

a condition in which one no longer suffers" (*WP*, 1968, p. 27). This gives rise to a desire for numbness which "emerges into the foreground in various disguises" (*WP*, 1968, p. 18). Nietzsche regards the impulse "to work blindly" or the desire to indulge oneself in "some kind of . . . continual work" as a means of attaining self-narcotization as well (*WP*, 1968, p. 20). He further maintains that all those "who are in love with hectic work…find it hard to bear" themselves; therefore, their diligence is a form of escape (*TSZ*, 2006, p. 32). The poem "Schoolmaster" delineates this Nietzschean premise. Similar to passive nihilists, the schoolmaster seeks anesthetizing security by clinging to work "like an opiate" (*EH*, 2007, p. 58). After sighing "with relief" (*CP*, 2014, "Schoolmaster", p. 162) and feeling "safe" (*CP*, 2014, p.162) because he has been offered "the job" (*CP*, 2014, p. 162), the schoolmaster diligently immerses himself in the hectic "life / Of exercises, marks, honour, speech days and games" (*CP*, 2014, p. 162) and without realizing, disintegrates "(Like sugar in a cup of tea)" (*CP*, 2014, p. 163). His machine-like "unreal life" (*CP*, 2014, p.162) gives him an opportunity to forget himself.

Another attribute of passive nihilists that is evident in Larkin's poetry is commodity obsession. It is noteworthy that commodity obsession enables passive nihilists to derive some semblance of order in their lives thereby acting as a means of self-narcotization. The insatiable consumerist desire to own commodities ranging from "kitchen-ware, sharp shoes, iced lollies, / Electric mixers, toasters, washers, driers" (*CP*, 2014, "Here", p. 49) to multi-coloured "Summer Casuals," (*CP*, 2014,"The Large Cool Store", p. 61), "shirts", blouses and "trousers" (*CP*, 2014, p. 61) enables the last men portrayed in Larkin's poetry to lose themselves in whatever is "fast, new, strange" and desirable (*TSZ*, 2006, p. 32), thereby ensuring "the happiness of the greatest number" (*WP*, 1968, p. 17). Likewise, the picture-perfect ideals propagated by the billboards portrayed in the poem "Essential Beauty", are meant to inform the masses "Of how life should be" (*CP*, 2014, p. 69). The enticing image of "Well-balanced families" (*CP*, 2014, p. 69) with their perfect "smiles" and "their cars" (*CP*, 2014, p. 69) becomes the much-longed for substitute for the lack of a *why* in the lives of the last men. The "disintegration of the will" is also a defining attribute of passive nihilism (*WP,* 1968, p. 27). This weakening of the will manifests itself as "the lack of strength to posit for oneself, productively, a goal, a why" (*WP*, 1968, p.18). In order to evade the responsibility of willing a goal (*WP*, 1968, p. 17), the passive nihilists depicted in Larkin's poetry, resign themselves to "a clockwork world" and the endless "repetition of passive routines" (Evans, 1993, p. 24). The repetitive mundane task of putting "one brick upon another," (*CP*, 2014, "To put one brick upon another", p. 279) followed by "a third, and then a fourth / Leaves no time to wonder whether / What" (*CP*, 2014, p. 279) one does "has any worth" (*CP*, 2014, p. 279). The mental stagnation and lack of creativity underlying such a cyclical routine also dominates the regimented "weekday world of those / Who leave at dawn low terraced houses" (*CP*, 2014, "The Large Cool Store", p. 61) and head for "factory, yard and site" (*CP*, 2014, p. 61). The workers inhabiting the weekday world abandon themselves to the task at hand and do not sit around "Weighing what" they "should or can do" (*CP,* 2014, "To put one brick upon another", p. 279). They are not in quest of a productive goal or a why. Consequently, their lives signify no resistance or dissatisfaction and hence, for these weekday workers the differentiation phase is merely a means of perpetuating a conformist lifestyle.

