UNIT 14: PHILIP LARKIN: "CHURCH GOING"

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14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- familiarise yourself with the life and works of Philip Larkin
- gain a brief idea on the sharp decline of religion particularly in the 1950s
- learn about Larkin's association with the Movement
- discuss the poem "Church going" with reference to the context
- explain Larkin's transforming poetic style
- highlight the critical response to his literary works
- appreciate the concerns and reflections contained in the poem

14.2 INTRODUCTION

Philip Larkin is one of the key poets in the English literary scene in the second half of the century. Larkin's poetry is marked by a sense of disillusionment, pessimism, insularity, and anti-modernism and it is also noted for a characteristic eloquence in many poems, as well as grace, sharpness, and humour in several others. Many of his poems address the

themes of love, marriage, freedom, destiny, ageing, death, and the isolation of the individual. Alan Sinfield in his essay "Varieties of Religion" charts the gradual decline of religion since the 17th century to the present and identifies the 1950s as marking a drastic decline in faith in the face of a growing secularity. In such a modern society that is dominated by television, advertising, modern economic practices, as well as extreme sophistication in technology and bureaucracy, the idea of a single worldview breaks down and with it, Christianity, which underpinned such a worldview, loses its relevance (quoted. in Rudnytzky Schray: 54). Larkin's "Church Going" (published in *The Less Deceived*, 1955), like many of his other poems, also engages with this decline in religion.

14.3 PHILIP LARKIN: THE POET

The unit takes up Philip Larkin's poem "Church Going" with a detailed reference to his life and literary works. In order to acquaint yourself to the poet the following subsections provides you with a detailed explanation of the poet's biography along with the detailed explanation of the prescribed poem.

14.3.1 His Life

Philip Larkin (1922-85) was born on August 9, 1922, in Coventry. He was the second child, and only son, of Sydney and Eva Larkin, the former working there as a City Treasurer from 1922 to 1944. Between 1930 and 1940, he attended the King Henry VIII School where he edited and contributed to the school magazine, *The Coventrian*. From there Larkin went to St. John's College, Oxford, in 1940, and despite the Second World War that took place during this time, Larkin (who had been unable to join the army due to his poor eyesight), completed his degree without interruption, graduating in 1943 with First Class Honours in English. Kingsley Amis and Bruce Montgomery were two of his closest friends there.

During this time, Larkin had also started publishing his poems such as, "Ultimatum", which appeared in the *Listener*, November 28, 1940, and "A Stone Church Damaged by A Bomb", "Mythological

Introduction", and "I dreamed of an out-thrust arm of land". After his graduation Larkin shifted to Wellington in 1943 as the librarian of the local library which he managed single-handedly. There he wrote his first two novels, *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter (1947). The North Ship,* Larkin's first collection of poems, came out in 1945.

In 1946, Larkin became assistant Librarian at the University College of Leicester and in 1949 an Associate of the Library Association. In October 1950, he became Sub-Librarian at Queen's University, Belfast. There, in 1951, Larkin published a small collection of his poems, titled *XX Poems*, that was privately printed in an edition of 100 copies. His next collection, *The Less Deceived*, came out in 1955. Larkin became a Librarian at the University of Hull in the same year. In 1964 Larkin's next collection, *The Whitsun Weddings* was published. This collection, like the earlier one, was well received, and the following year, Larkin was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry.

During the years 1961-71 Larkin contributed a number of monthly reviews of jazz recordings for the *Daily Telegraph*, which were published in a collected edition in 1970 as *All What Jazz: a Record Diary 1961-1968*. He also edited the *Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*, published in 1973. His last collection *High Windows* was published in 1974, and consolidated his position as one of the foremost poets in England. "Aubade", his last great poem, was published in *The Times Literary Supplement* in December 1977.

