

A Flâneur's "Deceptions": Gender, Sex and Ethics Re-narrated

Xi CHEN

Associate professor, College of Foreign Languages, Hunan University; PH. D. candidate in Comparative Literature Studies in Central China Normal University

Abstract

Philip Larkin is acknowledged as one of the England's most distinguished poets as well as a representative of "the Movement" in the post-war era. As Larkin had practiced writing novels in an earlier age, he used a story-like narrative to compose "Deceptions". This paper analyzes that "Deceptions" employs many writing techniques of a flâneur. As a detached spectator, Larkin attempts to express his *flâneur's* mediation by re-narrating a sexual crime in different voices from different perspectives. In "deceptions", he reproduces a historical sexual crime with a transient and aloof autonomy to express his contemplation on gender, sex, morality and ethical norms in the process of great changes from Victorian era to the 1950s.

Key Words: Philip Larkin, "Deceptions", Flâneur, Narrative, Ethical Chaos

Philip Larkin, an eminent writer in postwar Great Britain, was commonly referred to as "England's *other* Poet Laureate" until his death in 1985. His poems have enjoyed intense critical acclaim and immense popularity since last century. Larkin's poems are widely read for the lines "deceptively simple, demotic, colloquial"¹. Most of that depicted in his poem exist in the real world, and the poetic language is completely taken from daily life. Larkin always lives as a spectator keeping a keen eye on the social reality and human life, and strictly confines his self-exploration to the scope of rational constraint. In his poem, there is no impassioned idealism, no romantic ideology of fantasy, but only calm, rational and contemplative thought. Larkin's second collection, *Less deceived*, published in 1955, is regarded as one of Movement's momentous works. "Deceptions", the most popular poem in this collecting, is much discussed for decades by the critics for its concerns about human nature, sexual issue and ethical meditation.

1. Narrative composition of "Deceptions"

"Deceptions", based on a real story of 19th century, is about a Victorian young girl, who is drugged and raped. Larkin focalizes on the hackneyed sexual crime, and represents fragments of

¹ Regan, Stephen. "Introduction." *Philip Larkin*. Regan, Stephen. ed. (London: Macmillan, 1997) p.3

the story in a flashback, not only historically reproducing the social ethics of Victorian Age, but also reflecting modern people's confusion and ethical thoughts in the re-building of ethical order. In fact, this poem was originally entitled "less deceived", but later in the time of publication, was changed into "Deceptions", since Larkin shifted "Less Deceived" to the title-page of the whole collection. The expression - "less deceived"- was originated in Shakespeare's "*Hamlet*": in his vicious mock-madness, Hamlet toys with Ophelia's love for him, claiming for one moment, "I did love you once" and another moment, "I loved you not". Ophelia unexpectedly replies, "I was the more deceived." Larkin chose her vague remark as a title, indicating the author's ethical meditation and "worldly skepticism"².

"Deceptions" is a fragment which Larkin captures from the daily life ----a historical document read by him. He observes this historical event with a detective eye and traces it out with a painter's delicate hand. This poem shows an intertextuality between Larkin's poetry and novel, poetry and life. In the preface to "Deceptions", Larkin introduces a real story by citing the real account of a raped woman from Mayhew's "London labour and the London Poor". Then, in stanza one, Larkin vividly describes the injured party's inner grief and sadness after the insult; in stanza two, the author stunningly points out: the rapist is more deceived than the abused girl. In this way, Larkin shows his amazing poetic narrative skill in telling a story from a multi-perspective over time and space.

Larkin had more than once claimed that he had always wanted to be a novelist³. He pursued this dream persistently when he was young. In his letter to Sutton, 19-year-old Larkin had accurately outlined a blueprint of his artistic ambition: "I have in my head showy plans for a novel - nothing to get excited about, but I feel I should try before I finally sprout wings and turn into a poet dashing forward like a Hussar ... If I could do it as I imagined it, it would be a really poetic novel."⁴In order to make his own dream come true, Larkin devoted a great deal of time and energy to writing novels, and finally completed two novels, *Jill* (1946), and *Girl in Winter* (1947). However, like his idol - Thomas Hardy, Larkin finally gave up his novel writing. Hardy was forced to regain poetry and abandon fiction, because his last novel "*Jude the Obscure*" received fierce attack from public; while as for Larkin, on the contrary, he gave up writing novels because he thought his novels attracted little attention from the critics. In his later years, Larkin regretted his abandoning novels:

I wanted to be a novelist. I wrote one, and then I wrote another, and I thought. This is wonderful, another five years of this and I'll be in the clear. Unfortunately, that was where it stopped. I've never felt as interested in poetry as I used to feel in novels—they were more theatrical, if you know what I mean, you could do the strong second-act curtain even better. Looking back on

² Swarbrick, Andrew. *Out of Reach, The Poetry of Philip Larkin*. (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1995) p.43.