Contrary to a strong, transformative will, the uneventful mode of existence outlined in the poems - "The Large Cool Store" and "To put one brick upon another" - is predicated on the weak will of the last men. According to Michel Harr (1996), the last men display:

a will satisfied with meaninglessness . . . a will happy that there is no longer any sense or any meaning to look for, a will having found a certain comfort in the total absence of meaning and a certain happiness in the certainty that there is no answer to the question "why?" (p. 11)

Although Nietzsche maintains that the "experience of intoxication" proves misleading and induces a false sense of power (*WP*, 1968, p. 31), the monotonous existence of the passive nihilists depicted in Larkin's poetry, serves to lessen the "Soft horror of living" (*CP,* 2014, "Marriages", p. 279). Moreover, while offering a critique on passive nihilists, Bülent Diken (2009) maintains that for these individuals, "the loss of value and meaning no longer generates a crisis but is…accepted as a matter of fact" (p. 23). He further asserts that instead of revolting

against the nihilistic phenomenon, passive nihilists experience a "normalization of nihilism" (Diken, 2009, p. 24). Viewed in this light, Arnold, Dockery, the schoolmaster and workers of the weekday world, emerge as placid beings who accept nihilism as a commonplace fact of their lives. Hence, the aforementioned passive nihilists in Larkin's poetry do not move beyond the stage of conformity. For them, the journey of confronting the nihilistic abyss ends with a sense of resignation to the phenomenon of nihilism.

### 4.2. Active Nihilists in Larkin's Poetry

As opposed to a passive nihilist, an active nihilist's journey through the nihilistic abyss entails negating values, casting off illusions, and exhibiting skepticism. Within the framework of Larkin's poetry, the observant and nonconformist speaker featured in several of his poems serves as an archetype for active nihilists. Oftentimes, this quintessentially reflective speaker is "the excluded onlooker, slightly wistful, yet nevertheless resolute in his self-conserving detachment" (Clark, 1997, p. 94). This characteristic persona in Larkin's poetry does not seek relief in comfortable falsehoods and is persistently haunted by "the question 'for what?'" (*WP*, 1968, p. 19). Instead of mere survival or self-preservation, the ceaseless phase of self-questioning and the accompanying search for rationales underlying one's choices in life are of paramount significance for the active nihilists portrayed in Larkin's poems. Moreover, the tendency to renounce deceptive self-preservation in favour of self-scrutiny is a characteristic feature of active nihilism and is effectively delineated in these poems: "Dockery and Son", "Self's the Man" and "Reasons for Attendance".

While analyzing the "thick and close", "sand-clouds" of habits and beliefs (*CP* 66) that steer the course of one's life, the narrator in "Dockery and Son" remarks: "Where do these/ Innate assumptions come from?" (*CP*, 2014, p. 66). Likewise, after dismissing the "happiness found by couples" engaged in dancing as nothing but "sheer inaccuracy" (*CP* 30), the protagonist of the poem "Reasons for Attendance" searches for a convincing rationale underlying sexual intimacy. This quest for a rationale is reinforced through constant self-questioning illustrated in these lines: "Why be out here? / But then, why be in there? Sex, yes, but what / Is sex?" (*CP*, 2014, p.30). Similarly, after comparing Arnold's "passive acceptance of culturally sanctioned duty" of a husband (Clark, 1997, p. 101) with his undemanding life, the bachelor in "Self's the Man" wonders if there "Is . . . such a contrast?" (*CP*, 2014, p. 59) between Arnold's life and his.

Although in all three instances, the reflective narrator fails to provide conclusive answers to the questions posed, he does not "comfort himself with anything that might be characterized as . . . illusory" (Williams, 2012, p. 8). The fact that the active nihilist depicted in Larkin's poetry resorts to no "deceiving overevaluation" (Williams, 2012, p. 7) about himself is evident from the last lines of "Self's the Man". The speaker dismantles any sense of superiority he might have harboured toward Arnold by asserting that the only difference between Arnold and him is that the latter is better "At knowing what" he "can stand" or he supposes he "can" (*CP*, 2014, p. 59). Hence, for Larkin's active nihilists, the hallmark of the phase of progression is dispelling the comforting illusions pertaining either to oneself or one's socially borrowed convictions.

