

## Frozen Landscapes: The Symbolism of Winter in Philip Larkin's *A Girl in Winter*

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### **Abstract**

Philip Larkin's novel, *A Girl in Winter*, showcases his adept use of wintry imagery to convey the seriousness and universality of human experience. Through vivid descriptions of snow, ice, frost, and cold, Larkin creates a bleak landscape that mirrors the protagonist's sense of loneliness and displacement as a refugee from war-torn Europe. These wintry elements serve as a backdrop for the protagonist's psychological turmoil, with snow symbolizing hope in moments of brightness and despair in its dirty, brown form. Larkin masterfully intertwines these images with the theme of human relationships, showing how they have deteriorated in the face of adversity. The protagonist's emotional paralysis is reflected in the frozen stillness of her surroundings, while her unsatisfied dreams cry out against their deprivation. Despite Larkin's initial modesty, *A Girl in Winter* emerges as a compelling novel that deserves recognition in its own right.

**Keywords:** A Girl in Winter- Philip Larkin- wintry imagery.

**المناظر الطبيعية المجمدة: رمزية الشتاء في رواية فيليب لاركن "فتاة في الشتاء"**

### **مستخلص**

تعرض رواية فيليب لاركن، فتاة في الشتاء، استخدامه الماهر للصور الشتوية لنقل جدية وعالمية التجربة الإنسانية. من خلال الأوصاف الحية للثلج والجليد والصقيع والبرد، يخلق لاركن منظرًا طبيعيًا قاتمًا يعكس إحساس بطل الرواية بالوحدة والنزوح كلاجئ من أوروبا التي مزقتها الحرب. تعمل هذه العناصر الشتوية كخلفية للاضطراب النفسي لبطل الرواية، حيث يرمز الثلج إلى الأمل في لحظات السطوع واليأس في شكله البني القذر. ويربط لاركن هذه الصور ببراعة مع موضوع العلاقات الإنسانية، موضحًا كيف تدهورت هذه العلاقات في مواجهة الشدائد. ينعكس الشلل العاطفي الذي تعاني منه البطلة في السكون المتجمد الذي يحيط بها، بينما تصرخ أحلامها غير المحققة ضد حرمانها. على الرغم من تواضع لاركن في البداية، إلا أن رواية "فتاة في الشتاء" تظهر كرواية مقنعة تستحق التقدير في حد ذاتها.

**الكلمات الدالة:** فتاة في الشتاء - فيليب لاركن - صور شتوية.

## **Frozen Landscapes: The Symbolism of Winter in Philip Larkin's *A Girl in Winter***

**Dr. Ramadan A-Azzawi**

Philip Larkin (1922-1985) stands out as one of the prominent English writers of the latter half of the twentieth century. Renowned as both a poet and a novelist, he offers profound insights into the desolation experienced by his generation in the aftermath of World War II. Reflecting on the war's impact on his cohort, Larkin, in his "Introduction" to *Jill*, observes how it humbled them: "At an age when self-importance would have been normal, events cut us ruthlessly down to size" (12).

Initially, Larkin began his literary journey with poetry that leaned heavily on established styles, yet he later transitioned to crafting two original novels: *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947). These works garnered a peculiar form of popularity, each being reprinted twice. During this period, Larkin primarily identified as a novelist, expressing a preference for the richness, breadth, and depth found in novels over poetry: "I wanted to 'be a novelist' in a way I never wanted to 'be a poet,' yes. Novels seem to me to be richer, broader, deeper, more enjoyable than poems" (RW 63).

However, after struggling for five years to produce a third novel, Larkin came to the realization that his capacity for novel writing had waned. He felt compelled to abandon fiction and return to poetry, a fate shared by many poet-novelists where one aspect of their craft tends to overshadow the other. Even in 1982, amidst his considerable success as a poet, Larkin lamented his unrealized aspirations in novel writing, attributing their failure to the demanding nature of the form:

I still think novels are much more interesting than poems – a novel is so spreading, it can be so fascinating and so difficult. I think they were just too hard for me. I've said somewhere that novels are about other people and poems are about yourself. I think that was the trouble, really. I didn't know

enough about other people, I didn't like them enough. (RW 49)

This analysis delves into Larkin's adept utilization of wintry imagery in his second and final novel, *A Girl in Winter*. Through the seamless integration of these images with the novel's thematic elements, Larkin exhibits a poetic sensibility that foreshadows his later acclaim as a renowned poet. Employing various agents of winter such as snow, ice, frost, mist, fog, clouds, and darkness, Larkin crafts a captivating wintry tableau painted in "many greys." These elements conspire against the protagonist, heightening her sense of loneliness, deepening her sorrow, and chilling her desires and expectations.