³ Hamilton, Ian. "Four Conversations." *The London Magazine* 6(1964). p71.

⁴ Booth, James. *Philip Larkin: Writer*. (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992) p.40.

them, I think they were over-sized poems. They were certainly written with intense care for detail.⁵

Obviously, his early struggles with novels had immense implications for his poetic career, and his abundant narrative skills found their way into his poetry. Not only had Larkin employed a lot of narrative techniques in his poetry, he was also inspired by the plots in novels. Larkin consciously combined the skill of poem writing and fiction writing, thus, there can be found poetic images in his fiction, what's more, fictional structure in his poems. "Deceptions" depicts a marginalized and exploited female in Victorian age, an archetype of Tess in Thomas Hardy's novel. Like Tess, the ignorant girl with a rural origin was deceived, seduced by an urbanite, and was spurned by the moral society.

"Deceptions" is widely read and liked by most people, because the fascinating compositional technique makes the story vividly represented. However, there is another important reason for its popularity: its concern about the ordinary people. He once claimed that a good author needn't "have to try and jack myself up to a concept of poetry that lay outside my own life", but "could simply relapse back into one's own life and write from it"⁶. In this poem, Larkin succeeds in writing about "people who have done nothing spectacular, who aren't beautiful or lucky, who try to behave reasonably well in the limited field of activity they command"⁷, who have their own grief and joy but lead ordinary lives, who have moments of vision but are bypassed by the world-historical experiences. Larkin presented these ordinary people in ordinary language with realistic firmness and satire.

2. Flâneur's influence in the structure of "Deceptions"

Larkin is detached, shielded, peering out from a distance at the kaleidoscopically changing mass through a long-passed sexual event, trying to read the individual faces that reel off by him in several brief intervals of glances. As a *flâneur*, defined by Benjamin, Larkin skillfully represents various aspects of modern urban life in a unique perspective, with careful observation and mental acumen.

The term "*Flâneur*" comes from the French masculine noun *flâneur*, which means "aimless, pleasurable wandering." In his studies of modernist literary movement in 19th century, Benjamin identifies *flâneur* as the quintessential signifier of urban modernity in his book - *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyrical Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. According to Benjamin, a *flâneur* is commonly defined as an educated, eccentric male idler, an observant and a solitary man strolling about a city. Benjamin considers a *flâneur* the heroic figure, who stands out against the background of the population as "the true subject of modernism"⁸. For Benjamin,

⁵ Hamilton, Ian. "Four Conversations." P.71

⁶ Ibid.,p.35

⁷ Motion, Andrew. *Philip Larkin: A Writer's life*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1993) p.332

⁸ Benjamin, Walter. *Lyrical Poet in the Advanced Capitalism: Baudelaire*. Trans. Zhang Xudong, Wei Wensheng. (Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company, 1989) p.74

observation is a cogitative act and a *flâneur* is the hero who acts as a detective transforming the solitary wandering into the heroic observation of the urban quotidian of the modern era. Benjamin's study on the *flâneur* affords significant insights into the relationship between the individual and urban crowd, the conflict between tradition and modernity, and the idea of the *flâneur* has accumulated significant meaning as a referent for understanding urban phenomena and modernity.