A refusal to submit to any form of "deception" and "self-blinding" that numbs the pain is also a marked characteristic of active nihilism (*GS*, 2001, p. 201). This conviction to refrain from any form of anesthetic is evident from the fact that unlike Dockery, Arnold, and the enthusiastic couples on the dance floor, the active nihilists in Larkin's poetry refuse to succumb to a mode of sustenance ensured "through habit, routine, and confinement" (Clark, 1997, p. 95). They prefer to opt for willful skepticism instead of meek resignation and hence, for these active nihilists, the phase of differentiation consists of refuting the numbing comfort ensured by a conformist lifestyle.

The sense of futility accompanying the willingness to opt for a misfortunate reckoning of one's condition instead of a life-sentence of deception is evident in "Mr. Bleaney". While scrutinizing the grim "Bleaney-world", the "poetic persona" experiences a "sudden collapse of his own morale" along with "a chilling awareness" that the "helplessness and entrapment" exuded by the one-room flat previously occupied by Mr. Bleaney reflects his own predicament (Lodge, 1997, pp.79-80). The protagonist's self-debate regarding whether Mr. Bleaney chose

his circumstances or circumstances chose him, ends in uncertainty as is evident from the last phrase of the poem - "I don't know" (*CP*, 2014, p. 50).

Despite the ambiguous conclusion of "Mr. Bleaney", the narrator's strenuous self-examination leads to the same insights as those acquired by a philosopher who survives long, tormenting pain and whose plight is aptly highlighted by Nietzsche in *The Gay Science.* Similar to the philosopher who "descend[s] into" (*GS,* 2001, p. 6) his "ultimate depths" (*GS*, 2001, p. 6), the protagonist of "Mr. Bleaney" emerges "as a different person, with a few more question marks, above all with the *will* henceforth to question further, more deeply, more severely" than he "had previously questioned" (*GS*, 2001, p. 7). However, the questions raised by the speaker of "Mr. Bleaney" are implied rather than stated and revolve around weighing and counterweighing different life possibilities that inevitably affect the outcome of one's life. Within these profound questions, the most deeply embedded assumption is that an unexamined life amounts to nothing better than Mr. Bleaney's unremarkable existence. Hence, for the active nihilist in "Mr. Bleaney", the most significant development during the differentiation phase is coming to terms with the "queasy lonely discomfort of" a "self" (Paulin, 1997, p. 165) that is not afraid of addressing its restrictive existence.

The state of boredom that characterizes the lives of active nihilists is another attribute that becomes evident in the differentiation phase. Schopenhauer (2004) identifies boredom as a symptom of meaningless existence and contends that if there was any inherent value in life, boredom would not exist: "mere existence would satisfy us in itself" (p. 23). According to Lars Svendsen (2005), boredom arises out of a disparity between "the demand for satisfaction" and a "lack of satisfaction" (p. 27). In his essay, "Return to the Native: Time and Tradition in the Poetry of Philip Larkin", Paul Moeyes (1994) claims that within the context of Larkin's poetry, "a passive life is a boring life" - one in which "the future is associated with disillusionment" (p. 108). This viewpoint is highlighted in the poem, "To My Wife". This poem is replete with manifold regrets and highlights the discrepancy between the anticipated satisfaction of companionship and the dismal reality of marriage which far from being fulfilling, merely proves to be "Another way of suffering" (*CP*, 2014, p. 274) for the speaker. Another significant factor underlying "To My Wife" is that the narrator's increasingly passive and familiar life with his wife is punctuated by an unsettling sense of boredom, fear, and failure (Waterman, 2016, p. 95). This oppressive boredom leads to the grim realization that there is "No future now" (*CP*, 2014, p. 274) for either the protagonist or his wife. However, as asserted by Nietzsche, boredom is reflective of thinkers and "inventive spirits" (*GS*, 2001, p. 57). Svendsen (2005) also upholds the view that, boredom undeniably entails "self-awareness" and "reflection" (pp. 32, 33). The boredom experienced by the narrator of the poem, "To My Wife" is therefore, a manifestation of his highly reflective disposition and self-awareness.