The wintry backdrop proves particularly fitting for the novel's protagonist, Katherine, a displaced refugee from an unspecified European country who finds herself in England amidst the ravages of war. Moreover, these wintry elements imbue the events of the narrative with nuanced shades of meaning and emotion, reflecting the underlying discord threatening human connections. Larkin adeptly harmonizes Katherine's psychological state with the atmospheric conditions surrounding her; her emotional paralysis and frigidity manifest in the wintry landscape. When fleeting moments of happiness punctuate Katherine's prolonged winter, even the snow seems to glisten with newfound vitality. However, as her heart grows heavy, which is often the case, the snow transforms into a drab, disheartening brown powder.

*A Girl in Winter* was published in 1947, coinciding with one of the most severe winters of the century, almost as if the title of the novel, conceived two years prior to its publication, foresaw the bitterness and intensity of this particular winter. In 1947, England was still grappling with the aftermath of the war, and the additional burden of coping with one of the most severe winters on record only compounded the nation's challenges. From February 22 to March 17, 1947, snowfall was a daily occurrence somewhere in the United Kingdom, with temperatures rarely climbing more than a degree or two above freezing. The snow, often powdery, quickly accumulated into deep drifts, exacerbated by strong winds. These

drifts caused widespread disruptions, blocking roads and railways, and isolating communities for several days. The harshness of this winter closely mirrored the atmosphere suggested by the novel's original title, "*The Kingdom of Winter*."

Reflecting on the aptness of the novel's title in light of the weather during its publication year, Larkin remarked, "It was published by Faber in the great freeze-up of 1946-7 in February – very appropriate in view of the title, almost like a cosmic publicity campaign. And I thought this was it, I'm made" (*RW* 49).

*A Girl in Winter* offers a glimpse into the life of Katherine, a twenty-two-year-old refugee who sought sanctuary in England from an unspecified European country during World War II. Working as an assistant in a small library in an anonymous provincial town, Katherine endures the demeaning treatment of her boss, Mr. Anstey, who frequently disparages her for trivial matters and emphasizes her foreignness while assigning her menial tasks.

On a particularly frigid day, Katherine is tasked with accompanying the ailing Miss Green, a fellow librarian, to the dentist amidst the fog-laden, snow-clogged streets of the city. Amidst the bleakness of her present circumstances, Katherine drifts into a warm reverie, reminiscing about her youthful visit to her pen pal, Robin Fennel, and his English family six years prior. Anticipating a response to her letter, Katherine eagerly awaits Robin's promised visit later that afternoon.

However, upon returning to the library, Katherine is dismayed to discover Miss Green's ungrateful betrayal of her trust and Robin's abrupt cancellation of his visit. Upon reaching home, Katherine is startled to find an inebriated Robin stationed at her doorstep, a far cry from the mature and responsible teenager she once knew. It becomes apparent that his intentions are solely carnal.

Disillusioned by the fleeting and superficial nature of their relationship, Katherine grapples with self-deception before ultimately accepting the disappointments inherent in her life's wintry landscape. Consequently, she consents to Robin's advances,

finding solace in her newfound acceptance of herself and the world around her.

The novel is meticulously divided into three parts, with the first and third sections unfolding over the course of a single winter day, while the middle section offers a flashback to a summer interlude with the Fennel family. This structural arrangement facilitates a seamless transition between the tangible present and the wistful reminiscences of the past, effectively encapsulating the overarching theme of the conflict between dreams and reality.

Katherine's yearning to recapture the past, with its warmth, brightness, joy, and romance, starkly contrasts with the harshness, sterility, sadness, and isolation of her present reality. The novel's structure serves as a poignant reflection of Katherine's internal struggle, as her idyllic dreams collide with the starkness of her present circumstances. Despite her fervent hopes, the richness of her summer reveries is overshadowed by the bleakness of her wintry reality, forcing her to confront the irrevocable passage of time and the uncertainty of the future.

David Timms aptly characterizes the novel as a narrative of maturity and acceptance, wherein characters grapple with the harsh realities of life and learn to embrace what is authentic rather than cling to false expectations. Larkin himself remarked on the novel's thematic essence, emphasizing the inherent limitations of both interpersonal relationships and individual identity, which form the crux of *A Girl in Winter*'s narrative.