Among city crowd, the *flâneur* is rather a spectator than a participant. He can walk into the locale and at the same time out of the locale, thus he can manifest the connexion between individuals' outer worlds and their inner consciousness. A *flâneur*, like the narrator in "Deceptions", brings a personal version into effect. In the preface to "Deceptions", Larkin cites a story told by Henry Mayhew in 1862: "Of course I was drugged, and so heavily I did not regain consciousness until the next morning. I was horrified to discover that I had been ruined, and for some days I was inconsolable, and cried like a child to be killed or sent back to my aunt."⁹ Mayhew uses the first-person confession in his report, while in the main body of the poem, Larkin uses "I" and "you" to re-narrate the incident. "I" – a detached spectator - is the poem-narrator; "you" – the assaulted girl - is the interlocutor. In the discourse with "you", "I"-the narrator- not only vividly describes a sharp and painful sense of the girl's suffering and shame to review sexual ethical norm in the 19th century, but also subversively comments on the sexual crime, allowing readers to re-read this tragedy from the modern point of view. The main body of this poem begins with: "Even so distant, I can taste the grief", indicating the narrator is a detached spectator who stands far away from what had happened. In stanza two, the author mentions that "I would not dare / Console you ", reassuring the author's aloof attitude, which is a more objective approach to re-assess the sexual crime in the history.

A *flâneur* always regards the noisy city environment as a text to interpret, and he is "in" and "out" of the crowd, as an observant and solitary man strolling in the city with alienation, detachment, observation. Combining the casual eyes of the stroller with the purposeful gaze of the detective, a *flâneur* is capable of seeing the city as landscape, lying either desolately or seductively open before the fictional characters. As a wise detective in Allan Poe's novel, a *flâneur* is a "detective soul in search of a body, he enters another person whenever he wishes"¹⁰. Like a ghost who is physically manifested in the material world, but not opaquely, a *flâneur* enjoys the incomparable privilege of being himself and someone else as he sees fit. Larkin is the *flâneur* in producing "Deceptions" in a way that his translucent personality, like a phantom, haunts his own narrative, leaving a tinge of himself, of his latent, repressed personality. Larkin represents a historical moment through the mouth of the injured party as well as the crowd, so that he plays both protagonist and audience--like a commentator who stands outside of the

⁹ "Deceptions" in this paper is cited from Thwaite, Anthony, ed. *Philip Larkin: Collected Poems*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2003) p.67

¹⁰ Benjamin, Walter. *Lyrical Poet in the Advanced Capitalism: Baudelaire*.p.55

action- to show the change of ideology in the process of modernization, reflecting the dramatic changes of ethical thoughts, moral values and sexual awareness from Victorian era to the 1950s.

Benjamin finds Baudelaire, the representative of *flâneur*, employ the narrative structure of Poe's detective novel in his poems, thus, the detective deductive analysis constitutes a part of Baudelaire's works. From a comparative study of Baudelaire's "*Fleurs Du Mal*" and Poe's detective stories, Benjamin encapsulates the characteristics of a *flâneur*'s lyrical poems into three elements: the injured part and the crime locale; the criminal; and the crowd¹¹. As in Larkin's "Deceptions", these three elements compose the poem's narrative structure. The injured party is "you"- the girl being raped, and the locale is an abandoned attic where the girl was raped, where "Worry of wheels along the street outside". The criminal refers to the man who raped the girl, "stumbling up the breathless stair / to burst into fulfillment's desolate attic." The crowd is the essence of this poem: in stanza one, the crowd is "bridal London", a metaphor of the so-called "decent" women who represent Victorian sexual ethics; in stanza two, the crowd refers to "I", the representative of modern people. From a modern perspective shown in stanza two, the narrator points out that "Where / Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic", and the girl is less deceived than the criminal who is under the control of his own desire.

As the three elements demanded, the narration of "Deceptions" falls into three parts: 1. the preface which introduces the event: a "true story"; 2. Stanza one which depicts emotions aroused by the event: a sympathy for the girl; 3. Stanza two which introduces a prudent and tentative conclusion: people driven by the desire were the more deceived. Baudelaire is fascinated with the image of the female prostitute, who comes to symbolize for him not only his own fantasy about women but also the fact that beauty is to be found in evil. He argues that crime is "natural by origin" whereas virtue is "artificial, supernatural"¹². Following this tradition, Larkin also depicts in "Deceptions" a naïve girl degenerated into a prostitute. In the preface, he cites the real words of an aged prostitute in Henry Mayhew's report, which was published in "London Labor and the London poor" in 1862. According to the reported speech, the poem faithfully reproduces the social background of that historical period, showing people's views on rape, sex, gender and ethics. In stanza one, the poet imaginarily describes the inner feeling of the girl who has suffered sexual assault but could not speak out her sorrow, bitterness and humiliation. In Stanza two, the poet reassesses this crime in the context of modern sexual ethics and ideology. As a *flâneur*, Larkin offers the reader fascinating insight into the dynamics of modernity, as exemplified in "Deceptions", the passing moment in history provides a rational perspective for reading and understanding people's changing attitude towards sex and gender.

