Larkin once remarked that ‘First and foremost, writing poems should be a pleasure. So should reading them by God.’ At first sight it is hard to see how poems about ‘unhappiness, loss [and] a sense of missing out’ can be a pleasure either to read or write but, as Larkin said on another occasion, ‘[t]he impulse for producing a poem is never negative; the most negative poem in the world is a very positive thing to have done.’ Larkin enters into more detail about the writing of poetry in his essay ‘The Pleasure Principle’ where he says that it consists of three stages:

The first is when a man becomes obsessed with an emotional concept to such a degree that he is compelled to do something about it. What he does is the second stage, namely, construct a verbal device that will reproduce this emotional concept in anyone who cares to read it, anywhere, anytime. The third stage is the recurrent situation of people in different times and places setting off the device and re-creating in themselves what the poet felt when he wrote it.

This conveys a somewhat simplistic notion of poetic composition. Leaving on one side the fact that Larkin refers only to males he asserts that a poem can only have one meaning to which he gives the rather cumbersome term ‘emotional concept’. He also assumes a division between form and content which cannot really be sustained, since form and content are locked together in a mutually determining relationship. Larkin sees form as secondary to content. It is almost like a freezer keeping the emotional concept fresh until the appearance of the reader. There is some ambiguity here because it is not clear how far the poem reproduces the
emotional concept, nor how far the reader sets it off. Clearly the poem needs the reader and the reader needs the poem, but Larkin writes as if they are somehow independent.

Larkin’s view of the reader is equally problematic, even naive, for he sees no difficulty in the reader experiencing the same emotional concept that he did before enclosing it in the poem. What Larkin of course ignores is the reader’s historical and class position and the literary codes and conventions which he or she brings to the work. Larkin takes an authoritarian attitude towards the reader, circumscribing his or her experience of the work by insisting on its one meaning which, moreover, never changes. Indeed, the reader is envisaged as someone incapable of seeing things as the poet sees them for he or she lacks the poet’s ‘experience [and] education’. In this scenario, the reader is someone to be educated and the question of pleasure disappears into the background. However, the idea that the reader needs educating would make it impossible for him or her to experience the emotional concept in the same way that the poet does, thus collapsing Larkin’s case even further.

Indeed, Larkin’s view of the reader is highly confused. He disparages the academic reader and exalts the common reader who simply enjoys poetry, yet in the poem ‘Fiction and the Reading Public’ he reviles this same reader for his or her vulgarity and ignorance. Who, then, does Larkin imagine the common reader to be? It is unlikely that it is any of the characters who inhabit his poetry though they with their blighted lives, like Mr Bleaney, are common enough. The answer, quite simply, is Larkin himself. Andrew Motion has pointed out how Larkin’s poems characteristically take the form of a debate between the two sides of his personality and, I would add, one of these sides functions as a reader whom Larkin addresses and argues with.

In ‘Dockery & Son’ he asks where the assumptions discussed derive from and answers:

...They’re more a style
Our lives bring with them: habit for a while
Suddenly they harden into all we’ve got...

(CP, p. 165)

Here he assumes a reader with whom he is on familiar terms, and the use of ‘we’ suggests shared experience and values. The reader