In essence, the novel offers little sympathy for illusions or misplaced expectations. As Larkin noted in an interview with *The Observer*, the central narrative of *A Girl in Winter* revolves around the inherent constraints of human connection and self-realization, encapsulating the poignant realization that there are inherent limits to both external relationships and internal self-discovery.

*A Girl in Winter* stands as a testament to Larkin's mastery of prose, showcasing an authoritative stylistic approach that eschews emulation of other writers' rhetoric. It epitomizes Larkin's unique poetic conception of the novel, which he perceives as akin to an extended poem. In an interview with *Paris Review*, Larkin himself

likened a novel to a long poem, affirming the poetic essence of *A Girl in Winter* (RW 56).

Larkin's remarkable poetic imagination shines through in the novel, foreshadowing his later success as a poet. His evocative descriptions of weather at the outset of each section and his precise, realistic prose invite readers to vividly visualize and empathize with the protagonist's emotional landscape. By consciously infusing his prose with poetic sensibility and meticulous attention to language, Larkin transforms the novel into an extended poetic composition.

Described by Larkin as a "diffused poem," *A Girl in Winter* relies heavily on pictorial depictions of its wintry setting to convey Katherine's sense of loneliness and desolation. Laurence Lerner observes the novel's careful planning and exquisite wintry imagery, which serve to symbolize themes of withdrawal and isolation (7-8). This suggestive use of imagery is central to the novel's resonance and success, as noted by Bruce K. Martin, who highlights Larkin's adeptness in employing images and concrete details in a quasi-symbolic manner, imbuing the narrative with greater universality and depth (119).

As a refugee navigating life in a foreign land during wartime, Katherine experiences the harshness of winter with a heightened intensity, her psychological and emotional paralysis mirrored in the chilling atmosphere surrounding her. The city itself seems to freeze under the weight of snow, with the sky described as motionless as a pebble trapped in the surface of a frozen pond. John Reibetanz notes the novel's portrayal of a city gripped by cold and heavy snowfall, drained of color and movement, its afternoon light swallowed by early sunsets (268).

Everywhere she turns, snow, frost, and ice grip the landscape, rendering life stiff and transforming it into a desolate, sterile expanse. Katherine's own depiction as a crocus doomed to wither alongside the snow encapsulates the bleakness of her existence amidst the frozen wastes. The individuals she encounters reflect this frigidity and indifference, hindering the development of meaningful relationships. Detached from her past and estranged

from her present, Katherine finds herself unable to invest in human connections, feeling as though a part of her has withered without her consent or awareness.

Consequently, she becomes reluctant to engage with others, feeling devoid of the capacity to give and disillusioned by the lack of reciprocity. In an attempt to shield herself from the biting cold of her surroundings, Katherine retreats into wishful dreams and illusory expectations, seeking solace in a world insulated from the harsh realities of her existence.

Section I opens with a poetic portrayal of a wintry landscape enveloped in snow and frosted with ice, where even the inhabitants seem to contract under the cold's grip. Throughout the night, no new snowfall occurs, yet the persistent frost maintains the drifts in their frozen state, leading people to speculate about impending snowfall. As dawn breaks, the absence of sunlight contributes to the desolate scene, with a vast canopy of cloud masking the sky, rendering it a dull brown hue. Without the snow's reflective surface, the morning resembles the onset of night rather than day, with the faint illumination appearing to emanate from the snowy ground itself (*GW* 11).

Snow holds a profound significance within the narrative, imbuing the cityscape with a pervasive sense of coldness, isolation, and desolation. Blanketing every surface, it gleams in the absence of sunlight, casting an eerie pallor over the surroundings. The unmoving drifts of snow resemble lifeless bodies, frozen in place by the biting frost and the relentless chill. Even the expansive cloud cover overhead, laden with the promise of more snow, appears impenetrable, leaving the inhabitants suspended in anticipation. Contrary to initial impressions, it is not the sky that bears a brownish tint, but rather the trodden snow, providing the sole source of illumination in the dim morning light.

The city lies beneath a heavy blanket of snow, its presence stifling movement and isolating communities, rendering the landscape monochromatic and devoid of distinction. Snow accumulates in ditches and hollows across fields, leaving only birds to traverse its surface. In certain lanes, the wind sculpted the

snow into flawless drifts, reaching the very tops of hedges. Villages find themselves cut off, necessitating the efforts of work crews to clear passage on the roads; meanwhile, laborers remain confined indoors, unable to venture out for work. Nearby airfields remain deserted, with all flights grounded due to the wintry conditions. Out-buildings and fences bear the marks of wind-driven snow, with the entire scene enveloped in a stillness so profound that it resembles a meticulously rendered painting (*GW* 11).