3. Gender, sex and ethics re-narrated in "Deceptions"

11. Ibid., P.62

12 Quoted from: Mazlish, Bruce. "The Flâneur: From Spectator to Representation." *The flâneur*. Ed. Keith Tester. (London: Rotledge, 1994)

“Deception” opens with a straightforward narration, a quotation from Mayhew’s report. In 1861, Henry Mayhew published a research report on the poor people of London. In this document, Mayhew noted down an interview with a woman over 40, shabbily dressed and with a disreputable looking. She was the daughter of a Dorsetshire tenant farmer like Tess in Hardy’s novel. She came to London when she was 16 years old, and was enticed by a man feigning illness into a brothel. The ignorant girl was drugged by a cup of coffee with narcotic, and the man raped her in her unconsciousness. She had briefly been the man's mistress before she was deserted and inevitably fell into a prostitute:

When I became quiet I received a visit from my seducer, in whom I had placed so much silly confidence. He talked very kindly to me, but I would not listen to him for some time. He came several times to see me, and at last said he would take me away if I like, and give me a house of my own. Finally, finding how hopeless all was, I agreed to his proposal and he allowed me four pounds a week. This went on for some month, till he was tired of me, when he threw me over for some one else. There is always as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it, and this I soon discovered.

Then for some years – then years, till I was six and twenty, I went through all the changed of a gay lady’s life¹³

Mayhew, as a Victorian moralist, commented on the woman's experience at the end of his article: “this woman’s tale is a condensation of the philosophy of sinning”, and concluded, “she had become brutal.”¹⁴

The personal pronoun “I” in the preface and the main body of the poem refers to different “narrator”: in preface, “I” is the raped woman’s voice mediated by Mayhew; in the poem: “I” indicates a male consolatory voice mediated by the poet himself. The repetition of “I” in the preface – “I was drugged”, “I did not regain consciousness”, “I was horrified”, “I had been ruined” and “I was inconsolable”- reveals the girl’s perception so vividly that the reader can experience her exploitation. In a civilized society, as a common sense, only sexual intercourse inside marriage is in accord with ethical norms, and the parties are granted as husband and wife in a legal sense. Any irregular sexual activity outside the marriage is considered a violent towards the existing ethical system, which will inevitably bring about a tragedy to the relevant parties, the families, even the society, since the confusion of ethical identity by the immoral sexual act will lead to ethical chaos. Ethical chaos is bound to bring about social instability, thus the people who cause the confusion are subject to morally reprehensible. In the nineteenth century, people's idea on gender and sex were more conservative than people in modern society. Within the context of the admonishing strictures of Victorian morality, Mayhew, the spokesman

¹³ Mayhew, Henry. “Those that Will Not Work.” *London Labour and the London Poor*. (London: Frank Cass, 1862) p. 240

¹⁴ Quoted from: Swarbrick, Andrew. *Out of Reach, The Poetry of Philip Larkin*. (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1995) PP.57-58

of the Victorian ethic and morality, points out that the raped lower-class girl is the initiator of ethical chaos; the one who should be accused in the crime. Thus, as an injured party in a crime, the girl can not get any consolation; instead, condemnation and contempt are thrown on her. The word “ruined” shows the theatre of the girl’s tragic world - she is regarded as the original sinner: a “ruined”, unchaste women. The girl is alienated on account of a vicious sexual encounter for which Victorian society blamed her. As a result, she is helplessly "like a child to be killed". Larkin’s quotation about the girl successfully makes the vanished experience of suffering as something real, consequently, what Larkin has achieved is to represent to the reader the moral and ethical norms in the Victorian era.