Larkin chose to remain single for the whole of his life, though he had several important relationships with women. In his statements on poetry and on jazz, Larkin was hostile to the self-conscious adoption of a difficult mode by modernism, and was initially in his poetic career, was associated with the Movement, though his own work's relationship with modernism was more complex than what his position seemed to imply. In 1984, a year before his death, he was offered the Poet Laureateship but turned it down. Philip Larkin died of cancer on December 2 1985 at the age of 63 years.

14. 3.2 His Works

The early poetry of Larkin was influenced by William Butler Yeats and Thomas Hardy, the latter especially in Larkin's first volume of poems, *The North Ship*. The backlash against this volume led Larkin to adopt a starker, self-deprecating style in *The Less Deceived*. It was in this collection that Larkin constructed the poetic persona of the plain-speaking, sceptical, modest, awkward, commonsensical, but ironic observer that became characteristic of not only his poetry but of the Movement as a whole. The Movement consisted of the number of post-war generation of poets anthologised in Robert Conquest's *New Lines* (1956). This persona owed much to the impersonal observer of the modernist poets though the Movement itself was anti-modernist, but it also looked back specifically towards an English context than the international mooring of the modernists.

The next two collections of Larkin, *The Whitsun Weddings* and *High Windows* registered a refinement of the manner and enlargement of the scope of *The Less Deceived*. But they also indicated a move away from the Movement in that the poems in these volumes attempted to draws the reader into an immediate connection with the speaker through the use of vernacular, and slang-like language that reflected a more conversational style.

The mood of Larkin's poems is frequently "sombre, glimpsing the loneliness, emptiness, and mortality that lie underneath social rituals" (Hamilton: 289). However, his pessimism is often a poetic posture, as the poet casts himself in the role of misanthrope. As Hamilton argues,

"[e]ven his darkest poems have their element of black comedy, and there are, besides, a number of exercises in light verse, whether satirical about social mores ("Sexual intercourse began #" In nineteen sixty- three"), sardonic about human relationships ("He married a woman to stop her getting away/I now she's there all day"), or gently mocking of academic life ("Jake Balokowsky, my biographer/ Has this page microfilmed" (Hamilton: 289).

He often engages imaginatively with ordinary lives displaying a feeling of empathy towards them. There is also a note of affirmation that "comes from the metaphors of air and light, the transcendent Utopian gleams which appear throughout his work, highlighting the limitations of the real world, yet offering a vision of hope and integrity which is more than merely cruel" (Hamilton: 289-90).

After 1974, Larkin rarely published any new poem. He became depressed at the thought that "poetry had given him up", and turned increasingly to drink (Hamilton: 290). By this time, he had also become partially deaf and was no longer able to truly enjoy jazz (that had been one of his overwhelming interests). The only notable publication of Larkin during this time was his collected prose, *Required Writing*. "Apart from *'Aubade'* (the definitive statement of his fear of death) and *'Love Again'* (a haunting poem of sexual jealousy), he wrote almost nothing worth preserving in his last ten years" (Hamilton: 290). Nevertheless, Larkin remains "an original, obsessive, deep-feeling poet who courageously refused the consolations of conventional belief" (Hamilton: 290).

14.3.3 List of Works

The major collections of larkin's Poetry were :

The North Ship (1945), *XX Poems* (1951) *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) *and High Windows* (1974)

Among his posthumously published anthologies are *Collected Poems* (1988) and *The Complete Poems* (2012).

Some of his works of nor-fiction are : All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961–1971, Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955–1982 (1983), *Further Requirements: Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Book Reviews 1952–1985,* Larkin, Philip (1979), "The Brynmor Jones Library 1929–1979", in Brennan, Maeve, *"A Lifted Study-Storehouse": The Brynmor Jones Library 1929–1979, updated to 1985*, Hull University Press (published 1987), *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973)



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Why was Philip Larkin unable to join the army? Where did he receive his education?

Q2. Which collection won Larkin the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry?

Q3. Which major movement was Larkin associated with and why?

Q4. In which year was Larkin offered the Poet Laureateship?