This featureless expanse of white suggests a loss of identity and meaning, as objects and landscapes become indistinguishable beneath the snow's uniform cover. Andrew Motion comments on this passage, noting how the snow erases specific features from the landscape, reducing it to a collection of representative elements—fields, villages, railways, factories, and cities—all bathed in a uniform white silence reminiscent of a formal painting (55). The mesmerizing allure of snow can have a profound impact on individuals, causing them to lose focus and feel a physical tightening in their bones after prolonged exposure: "To gaze at the snow for too long had a hypnotic effect, draining away one's ability to concentrate, while the cold seemed to tighten the joints, making tasks more arduous and uncomfortable" (*GW* 11). This hypnotic quality extends to its therapeutic potential, as evidenced by its use in alleviating Miss Green's toothache, with cold air described as feeling like "She tilted back her head as if the cold air were wet muslin laid across her head" (*GW* 31), and cold water nearly halting the pain altogether: "It is so cold it almost stops my tooth hurting" (*GW* 34).

The hypnotic allure of snow often deters people from venturing outdoors, preferring the comfort of their beds. However, the necessity of carrying on with life, albeit within the confines of indoor spaces, remains paramount: "Life had to be carried on, in no matter what circumscribed way; even though one went no further than the window-seat, there was plenty to be done indoors, saved for such time as this " (*GW* 11).



Amidst the bitterly cold and desolate wintry setting, Katherine commences her day at the library, where frosted-over windows contribute to the chilly atmosphere within. The pervasive cold, both inside and outside the library, serves as a poignant symbol of the profound loneliness that shadows Katherine wherever she roams. Among strangers who regard her as a foreign interloper, Katherine yearns for the warmth and acceptance she once found among the Fennel family.

There exists a palpable synchronicity between Katherine's emotional state and the surrounding weather. When she is overcome with sadness, the weather mirrors her desolation with its bleakness and biting cold. Conversely, moments of happiness are accompanied by more agreeable weather, where even the chill becomes invigorating and the snow takes on a sparkling allure. Thus, despite the daunting prospect of accompanying Miss Green to the dentist amidst such hostile weather, Katherine's spirits remain buoyed by the anticipation of a letter from Robin and the hope of assistance from the Fennels, which might offer solace in her grim wintry present.

Her temporary uplifted mood seems to coax a flirtatious response from the cold itself, as she and Miss Green stand atop the library steps, the frosty air swirling around them as they embark on their journey to the dentist: "They stood for a second on the top of the steps, the cold rising up their skirts, and began to walk down as a clock struck ten-fifteen" (*GW* 26-27). In this moment, Katherine finds herself enchanted by the cold, perceiving it as delightful, while the frost, despite its numbing effect, imbues the surroundings with a crystalline brilliance that captivates her senses.

Katherine awakens from her reverie about Robin's anticipated letter only to find the city transformed into a desolate wasteland. The bank was now blanketed in snow, strewn with discarded bus tickets. A newspaper, carefully folded, lay wedged into a drift, frozen stiff (*GW* 27). On the bus alongside the aloof Miss Green, Katherine observes a pile of bricks, coated in frost, marking the site of a demolished house (*GW* 30), an image evocative of destruction, desolation, and abandonment. The

remnants of the razed structure, cloaked in frost, resemble the fur of a lifeless, white bear.

Upon disembarking from the bus for a brief respite prompted by Miss Green's severe illness, Katherine notices the greenery blanketed in snow (*GW* 31), and the benches where they rest dusted with frost while the laurel bushes rustle (*GW* 32). However, as they make their way to seek shelter, they inadvertently crush a thin layer of frozen snow (*GW* 32). This act of breaking through the fragile layer of frozen snow may symbolize a tentative exploration of new depths in their relationship. With Miss Green weakened and reliant on her, Katherine finds herself unexpectedly filled with sympathy and a sense of purpose. Encountering someone who requires her assistance and care brings Katherine a rare sense of fulfillment, prompting her to remark, "for the first time in months she had happiness to spare" (*GW* 35).