In the preface of "Deceptions", by quoting the woman’s original account, Larkin depicts the moral and sexual categories of the Victorian context. In Stanza one, Larkin focalizes with emotional intensity on the moment of stress when the girl first realizes her situation to picture her psychological torture and humiliation in facing the city crowd. The poem goes with her voice mediated by a Hardy’s type of reader:

Even so distant, I can taste the grief,
Bitter and sharp with stalks, he made you gulp.
The sun's occasional print, the brisk brief
Worry of wheels along the street outside
Where bridal London bows the other way,
And light, unanswerable and tall and wide,
Forbids the scar to heal, and drives
Shame out of hiding. All the unhurried day,
Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives.

Larkin once declared that “What I like about him (Hardy) is his temperament and the way he sees life. He’s not a transcendental writer, he’s not s Yeats, he’s not an Eliot; his subjects are men, the life of men, time and the passing of time, love and the fading of love”¹⁵. It was from Thomas Hardy that Larkin had learned to depict life in a new way. During Christmas Days in 1949, just one year before Larkin wrote “Deceptions”, he visited the hometown of Hardy, for whom he “had the deepest admiration”¹⁶. He walked from Dorchester to Weymouth like a Hardy character trudging from Casterbridge to Budmouth. Thomas Hardy exerted an influence on Larkin as he sought his own voice, not an abandonment of emotion, but a mixture of rationality with feeling, of objective control with subjective abandon.

In Stanza one, Larkin describes the mental sufferings and experience of a female who is like the archetypes in Hardy’s novel. Both Tess and the girl in the poem come from the countryside and are forced to be the rapist’s mistress for a short time before they are abandoned. However, their difference is that Tess is seduced in the forest by an urbanite - Alec, while the girl in the poem

¹⁵ Motion, Andrew. Philip Larkin: A Writer’s life. P. 141

¹⁶ Ibid., p.139

is raped by a city man as soon as she arrives in the “city forest”. The first line of this poem: “Even so distant, I can taste the grief” indicates that “I”, as a narrator, is a detached spectator who stands simultaneously part of and apart from the locale. “Bitter and sharp with stalks, he made you gulp” can be interpreted as both the narcotic used to drug her and the sexual assault forced on her, just as the “bitter” and “sharp” both referring to the sensation of the coffee she forced to swallow and the humiliation the rapist inflicted on her. If we can read these words “bitter”, “sharp”, “stalks” and “gulp” in terms of psychoanalysis, we can better understand the complex significance. As a young man, Larkin was once keen on psychoanalysis; he attended and was extremely impressed by a series of lectures by John Layard, a Jungian psychologist. In 1942, he started a plan to record his dreams and to interpret them. In fact, he had recorded ninety-five dreams in his diaries, among which “the largest concentration of images reveals a combined attraction to and revulsion from woman”¹⁷. In terms of psychoanalysis, “stalk” implies male genital organ; “gulp” hints the violent sexual assault forced on the girl; “Bitter and sharp” describes the physical and psychological devastation and pain that the girl suffers. Subsequently, “The sun’s occasional print” symbolizes that the glimpse of sunlight “print” itself onto her in the same way the rape has “printed an indelible mark onto her mind and body”¹⁸. Comparing with the humiliating experience inside the house, she is more fear of contempt gaze, defamatory gossip and social marginalization outside the house. The “brisk brief/ Worry of wheels along the street outside” hints the city folk outside are indifferent to the girl’s tragedy. The word “bridal” is a sarcastic metaphor in the line: “bridal London bows the other way”, which suggests that the sanctimonious unmarried women in London turn “the other way” to show their intolerance to the abused girl. “And light, unanswerable and tall and wide” makes an intense visual contrast - the bright sunshine outdoor versus the dark interior of violence and crime. In the girl’s eyes, the outside light “unanswerable and tall and wide” is a blight rather a comfort, since “the partial light which does penetrate (the girl’s gloomy situation) through men like Mayhew... emphasizes the social distinction and prevents the ‘scars’ from healing”¹⁹. The girl is alienated on account of a vicious sexual encounter, and she is nowhere to “hide” from the blames that Victorian society flint on her. As a conventional melodramatic archetype of Hardy’s heroin, the girl reacts to the social prejudice upon her in the same way as Tess does. When Tess returns to her hometown after being seduced by Alec, “the people who had turned their heads turned them again ...observing her whispered to each other. She knew what their whispers were about, grew sick at heart”. Since “She had been made to break an accepted social law,”²⁰ the pressure of public opinion makes Tess feel too shamed to live, “wearing and wasting her