Q5. Name the collection of poetry which came to characterise both his poetic style and that of the Movement.

Q6. Name a few poetry collections or anthologies of Philip Larkin.

Q7. Who had inspired Larkin's early poetic works?

14.4 THE TEXT OF THE POEM

Church Going

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books; **sprawlings** of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in **awkward reverence**.

Move forward, run my hand around the font.
From where I stand, the roof looks almost new -
Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know: I don't.
Mounting the **lectern**, I peruse a few



Sprawlings: spread out irregularly over a large area
Awkward: feeling embarrassed
Reverence: deep respect
Lectern: a tall stand with a sloping top from which a speaker can read while standing up
Hectoring: talk in a bullying way
Cathedrals: a church

Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce
'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant.
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always end much at a loss like this,
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
When churches will fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few **cathedrals** chronically on show,
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will **dubious** women come
To make their children touch a particular stone;
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some
Advised night see walking a dead one?
Power of some sort will go on
In games, in riddles, seemingly at **random**;
But superstition, like belief, must die,
And what remains when disbelief has gone?
Grass, weedy pavement, **brambles**, **buttress**, sky,

A shape less recognisable each week,
A purpose more **obscure**. I wonder who
Will be the last, the very last, to seek
This place for what it was; one of the crew
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff



Dubious: hesitating or doubting, not to be relied on
Random: something done in any order
Brambles: a prickly shrub of the rose family
Buttress: a projecting part of a mountain or hill
Obscure: purpose that is not known well

Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
Or will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt
So long and equably what since is found
Only in separation - marriage, and birth,
And death, and thoughts of these - for which was built
This special shell? For, though I've no idea
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be **obsolete**,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And **gravitating** with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.



Obsolete: no longer used; something that is out dated
Gravitating: movement or a tendency to be moved

14.4.1 Explanation of the Poem

The poem begins with the speaker entering a church after ensuring that "there's nothing going on." The first stanza suggests that this person is someone who habitually visits churches but not because he has a devout belief in God. Rather he comes across as a sceptic for whom the contemporary world does not have a place for religion. There seems to be a note of monotony when he says "Another church," since it might point towards the repetitiveness of the exercise for him, or of the functions of the church in general. The

first two stanzas narrate the first impressions of the speaker upon entering the empty church in the "suburban scrub" and at the same time strive to establish the ordinariness of the visitor himself.

The speaker professes ignorance regarding church matters, and his ordinariness seems to be emphasised by his being on a bicycle and wearing "cycle-clips" but as we proceed through the rest of the poem, this is seen to be more of a pose than real ignorance since he simultaneously shows a familiarity with church ritual and other technical details. The introductory first two stanzas are filled with minute details observed by the speaker, who instinctively records the various sensory impressions he encounters as he enters the church: auditory ("the door thud shut"), visual ("brownish" flowers), and olfactory ("musty" silence). These serve to create a sense of immediacy in the reader with reference to the speaker's experience, so that we can enter into his subjectivity, and identify with his perspective. The speaker then ascends the lectern, pretends to read Bible verses to the absent congregation, hears "[t]he echoes snigger briefly," and then leaves.

Although the speaker emphasises his nonbelief, he does confess that there is something in churches which always makes him feel "at a loss" and elicits an "awkward reverence" in him, a feeling which he proceeds to analyse in the rest of the poem. He meditates on the future of the church, and other similar buildings in the face of a constant decline in the number of religious believers, and imagines a time when the church will fall completely out of use. In the third stanza he wonders if a few church buildings will be preserved because of their historical interest, while other churches will be left at the mercy of the elements, or even used as barns.

The fourth stanza then brings in the possibility of these empty church buildings drawing the superstitious, who might hope to absorb some remnant of spiritual or magical power. In the fifth stanza the speaker speculates that such places will attract antiquarians and even those "Christmas-addicts" who are eager for

"a whiff/ Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh". However, in the sixth stanza he refers to the building contemptuously as "this special shell" and "this accoutred frowsty barn", but still finds himself drawn towards it.