Section II transports us back to a pivotal three-week summer getaway with Robin Fennel and his family, a nostalgic interlude from Katherine's past at the age of sixteen. Unlike the wintry backdrop of the first and final sections, this summer retreat boasts an idyllic setting, complete with "every romantic background ready to hand, deep cornfields, the burning-glass of the sky, the willows by the river, the white lanes" (*GW* 127).

The warmth, tranquility, and sheer beauty of this summer experience suggest a deliberate effort to craft a perfect memory, to be cherished during the desolate, sterile winter days that may lie ahead. Katherine reminisces about her initial arrival in England, recalling a morning of unparalleled stillness and heat, not just a fortuitous fine day, but one in a series of flawlessly sunny days that had persisted for a week. Each successive day seemed to surpass the previous one, gradually evolving towards a state of perfection (*GW* 67).

The poetic depiction of the exquisite weather and captivating natural landscapes mirrors the idyllic essence of this bygone era, which unfolded leisurely and delightfully, capturing every minute detail of this unforgettable visit. She could almost

sense time slipping by at a leisurely pace, akin to thick cream cascading from a silver jug. With each passing moment, it enriched her experiences, contributing to her sense of fulfillment (*GW* 101). It was a prolonged immersion, imbuing her mind and soul with cherished memories and enduring joys.

Through juxtaposing Katherine's challenging experiences in the cold winter at the library with the warm sunshine of her English visit, Larkin employs deliberate symbols to accentuate the stark contrast between a youthful Katherine, guided by emotional spontaneity, and a more mature Katherine who adopts a guarded approach to personal relationships as a form of self-preservation (Domnarski 16).

Katherine clings to the memory of the summer idyll to bolster herself against the harsh realities of the wintry present, yet its delicate nature becomes apparent when confronted with the storms of life. James Booth remarks on the ephemeral nature of this summer oasis, noting that its portrayal is imbued with a language of delicate fragility, capturing both its beauty and vulnerability (54). In the face of ongoing challenges and frustrations, Katherine finds herself prone to idealizing these cherished memories from the past, falling prey to romantic illusions. Bruce K. Martin emphasizes this vulnerability, highlighting how Katherine, amidst the hardships of wartime exile and loneliness, fears anything that might threaten the fragile construct of imperfect recollection and fantasy that comprises her image of the summer with the Fennels (115-16).

The synchronization between Katherine's emotional state and the weather is palpable throughout this flashback section. The weather undergoes fluctuations corresponding to the level of intimacy between Katherine and Robin. As her fascination with him grows, the weather becomes more pleasant, with brighter sunshine illuminating their interactions. Conversely, when their connection wanes, the weather reflects this shift, dimming in response. In the initial days of their acquaintance, Katherine's preconceived notion of Robin as unremarkable proves to be inaccurate. She discovers a depth and maturity in him beyond her

expectations, finding herself captivated by his physical attractiveness, symbolized by the radiant sunlight:

...the sun seemed simultaneously to lift up at them from the ground and to press down on their heads and shoulders. Robin appeared to straighten himself against it, looking round at the trees that ascended on all sides towards the sky. He looked handsome to the point of sleekness...They walked together through the pouring light... (GW 94-95).

Even during their tennis match, the setting mirrors the burgeoning connection between Katherine and Robin played out beneath the radiant sun on the deep red tennis court nestled amidst the lush garden and towering, sunlit trees, their confrontation takes on an aura of warmth and intimacy: "So on the dark red tennis court, sunk below the garden and surrounded by high, rustling trees that glowed and rippled in the sun, Robin and Katherine faced each other" (GW 99).

Katherine experiences a realization, at an indiscernible moment, that she has fallen in love with Robin, despite the absence of reciprocation on his part (GW 127). Her affection remains unrequited, as Robin fails to acknowledge her fervent emotions adequately. Blinded by her hopeful fantasies and unrealistic expectations, Katherine attributes Robin's lack of romantic overtures to the constant presence of Jane, their chaperone. However, this illusion shatters when they find themselves alone, and Robin's demeanor remains as impassive as a "small frog" she nudges with a straw in vain attempts to coax movement.

During their excursion to Oxford, Katherine eagerly anticipates Robin's declaration of love, but it never materializes. His failure to respond appropriately to her romantic gestures leaves her feeling frustrated, dispelling her illusions of a romantic relationship with him. Mirroring Katherine's profound disappointment, the pale sun disappears, replaced by dark clouds and steady rainfall as they journey home: "The sun had gone in, and a light rain began to fall in the wind. Robin straightened up regretfully, and, looking round the sky with a knowledgeable air, said: I half expected this" (GW 141).