¹⁷ Ibid., p.81

¹⁸ Holderness, Graham. “Reading ‘Deceptions’- A Dramatic Conversation.” *Philip Larkin*. Regan, Stephen, ed. (London: Macmillan, 1997) p.85

¹⁹ Hartley, George. “Nothing to Be Said.” *Philip Larkin 1922-1985: A Tribute*. (London: The Marvell Press, 1988) p.103

²⁰ Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of The D’urbervilles*. Trans. Jiang Jiansong, Peng Daiwen. (Hainan: Hainan International Press Center. 1997) p.83

palpitating heart with every engine of regret that lonely inexperience could devise"²¹. The girl in the poem has the same experience as Tess, and her grief is so deep that her mind "filled with self-tormenting consciousness filled with sharp humiliation"²², "lay open like a drawer of knives" unable to be healed. Both Tess's and this girl's anguish come from the secular bias, ethical norms and conventional mortality, which is "unanswerable, tall and wide", as a result, they feel ashamed with the physical and mental trauma.

In this stanza, Larkin delineates the girl's misfortune and bitterness to reveal the historical evolution of ethics, demonstrating that in the decades following Mayhew's time, people no longer put the blame of the ethical chaos on the vulnerable groups of the society - women, but sympathized them for what happened to them. Women, the victims of sexual abuse, are considered the tragic figures in this ethical chaos. Although the rapist is not delineated in the first stanza, but the more description of the physical and mental torture the girl suffered, the clearer the reader can see the evil of this masculine violence. As the root of this poem is a mixture of detached distance and vivid immediacy, Larkin tells the girl's story as a spectator far away from the ethical locale of the incident, and at the same time, deftly expresses his own view: with time goes by, people no longer agree with Victorian morality and ethics. As shown in this ethical chaos which is caused by a sexual violence, few years after the incident, people agree that the girl who suffers sexual abuse is the victim of the tragedy, and should not be condemned by the city crowd and moral critics, while the rapist, who has disrupted the ethical order, should be condemned.

Larkin disagreed with "impersonal" theory of the modernist, and his poetry was highly personal to describe the unique private experience and his real insight. He had declared that "I write poems to preserve things I have seen/thought/felt (if I may so indicate a composite and complex experience) both for myself and for others, though I feel that my prime responsibility is to the experience itself, which I, trying to keep from oblivion for its sake."²³ He also frankly confessed, "Generally, my poems are related, therefore, to my personal life"²⁴, accordingly, when we read "Deceptions", it is necessary to understand his personal background and the social background. In the 1950s, "sexual liberation" was in ascendant trend in western country. Larkin was greatly affected by this trend and had become an advocate of the sexual revolution. Booth suspects that "the image of rape is an extreme metaphor for his immediate personal feelings concerning his engagement hence the historic tortuousness of his tone"²⁵. It's obviously that the life at the time of composition fuels the poetry, since Larkin wrote this poem when he broke up with his first love - Ruth. At a time when new sex concepts encountered traditional thoughts, Larkin drew on the multifarious facts of experience and distilled them into

²¹ Ibid., p.89

²² Holderness, Graham. "Reading 'Deceptions' - A Dramatic Conversation." P.86

²³ Motion, Andrew. Philip Larkin: A Writer's life. p.273

²⁴ Motion, Andrew. Philip Larkin: A Writer's life. p. 273

²⁵ Booth, James. Philip Larkin: Writer. P.112

a different experience to reveal his own anxiety and meditation. Thus, in stanza two, Larkin reevaluates the story in the modern perspective to express modern people's interpretation of gender and sexuality.

Comparing with stanza one, the tone in stanza two is calm and objective:

Slums, years, have buried you. I would not dare
Console you if I could. What can be said,
Except that suffering is exact, but where
Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic?
For you would hardly care
That you were less deceived, out on that bed,
Than he was, stumbling up the breathless stair
To burst into fulfillment's desolate attic.