It is noteworthy that in order to experience boredom, the subject must demand some form of meaning from the "world and himself" (Svendsen, 2005, p. 32). Inability to find such meaning impels one to look for "meaning-surrogates" or "diversions" (Svendsen, 2005, pp. 30, 33). The debilitating "boredom" (*CP*, 2014, p. 281) eclipsing the unglamorous life of the protagonist of the poem "At thirty-one, when some are rich" reaffirms the reciprocal relationship between ennui and seeking diversions. While questioning the purpose of writing letters that signify no meaning and "plot no change" (*CP*, 2014, p. 281), the speaker entertains the probability that his uninspiring letters merely serve as "Stand-ins" (*CP*, 2014, p. 281) - short-lived meaning surrogates. In the above-mentioned poems - "To My Wife" and "At thirty-one, when some are rich" - a lack of meaning fuels boredom. The ever-increasing chasm of meaninglessness is supplemented by an ever-widening spiral of boredom. According to Svendsen (2005), "The growth of boredom is linked to the growth of nihilism" (p. 33). He further claims that, "Human beings are addicted to meaning" (Svendsen, 2005, p. 30). They cannot "bear to live" their "lives without some sort of content that" constitutes "a meaning" (Svendsen, 2005, p. 30). Due to the absence of this meaning, the differentiation phase for the active nihilists featured in the poems, "To My Wife" and "At thirty-one, when some are rich", is marked by conscious dissatisfaction and restlessness.

## 5. Conclusion

The stage of progression can be equated with the "period of catastrophe" outlined by Nietzsche (*WP*, 1968, p. 39). Nietzsche's period of catastrophe is a phase of sifting that

compels the weak-willed last men to retreat to the cocoon of unrisky decisions and the strong-willed individuals to take risky decisions (*WP*, 1968, p. 39). Nietzsche further identifies the willingness of active nihilists to take the more difficult path as a manifestation of courage; their hallmark is that they are "not so afraid of misfortunes" (*WP*, 1968, p. 38). By forsaking all forms of self-narcotization, the active nihilists portrayed in Larkin's poetry render themselves vulnerable to the chaotic crisis. Moreover, these poetic personae are courageous and do not shirk from withstanding "the risks of possible meaninglessness and the futility that might be involved in" their "resolute refusal of pretense" (Williams, 2012, p. 16). For the active nihilists illustrated in Larkin's aforementioned poems, the progression of nihilism leads to diminished hopes ("To My Wife"), misplaced expectations ("At thirty-one, when some are rich") and utter disillusionment ("Self's the Man") thereby magnifying the crises of the abyss. Thus, whereas for the passive nihilists in Larkin's poetry, abandoning to self-narcotization during the stage of progression leads to an indefinite period of stagnation and relief, for the active nihilists, the progression phase paves way for the compulsion to confront the repercussions of suspending all illusions thereby ensuring a transition to self-transformation. The stage of progression plays a pivotal role in establishing which of the two nihilists - active or passive - will transition to the next phase. It is noteworthy that not all nihilists proceed to the phase of self-transformation. Only those who are willing to reevaluate their values and endure extreme disillusionment can experience self-transformation. Future researchers interested in analyzing Larkin's poetry with respect to the nihilistic frameworks proposed by Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, or Baudrillard can further explore the correlation between the thematic trajectory in Larkin's poetry and the theoretical frameworks for nihilism outlined by the aforementioned philosophers.

**List of Abbreviations**

| | |
|---|---|
| CP | The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin |
| EH | Ecce Homo |
| GS | The Gay Science |
| TSZ | Thus Spoke Zarathustra |
| WP | The Will to Power |

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