The relative stability of the weather during the final days of Katherine's visit to the Fennels reflects her growing disillusionment with Robin's true character, despite her efforts to maintain a positive outlook on the visit despite its disappointments.

Section III thrusts us back into the wintry present, characterized by icy underdeveloped relationships, the numbing snow of indifference, the frost of isolation, and the mist of uncertainty. Katherine transitions from the warmth of companionship to the chill of solitude, from the beauty of the past to the harshness of the present. Once again, a seamless alignment exists between her emotional state and the prevailing weather. In her reluctance to confront Robin, she mirrors the steadfastness of the unyielding sky, refusing to release more snow, akin to a frozen pebble trapped in the surface of a pond, immobile and unchanging: "But the snow remained absent. The sky retained its steadfastness, resembling a pebble frozen in the pond's surface" (*GW* 177).

Much like her surroundings, Katherine's thoughts and desires are ensnared in a state of frozen stagnation. Calvin Bedient characterizes her "permanently frozen desires" as akin to the orderly yet glacial progression of an ice floe (73). Her emotional paralysis extends its reach to every facet of her environment: from the failed personal connections to the barren and desolate landscapes. Even the once-graceful snow, which sparkled with her elevated spirits, now assumes an ugly and disheartening appearance:

...the winter persisted. It lacked the romance or charm found in the countryside; here, the snow, once graceful, now lay days old and trodden into a brown powder, hastily shoveled into the gutters. In untouched patches, such as atop burnt-out buildings or warehouse roofs, or lining the railways yards, it only served to accentuate the scene's dinginess and despair. (*GW* 177)

In the midst of her desolate and freezing existence, Katherine finds herself engulfed in a profound sense of solitude within an unforgiving world: "Never in her life had she experienced such bottomless despair and loneliness: there was nothing familiar,

nothing of her own choosing, nothing that she could turn to and grasp in the face of everything else" (*GW* 181). However, fleeting moments of faint hope flicker through the seemingly unyielding sky of her rigid reality, akin to a somber winter landscape painting lacking the beauty of its inspiration (*GW* 184). Katherine is now entrenched within this frozen tableau of winter, yearning for a rekindling of her connection with the Fennels in hopes of thawing the icy numbness that has encased a part of her being (*GW* 185). Life, once brimming with beauty and allure, has become devoid of its former charm, with Katherine anticipating the worst and expecting nothing to surprise her. Her reluctance to trust or love stems from a belief that detachment is safer than involvement. As the specter of death looms, Katherine envisions departing this world without having realized her dreams or fulfilled her expectations. This pessimistic outlook on life underscores Katherine's stoic acceptance of her wintry present, with all its frustrations and hardships, as she resigns herself to the reality that she lacks the power to alter the trajectory of her existence.

In this section, mist assumes a significant role, mirroring the mistiness and enigma enveloping Katherine's life. Her past remains veiled in mystery, while her present and future are obscured by uncertainty. As Katherine embarks on her wintry journey to return Miss Parbury's handbag – taken by mistake – and retrieve Miss Green's, the mist thickens, obscuring her vision. As she turns into Cheshunt Avenue, she notices the mist, which had lingered undispersed since morning, thickening. The road ahead disappears into a haze, resembling a dead-end (*GW* 190). The increasing density of the mist parallels Katherine's struggle to comprehend the people around her. Miss Parbury's symbolic query upon Katherine's departure – "Are you sure you can find your way?" (*GW* 201) – underscores the difficulty Katherine faces in navigating this mysterious and convoluted world. Indeed, Miss Parbury had been correct about the mist. It had intensified to the point where, in the heart of the city, it bordered on fog (*GW* 202). Consequently, on her return journey from the library, Katherine experiences a mishap, slipping from the curb to the snowy gutter

with a jolt, remarking, "Katherine slipped with a jar from the kerb to the gutter into the crusty snow", saying: "This is the weather to lay you under the ground" (*GW* 220).

Leaving the library, Katherine is confronted with a series of shocks: Miss Green's betrayal, Mr. Anstey's furious insults, and Robin's abrupt cancellation of his visit. As she navigates the foggy streets on her way home, visibility is severely limited, compounded by the presence of "worn-out snow" strewn along the path (*GW* 204). The darkness envelops everything, rendering the frost-encrusted landscape invisible. In the absence of the moon's glow to illuminate the frost-covered scenery, the darkness loomed like a cathedral, an impenetrable veil. It blanketed the town and extended to the frozen allotments, beyond which lay the scattering of houses, brittle grass, and dense woods (*GW* 224).