In contrast with the enjambment: "All the unhurried day, / Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives", which is emotional and sympathetic; the first line in stanza two: "Slums, years, have buried you" emphasizes the time and spatial distance between the narrator and the incident. Social condition and ethical norm in the 1950s are quite different from that in the Victorian era. As a reader in modern time, "I" could not "Console you" to relief your "suffering", but "where desire takes charge/ readings will grow erratic". The poet attempts to introduce a fundamental ideological difference into the modern reading of this sexual enforcement by "shifting the responsibility for the masculine crime onto some abstract power beyond actual men and women"²⁶. As far as gender and sex are concerned, public opinion is more tolerant of sexual relations between men and women; therefore, an unmarried girl who has lost virginity will cause no big fuss. As the real world required, a subversive ethical system has to be built to keep pace with the development of the society. In this process, there is a conflict between the traditional ethical norms and modern ideas.

Larkin had met Ruth Bowman late in 1943, and they had become lovers after Ruth's eighteenth birthday in 1945. A few months later, Larkin "made a painful contradictory universe for Ruth to inhabit, a universe in which she was kept in a state of permanent eagerness with no real hope of finding permanent satisfaction."²⁷ Since Ruth, as a traditional girl, took it for granted that their love affair should lead to marriage, however, whenever the possibility was mentioned, it threw Larkin into a convulsion of dread, and the sexual anxiety in his earlier years had converted into moral anxiety. Larkin's parents' unhappy marriage left him with a conviction that marriage, children and household chores would distract his time and energy as a poet, which was incompatible with his ideal of becoming a writer. In the year of writing this poem, he revealed his dilemma in a letter to his friend, "My relations with women are governed by a shrinking sensitivity, a morbid sense of sin, a furtive lechery"²⁸, to be more exact, he explained, "If we

²⁶ Holderness, Graham. "Reading 'Deceptions'- A Dramatic Conversation." p.90

²⁷ Motion, Andrew. *Philip Larkin: A Writer's life*. p.137

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.190

part, I shall be tormented by remorse at not having married. If we marry, I shall spend my life mentally kicking myself for having so carelessly given up priceless liberty.... And instead of equipped with a pick and span battery of desires and the means to gratify them, I have only illusions, inhibitions, deceptions.”²⁹ His perplexity and guilt displayed in these letters are best exhibited in “Deceptions”: “you were less deceived, out on that bed, / Than he was”.

“That you were less deceived, out on that bed, / Than he was” is the crowning touch to the poem, but also the most controversial verse for critics. Larkin had been criticized for his defiant exculpation for the rapist as the one more deceived. Cleath averts: “the second half of the poem is a denial of the first, a betrayal of the achieved reality of art, a failure of the poetic imagination The impulse to tamper, to explain, to reflect and philosophies, to intervene with some deliberate, willed intention, finally destroys the poem.”³⁰ While, Kate attacked this part of the poem from a feminist’s reading that Larkin’s sympathetically exculpating the male perpetrator as a victim will lead to excuse the rapist and to blame their victim, making the innocent suffer over again((Holderness. 86). To debate the above counterviews, Raymond, reading in a modern perspective, approves of Larkin’s “desire” explanation:

This is the true importance of the poem, which consists in Larkin’s recognition that every member of that oppressed Victorian underclass was a victim of deceptions, blinded by ideological illusion to the real condition. The man who exploits the woman is himself in turn exploited by a more powerful agency. His “desire” begins as the most basic human need – for love, for recognition, for an end to isolation. But in these condition of alienation, where men and women cannot know either themselves of one another, can only see and use one another as objects, this “desire” is deflected, distorted and turned to cruelty and appetitive lust.³¹

In my opinion, all the critics mentioned above have failed to notice the significance of these words "Slums, years" which appears at the beginning of the stanza. Separated both spatially and temporarily by the two words, Larkin shifts the ethical locales from the Victorian era to the 1950s, to read this historic event in a detached, rational point of view, highlighting how the passing of time enables new angles of vision. As a detached spectator, Larkin “would not dare / Console you if I could”, since the era of this tragedy has already been a part of history, any consolation or censure makes no difference to the injured girl , then what lessons can the modern people learn from this tragedy ? “Stumbling up the breathless stair / To burst into fulfillment’s desolate attic” suggests a moral imbalance as well as a physical one and the “burst(ing)” in the last line implies not only the man’s ejaculation but also the shattering of his erroneous perception. This rapist thought his desire got satisfied, but what he actually got was an utterly solitude. Larkin defiantly claims: the man is more deceived, since the raped girl is well aware that she is a victim, and is sober enough to know who is to blame, and what kind of consequence there would be; the rapist man, although having tried “breathlessly” to satisfy his