In the seventh and final stanza, he speculates that such a place will always compel people to come, since it is, he admits, a "serious house on serious earth," and "someone will forever be surprising / A hunger in himself to be more serious". This constitutes a kind of epiphany in that the attitude of ironic scepticism here suddenly gives way to a serious realisation of the impact of the church on the human (Christian) psyche which cannot even now, distance itself from a need to believe. As Rudnytzky Schray argues, "Larkin's "Church Going" becomes not so much an expression of outright scepticism towards Christianity, as a desperate struggle to understand an intangible need" (Rudnytzky Schray: 52).

14.5 POETIC STYLE

There is an epigrammatic quality in Larkin's poetry that is clearly evident in "Church Going" in lines such as "A serious house on serious earth it is". The poem, like many others, is long, consisting of seven large stanzas (with nine lines each) with a complex rhyme scheme. The pattern is also indicative of much of his poetry: the speaker finding himself in a particular place, and then slowly moving on from an individual meditative commentary to a wider universal statement. Tijana Stojkovic looks at the rhetorical strategies that Larkin uses in his poems, using the present poem as an illustration. She argues that the poems move from "a sensory, concrete level to a speculative, abstract level" though the "thought process of one who is asking questions, wondering, and imagining different possibilities" (Stojkovic: 83). Although the speaker's interior train of thought becomes the central structural principle of the poem, the associations resulting from it are presented in an orderly manner "with links supplied between them (churches as museums, alternative uses, different superstitions, types of

future visitors)" (Stojkovic: 83). However, even though the poem shifts to a more speculative and abstract level, it is still mediated by material or concrete details that are relevant in building up the image of the church and the activities around it, such as, "churches," "cathedrals," "parchment," "plate," "pyx," "cases," "rood-lofts," "Christmas-addict," "gown-and-bands," "organ-pipes" and "myrrh." The "epiphanic conclusion" brings about a qualification of the "non-worshipper ("I've no idea / What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth")" to a speaker who "claims a certain universality for the modern atheistic type who is nevertheless genuinely aware of "A hunger in himself to be more serious," assuaged in "this ground," the church"" (Stojkovic: 83-84). This is not, however, due to the institutionalised aspects of the church, such as the service, but because of "some deep truths about human life implied in religion, and symbolised by the dead in the church-yard" (Stojkovic: 84).Again, James Booth points towards the elegiac nature of the poem and is of the view that it "is an updated graveyard meditation
in the tradition of Gray" (Booth: 14). At the same time, it is marked by a "colloquial tenor...ironic humour and...clear-sighted realism"" (Regan: 1).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q8. How does the opening stanza of "Church going" begin?

Q9. What are the various sensory impressions recorded by the poet in the poem "Church Going"?

Q10. Briefly note the quality and structure of Larkin's poem "Church going".

The critical consensus with respect to Larkin in the 80s after his death was that he could be identified with an "essential and enduring Englishness" that not only expressed itself through its "self-restraint and ironic reserve" but also through "its fundamental decency and tolerance" (Regan: 1). His poetry articulated the changed realities of post-war society that demanded "rational, vigilant poetry, responsive to a new mental and physical landscape" (Regan: 1). His poetry at this time was also seen a marked by a tight economy of language and a cultivated dryness of tone.

However, with the publication of the *Collected Poems* in 1988, Selected Letters in 1992, and the authorised biography of Larkin by Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, in 1993, the reception of Larkin underwent a drastic change. His poetic career now seemed to imply an attempt "of a writer striving for his own distinctive style and reaching ambitiously, poem by poem, for the most felicitous use of metre, deployment of rhyme, and choice of vocabulary" (Regan: 2). These works as well as the biography also gave the impression of a poet who was less impersonal in his poetry, and instead worked the tensions and conflicts of his mind into his poetry. Larkin was also condemned on the grounds of being racist, fascist, sexist, anti-intellectual and class-conscious, especially with the publication of his letters. His poetry, again, was seen as colloquial and simple only in appearance. Earlier, in the 1970s, Larkin's poetry was already seen as possessing a "transcendental element", that was later to be tied up with the "symbolist dimension of his poetry", particularly in the critical commentary of the poet by Seamus Heaney (Regan: 7,8).



