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CHURCH GOING BY PHILIP LARKIN: A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The poem "Church Going" is a poem by the English poet Philip Larkin (1922–1985), a modern post war writer. It is the best-loved but abstract poem who has several critical responses. Church Going is a medium length lyrical poem that explores the issue of the church as a spiritual base. Larkin's shaping of tone in "Church Going" makes the poem successful, more than any other device, although he uses a many of devices as rhyme, meter, form, figuration, metaphor, pun, alliteration etc. It begins ordinarily enough, as do many of Larkin's poems, then progresses deeper into the abstract subject matter, the narrator questioning why people still need to go to church. Furthermore, he felt in such places, are apparent in the poem, standing in contrast to his cynicism about Christianity.

**Keywords** – Lyrical, Church, Spiritual, devices, Christianity.

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Introduction

"Church Going" looks like an ironic atheist's poem, and a very good one. The Poem appeared in his second full collection of poetry, *The Less Deceived* (1955). Larkin's first draft of the poem was dated 24th April 1954. He worked through 21 pages of drafts, abandoned it, and then took it back up, emerging with his final version in July 1954. "Church Going" too is a very autobiographical poem. In a 1981 interview, Larkin explained "It came from the first time I saw a ruined church in Northern Ireland, and I'd never seen a ruined church before — discarded. It shocked me. Now of course it's commonplace: churches are not so much ruined as turned into bingo-halls, warehouses for the refrigerators or split-level houses for architects."

At that time when traditional religion was beginning to decline in England, the poet skillfully teases out more universal issues of post-world war, poet uses metaphor and pun and other devices to produce a memorable, technically efficient poem that makes it different. Church Going" is a marvelous blend of tones and tropes. Poet is initially just curious; stepping into a quiet church, but then becomes more perceptive, knowledgeable and dry looks around mysteriously. Each stanza furthers the inquiry until the conclusion comes at the end; it searches the importance and relevance of church as per passing time. Larkin explores the experience of visiting a church. He declares himself unsure why he "often" stops at churches whilst out cycling, as he finds himself "at a loss" about what he is looking for - both literally, and spiritually.

A Critical Study

During modern period there is a lot of changes and influences in the perception and believes of human beings. The impact of world war profoundly impacted Larkin and the theme of the poem is example of it. In this poem Larkin hated when people called this poem a religious poem. He has different opinion and described

it both as a secular poem and a humanist poem. The poem isn't about the eternal existence of God and divine power. Larkin doesn't care about Godly concerns. He didn't even believe God exists. Rather, Larkin is interested in the basic human compulsion for an order to our lives in rational way and how churches long provided that organization to their parishioners. People will always hunger to believe this world is the product more than mere randomness and this poem focuses on the fact that the church's specific power to offer this power is in decline. The title, 'Church Going', is not hyphenated, to allow for a secondary meaning to be glimpsed – or, in fact, a tertiary meaning, since 'Church Going' is itself already carrying a double meaning. It immediately suggests going to church as an act of worship, but Larkin is not a 'church-goer' in that sense: he visits the churches (something, he tells us, he 'often' does) for other reasons, and is not himself a believer or worshipper but his views are different. But 'Church Going' also glimmers with another meaning: the idea that the church, as institution, is 'going' or fading from view.

*Alfred Alvarez on Critical Analysis of Church Going:*

"Church Going presents in concentrated form an image of the post-war Welfare State Englishman..... It is the image of a shabby Englishman who is not concerned with his appearance but who is poor, having a bike not a car, who is gauche (or clumsy) but full of agnostic piety; who is under-fed, under-paid, over-taxed, hopeless, bored and wry."

He considers how the buildings are falling out of use, and what they might become in the future because the importance of spiritualism is degraded. The final stanza of the poem adopts a more conclusive tone about this "serious house on serious earth", to which people will always be drawn, if only because so many people before them have been drawn there.