²⁹ Motion, Andrew. *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s life*. p.193

³⁰ Holderness, Graham. “Reading ‘Deceptions’- A Dramatic Conversation.” p.86

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.88

sexual desire, what he has got in the end is pain and “desolate” isolation. The man is self-deceived; and he acts on his illusions is truly dangerous. Larkin had once revealed that “the agent is always more deceived than the patient, because action comes from desire, and we all know that desire comes from wanting something we haven’t got, which may not make us any happier when we have it. On the other hand, suffering – well, there is positively no deceptions about that.”³² In his opinion, not only the sexual fulfillment got from violence is a kind of deception; fame, wealth and even marriage that most people pursuit all their life is various kinds of “deceptions”. Many of his poems, such as “Place, Loved ones”, “Next, Please” and “going, going”, express the same idea: the plight of love, of happy families, the blankness of time and life.

Larkin has no specific relationship with any individual described in this poem, but he establishes a temporary, yet deeply empathetic and intimate relationship with the historical document, writing a bit of himself into the margins of the text in which he is immersed, a text devised by selective disjunction. As stated previously in this paper, there are three decisive elements in the narration of a *flâneur*'s works. In the case of “Deceptions”, the three elements are embodied by three kinds of people: the injured party – a sexual abused girl; the criminal – the rapist; the crowd- both “bridal London” and the modern people represented by “I”. Of all these elements, the crowd is the pivotal one in the reading of this poem, since “Whenever we fully engage with any story, we engage not with abstract concepts or moral codes but with persons, both with the characters in the story and the implied person who has chosen to portray them in this precise way.”³³ The “implied person” in “Deceptions” to convey the moral codes is the crowd. In Stanza one, the crowd is “bridal London”, which is a metaphor of the sanctimonious Victorian women on one hand, on the other, a metaphorical description of Victorian morality on virtue and of gender conflicts. In stanza two, the crowd is “I”, the representative of modern people, who believe that “Where /Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic”, that rapist is an unwitting subject of an act of cruel deceptions. The different crowds in different stanzas reveal that sexual morality and ethical norm changes with time, so do people’s attitude towards gender identity. In Victorian era, people thought that the raped woman was the initiator of the depravity since her sexuality had caused ethical chaos. Decades later, it was generally agreed that a raped woman was the victim of the tragedy, and Victorian ethics played an accessory part in her exploitation, although the rapist was not mentioned in this part, he was alluded to as the one to be condemned. In the second stanza, Larkin subversively suggests: the rapist and the raped are both the victims of this tragedy, to be exact, the rapist is the one more deceived. Larkin’s interpreting of this sexual event faithfully reflects an unprecedented change of sexual attitudes in the last century, and practically reveals his

³² Swarbrick, Andrew. *Out of Reach, The Poetry of Philip Larkin*. (London: Macmillan Press LTD, 1995) p.43

³³ Booth, Wayne C. “Why Banning Ethical Criticism is a Serious Mistake.” *Philosophy and Literature* 22.2(1998) p.275

“objections to the hypocrisies of conventional sexual politics that hamper the lives of both sexes in equal measure”³⁴.

4. Conclusion

As an intellectual of the twentieth-century, Larkin attempted to explore the uncomfortable or terrifying experiences thrust upon common people in the modern age through his keen observation to society, not only something he had seen or heard, but also the historical documents he had read. In "Deceptions", Larkin repeats a sexual crime again and again by different voice: first, a woman's voice mediated by Mayhew, then her voice mediated by a Hardy's type of reader, finally a male consolatory voice mediated by a modern reader. The poem employs this repetition as a vehicle for contemplating sex, gender and ethics. By these repetitions, his poetry seems to be not only the necessary expression of his temperament but the very voice of his view of modernity, the pure expression of the contradictory moral value and countervailing social ideology. Like a flâneur, a solitude and distance spectator, Larkin best exemplifies the modernist dilemmas and subtly extends the ethical program beyond reform of individuals to whole societies and epoch.

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³⁴ Cooper, Stephen. *Philip Larkin: Subversive Writer*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004. p.179