14.6 LET US SUM UP

At the end of the unit you have learnt about the life and works of the Modern poet Philip Larkin. It discusses Larkin's association with the Movement (upheld by the post-war generation of poets) which had a considerable bearing on his poetry. Thus, the unit provides the learner with a detailed explanation of the poem's content by highlighting the reflections of the modern man and his changing perceptions towards faith and religion in the modern world.



14.7 FURTHER READING

1) Booth, James. (2005) *Philip Larkin: The Poet's Plight*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

2) Hamilton, Ian. (1996) *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English.* Oxford: OUP.

3) Regan, Stephen, Ed. (1997) *New Casebooks: Philip Larkin*. Hampshire: Macmillan.

4) Rudnytzky Schray, Kateryna A. "'To Seek This Place for What It Was': Church Going in Larkin's Poetry". South Atlantic Review, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Spring, 2002), 52-64. JSTOR. Web.

5) Stojkovic, Tijana. (2006) *"Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day": Philip Larkin and the Plain Style*. New York: Routledge.

Websites:

www.philiplarkin.com. 30 January 2014

www.poetryfoundation.org



14.8 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1. Larkin was unable to join the army due to his poor eyesight, but he completed his degree without interruption graduating in 1943 with first class in English.

Ans to Q No *2.* *The Whitsun Weddings* was published in 1964 following year Larkin was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry.

Ans to Q No 3. In his statements on poetry and on jazz Larkin was hostile to the self-conscious adoption of a difficult mode by modernism and was initially associated with the Movement though his own work's relationship with modernism was more complex

Ans to Q No 4. In 1984, a year before his death, he was offered the Poet Laureateship but turned it down.

Ans to Q No 5. In the collection titled *The Less Deceived* Larkin constructed the poetic persona of the plain-speaking, sceptical, modest, awkward, commonsensical, but ironic observer…this had turned into the characteristic of not only his poetry but of the Movement as a whole.

Ans to Q No 6. *The Whitsun Weddings*, *High Windows*, *The Less Deceived, The North Ship*

Ans to Q No 7. William Butler Yeats and Thomas Hardy

Ans to Q No 8. The Speaker enters a church after ensuring that "there's nothing going on." The first stanza suggests that this person is someone who habitually visits churches but not because he has a devout belief in God. Rather, he comes across as a sceptic for whom the contemporary world does not have a place for religion. There seems to be a note of monotony when he says "Another church," since it might point towards the repetitiveness of the exercise for him or of the functions of the church in general.

Ans to Q No 9. The introductory first two stanzas are filled with minute details observed by the speaker that reward the various sensory impressions he encounters as he enters the church: auditory ("the door thud shut"), visual ("brownish" flowers), and olfactory ("musty" silence).

Ans to Q No 10. Epigrammatic quality in Larkin's poetry that is clearly evident in lines such as "A serious house on serious earth it is". The poem, like many others, is long consisting of seven large stanzas (with nine lines each) with a complex rhyme scheme.



14.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Give a concise description of the life and literary works of Philip Larkin.

Q2. Why does the speaker express an "awkward reverence" as he enters the church?

Q3. Describe the speaker's experience inside the empty church in the poem "Church going"

Q4. Briefly explain the characteristics of Larkin's poetic style.

Q5. How was Larkin associated with and later differed from the Movement?

Q6. Briefly describe the world-view of the modern society as a relevant concern or aspect of the poem "Church going".

Q7. Explain with reference to context:

"Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce
'Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant.
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for."

Q8. Explain with reference to context:

"A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete"

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