She now realizes that her past is lost forever, and the once-delicate idyll has been shattered and obliterated by the day's calamities (Booth, James 55). This reinforces her belief in the importance of solitude, as she consciously rejects the past symbolized by Robin. From her suffering emerges a newfound understanding of herself: Amidst the swirling wastelands that surround her, there remains a kernel of enjoyment (*GW* 225). Despite the city's icy grip and the sense of displacement in her surroundings, Katherine finds solace in the knowledge that she can still retreat into sleep when the challenges of the day become overwhelming (*GW* 225). This realization is pivotal, as it empowers her to relinquish the illusions of daydreams and wishful thinking, embracing the austere reality of her present circumstances with stoic acceptance.

Through her encounter with Robin, Katherine gains a newfound clarity in her perception of both her past and present. She views their meeting with stark realism, devoid of any romanticized notions; a young man from her past has arrived on a wintry night, and now they find themselves in a sparsely furnished room, illuminated by a fire, with the cold darkness of the street below (*GW* 230).



She no longer sees Robin as the embodiment of her idealized dreams. Instead, he is reduced to a mere "chance acquaintance", a rough, intoxicated soldier who has ventured from his camp into the night (*GW* 233). The snowflake clinging to his shoulder symbolizes nothing more than his fleeting lust, which quickly dissipates upon fulfillment. Despite her attempts to find solace in his presence, Katherine remains unaffected, as cold and indifferent as "a blasted block of ice" (*GW* 238), tossed aside by the wintry storm of war. Fragile and vulnerable like the last leaf clinging to an autumn tree, she resigns herself to Robin's request for intimacy, not out of genuine desire, but as an act of "insignificant kindness", soon to be forgotten amidst the passage of time (*GW* 243).

The snowfall that occurs shortly before and during Katherine's encounter with Robin symbolizes her contentment with her decision to sleep with him, or rather, with her newfound acceptance of her present reality without complaint. William Domnarski highlights this by stating that Katherine's interaction with Robin demonstrates her newly embraced detachment, while the snowfall at the conclusion of the novel suggests her comfort with this new perspective. Her attitude can be described as a serene acceptance of life's disappointments. Having moved past her daydreams and wishful thinking, Katherine now looks towards the future (17).

She no longer feels trapped in her past or weighed down by its memories. Instead, she is determined to make the most of her current circumstances. Martin further comments on this transformation: Rather than indulging in illusions, Katherine is now committed to exploring the possibilities for happiness in the present and future. As a result, she faces her time with Robin that night, as well as the following day, with a newfound openness and tranquility that starkly contrasts with her previous coldness and anxiety (117).

She has come to the realization that living in the harsh reality of the present world is less painful than dwelling in an imaginary realm of unattainable dreams.



The novel ends, mirroring its opening, with a vivid depiction of a harsh winter landscape dominated by snow and ice, symbolizing the physical and emotional states of the two individuals: Amidst the snow, the steady ticking of her watch marked the passage of time. Each snowflake seemed to correspond to a second, gradually melding together in their minds, accumulating into a colossal form resembling either a burial mound or the towering edge of an iceberg concealed from view. Within this shadowy realm, dreams intermingled, teeming with icy sensations and notions, as though frozen floes navigated a dim, uncharted waterway. Progressing methodically, they moved from obscurity into deeper obscurity, adhering to an unbroken sequence, with no hint that their procession would falter, or that eventually, perhaps after countless years, darkness would yield to light (*GW* 248).

This passage is hailed as one of the most poignant in contemporary literature, capturing a profound sense of unfulfilled longing. As the snow falls, representing Katherine's immersion into the passage of time and the reality it brings, the ticking of her watch serves as a stark reminder, particularly to Robin, of looming dangers. With each passing moment, their physical union transcends into a merging of their minds. Their bodies become akin to a "burial mound" or the edge of an iceberg, signifying a spiritual demise. This bleak physical encounter is devoid of life, resembling a grave and exuding the chill of ice. It shatters the enchanting illusion of a warm dream that once shielded Katherine from the biting cold of her present reality, leaving her with scant remnants of the perfection of her idealized past.

