

## Philip Larkin's Toads: Summary & Analysis

The word toad conjures up images of a grotesque, little amphibian and yet it is this little animal that Larkin decides to base his poem on. He describes two toads. One is the exterior influence that society has on an individual to work, and the other is the interior or personal prompting to work. He takes a thirty six line attempt at finding away to elude the "squatting" of the toads, and yet in the end his conclusion is that there is no way to hide from them. As the poem begins, Larkin wastes no time in introducing the first toad, "Why should I let the toad work / Squat on my life."(1-2) The first toad is said to be equal to work. The use of this metaphor jogs one's memory to the social connotations that a toad upholds. One of these connotations is that a toad is a repulsive little being, with an ugliness characterized in its warts or more precisely the myth that those "uglies" are contagious. When this interpretation is used the poet is saying that work is a ugly and repulsive entity, and its ugliness is contagious. A second interpretation of the word toad can be found from fairy tales. In these types of works the toad is often seen as something detestable on the exterior and yet of great value or beauty on the interior. An example of this is the toad that when kissed by the princess was turned into a prince. In order for the real identity of this amphibian to be realized, one must to get past the outer shell. In keeping with this explanation Larkin can also be seen as saying that work at first appear as a hideous and burdensome beast and yet after careful inspection and acceptance its true beauty is shown. Thus one sees the first toad and views its composition as a combination of two interpretations.

A second item to note is the use of the verb "squat"(2) as the word to carry the action of the toad. This word is definitely not one of the English languages most attractive words. Rather by stretching one's mind it can be seen as an "ugly" verb. The use of this "ugly" verb with a noun that already has the connotation of being ugly pushes this metaphor to its maximum.

A second interesting metaphor in this stanza is the setting of "wit"(3) being equal to "pitchfork"(3). This is a good parallel because it describes the versatility of wit in terms of a pitchfork, which is also quite versatile. At the very minimum a pitchfork can be used for two distinct objectives. It can be used as a device to picking up or carrying something. Secondly, it can be used as weapon to fend off a foe. When using this interpretation the question in lines three and four can be restated as, "Why can't I use my wit to drive off work, and then also use that same wit, like a pitchfork picking up hay, pick up the things of success?" By applying these definitions it can be seen how Larkin's choice of words gives the metaphor tremendous depth.

Another item to be noted in the first stanza is how Larkin brilliantly uses meter to give the metaphors added feeling. He does this first by ending lines one and three with a double accent. This gives the rhythm an awkward feel, as well as gives the word "work"(1) a inflection of ugliness. He also does this with the word "pitchfork"(3), which gives it the feeling of sharpness. Together, this strengthens the persuasive effect of the poem.

The second stanza continues on with a broadening of the description of the first toad. Here another excellent metaphor is used when the toad is linked to a type of poison. Larkin has just said that work "soils"(5) one with its poison and that the amount of this poison one has to ingest is not proportional to the benefit it brings us. Instead this poison, otherwise known as

work, slowly infiltrates ones whole being and gradually overcomes one's self. The poet has now revealed the first toad's deadly side.

The third stanza marks the beginning of a change in thought that continues for the following two stanzas. Here the poet starts to explore the seeming escape of certain individuals from the toad, Work, and their apparent happiness. He effectively uses alliteration in the line "Lecturers, lispers, / Losels, loblolly-men, louts – / They don't end up as paupers;"(10-11) to create a droning effect that makes the list seem to go on indefinitely. This seems to make Larkin's argument better by showing this seemingly long list of individuals who supposedly escape work by using their wits.

The metaphor of wit and pitchfork can be applied in this stanza as well, which give the impression of frustration on the part of the poet. The question that he asked in the first stanza, "Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork / And drive the brute off?"(3-4), is being positively answered here, although he does not know the answer. This continues to show how the toad is "squatting" on Larkin. Though others seem to escape it, he cannot.

Larkin now moves on to stanzas four and five, where he examines the poor people who seem to escape work. The words "windfalls"(15) and "tinned sardines"(15) are symbolic for poverty. "Windfalls" represent the idea of being filled with nothing. These people are trying to live off the wind, and "Tinned sardines" are viewed as the food poor people eat. Larkin says these people manage to elude the toad and live on nothing or near nothing while remaining happy.

The fifth stanza goes on to say that while these work elusive people may be partially naked and malnourished, "No one actually starves"(20) Larkin uses the word "nippers"(17), which is slang for children, as a way of showing how these people are not the upper class but instead the lower. This use of diction greatly expands the meaning of the stanza.

The last section of the poem embodies the last four stanzas and here again Larkin changes directions in his thoughts on work. He now turns inward and begins to unveil a second toad, one that lurks within himself. Again Larkin uses symbolism to enhance his point in stanza six, "Ah, were I courageous enough / To shout Stuff you pension!"(22) The reference to "pension" embodies much more than just the financial security. It is symbolic of protection from the unknown. A person with a pension does not have to worry about the future because he will be provided for, while without this his future can be seen as a great unknown. So Larkin says, while he may want to throw away work, which brings him his pension, he knows that he will be casting himself into the abyss of the unknown and therefore cannot.

The seventh stanza introduces the second toad. This new toad embodies all the characteristics that the first did except it is found within the poet. Again it "squats" on the poet, which is enforced through the use of alliteration. "Its hunkers are heavy as hard luck,"(27) this phrase gives the impression of heaviness and the idea of the toad being "stuck" inside him. This second toad dwells within, and like the first toad, cannot be escaped.

As the poem enters its eighth stanza the effects of this second toad are made apparent. This inner tumor will not allow Larkin to gain success and happiness easily or without due payment. Here the poet finally reveals what he considers symbolic of success – "The fame and the girl and the money."(31) He continues to say that he will never be able to get these things