Their bodily movements now mimic a somber, methodical procession akin to a funeral procession traversing from one darkness to another. Reflecting on this passage, Katy Aisenberg observes that the focus of their sexual encounter ominously shifts from a bed to a metaphorical "burial mound" or the edge of an iceberg, their lethal potency only partially revealed. Desire remains unfulfilled, relegated to mere contemplation. Katherine and Robin find themselves metaphorically "buried alive" as they attempt to

extract warmth from this frozen tableau. The end of the novel suggests that the failure of sexuality can be even more harrowing than perpetual emotional detachment (160-1).

In this eerily motionless realm of frozen imagery, everything appears to have come to a standstill, devoid of life or vitality. The sole exception is a cluster of unfulfilled dreams, swirling around the entwined bodies, lamenting their inability to manifest, yet ultimately finding solace in the existence of order and fate. Unfulfilled dreams swirl around them, voicing their grievances against their unyielding reality, yet ultimately finding comfort in the presence of such immutable order and destiny. In light of this understanding, the heart, the will, and all impulses toward protest can finally find rest (*GW* 248).

Katherine's heart and will no longer resist her predetermined path; she finds tranquility not only within herself but also in harmony with the world and those around her.

## Conclusion

It's arguable that Larkin's prowess as a novelist exceeds his own evaluation. "A Girl in Winter" stands as a work deserving more significant critical recognition, possessing intrinsic merit beyond its connection to his poetry. The novel intricately weaves wintry imagery throughout its narrative, deftly capturing the protagonist's profound sense of isolation and despair. It presents a fitting backdrop for a character shaped by wintry circumstances: Katherine, a refugee displaced from an unnamed European country by the devastations of war.

The narrative relies heavily on the evocative portrayal of this wintry setting, serving as a mirror to Katherine's inner turmoil. Her psychological stagnation is palpably reflected in her surroundings, her desires seemingly frozen in time, unable to break free from the clutches of the past or find solace in the present. The weather acts as a tangible manifestation of her emotional state, with moments of joy accompanied by glistening snow and playful breezes, while periods of gloom transform the pristine snow into a

dismal powder and obscure the sunshine with overcast skies and rain.

In essence, Larkin masterfully employs the wintry landscape as both a metaphor and a vehicle for character development, infusing the novel with layers of depth and nuance that transcend mere description. Through his skillful crafting of imagery, he invites readers into Katherine's world, where the external environment becomes inseparable from her internal struggles, ultimately enriching the narrative with profound thematic resonance.

The novel portrays a desolate landscape akin to "frozen wastes," resembling a "formal painting" characterized by a "winter landscape in neutral colors" or a "nocturne in many greys." This wintry tableau includes elements such as snow, ice, frost, cold, mist, fog, clouds, rain, and darkness, all of which conspire to exacerbate Katherine's anguish and heighten her sense of isolation. Snow, in particular, plays a significant role in lending the landscape its somber hue. Earlier in the day, when Katherine anticipated receiving a letter from Robin, the snow sparkled brightly, illuminating the morning. However, as events unfold, with Robin canceling his visit and Miss Green betraying her trust, the snow loses its luster, becoming a disheartening brown powder that Katherine slips on. The accumulation of snow only serves to deepen Katherine's loneliness, as it acts as a barrier, separating people and isolating places. However, amidst the coldness and isolation, there are moments of warmth, such as when Katherine and Miss Green crush "a light layer of frozen snow" on their way to the shelter, which briefly fosters a sense of connection between them. Additionally, snow serves as a symbol of Robin's fleeting desire and Katherine's emotional detachment, epitomized by their entombment in a "burial mound," representing their spiritual demise.

The cold depicted in this wintry scene encompasses various shades of meaning. At times, it stiffens bones and makes tasks arduous and unpleasant; yet at others, it offers a soothing effect, akin to "wet muslin" easing Miss Green's pain. Occasionally, it

flirts playfully under skirts as one walks, reminiscent of the steady ticking of a clock marking "ten-fifteen." However, it can also embody a menacing force, akin to a wild animal prowling through the darkness, ensnaring the entire city in its jaws.

Mist and clouds further contribute to the composition of this wintry tableau, adding layers of illusion, indecision, and obscured vision. The thickening mist during Katherine's journey reflects her struggle to comprehend those around her, including Robin, Mr. Anstey, Miss Green, and Miss Parbury. The more perplexed and uncertain Katherine feels, the denser the mist becomes.

Within this static, desolate landscape painted in "many greys," Katherine, the solitary refugee, finds herself ensnared. She is like a girl in winter, yearning to recall a past summer to thaw her frozen spirit and infuse vitality into her frigid existence.

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