Poem begins with the speaker entering into a building the reader later discovers is a church. He is not sure why exactly he wants to be there, and is even more confused by what he sees inside. He has seen many altars, pews, and bibles before and does not feel any type of reverence towards them. The speaker reads briefly from the Bible. Upon leaving the church he contemplates what the building represents and what it will mean when all the believers are long dead. He pictures the very last explorer of the building and wonders whether he or she will be like him, curious but emotionless. In the first two lines it is unclear to the reader where exactly this speaker is and what is so important about making sure, "there's nothing going on." The reader might ask, what is this place that it needs to be empty for one to enter? What could have been "going on?"

The speaker checks to make sure the structure is clear and steps inside. He mentions the fact that the door closes with a "thud" behind him. It is both sealing him into the space, and keeping the exterior world out.

If one had not assumed the identity of the structure from the title, the next line makes known to the reader that the speaker is exploring a church. Immediately it becomes clear why the space needed to be empty so that he could explore inside it. There is an important word mentioned in this section which changes the feeling of the poem, "Another." This is not the first time that he has entered into an abandoned, or simply empty, church.

The speaker glances around and notices all the items that are consistent throughout all the churches that he has visited. There are books, and sets, and "stone." He is unsurprised by these sights. He also takes in the fact that there is some "brass and stuff / Up at the holy end." This mundane way of referring to the altar at the front of the church says a lot about the speaker. He does not hold any reverence or respect for the space he is in.

Amongst all the physical things he notices, he also feels an "unignorable silence" that is overwhelming in the space. It seems to the speaker that the church has been absent of people for quite a long time.

The speaker moves "forward" to the front of the church and "runs" his hand over the pews. Once he has made it to the front he looks around and notices what seem to be complete repairs and restorations done

to the roof. This is a curious fact about the space as it is so devoid of people. There is no one there to ask why this is the case.

The speaker continues his journey through this religious space and takes to reading from the Bible. He speaks a few “large-scale verses” in an increased volume, spreading the words around the space. His projected voice comes back to him in an echo.

This ends his tour of the church and he departs after leaving an “Irish sixpence,” an incredibly small amount of money, in the donation box. He comes to the conclusion that this place was not worth visiting.

The speaker seems to have some kind of inner conflict about his attraction to churches. He knows, and knew, that there would not be anything new inside, but he stopped anyway. This is not unusually for him. He “often” does it and winds up in this same mental space. The man is frequently entering into the churches, searching through their religious objects, and then leaving unsatisfied. He does not yet know what he is looking for but is always left with one specific question.

He is curious about what the church will be like, or what the human race will utilize all the churches for, when the very last believer is gone. When they have fallen “completely out of use” will they be avoided “as unlucky places?” Or will the “sheep” have full rein over their interiors?

In the fourth stanza the speaker continues his contemplation of what the churches will become when all the religiously devoted have passed on. One idea the speaker has about the fate of these place is the continued existence of their power. He considers the possibility that in the future people will still come to them for a variety of spiritual reason. Mothers might bring their children to “touch a particular stone” for luck, or perhaps people will come to see the dead “walking.”

He knows that “Power of some sort will go on” even if the traditional religious context is lost. The “superstition” he knows will surround the place “must die” as well. One day, even the “disbelief” of the superstitions will be lost. All that the building will be is “Grass...brambles, buttress, sky.” It will be no more than its walls.

As time passes this conglomeration of architectural elements will fall further into disrepair. It will become “less recognizable” as the days more forward until its original purpose is completely unknown.

The speaker embraces a new question in this stanza. He is considering who the very last believer, or pilgrim, or seeker of true will be who enters the building. Will this person even comprehend where he or she is? What, he wonders, will this man or woman think as the final remainder of a dead religion?

The last person, he assumes, will be “one of the crew” who knows what a “rood-loft” is. This is a reference to what is more commonly known as a rood screen. It is a feature of late medieval church architecture that was situated between the chancel and nave at the front of the church.

In the final lines of this stanza the speaker contemplates who this person is. Will they be a “Christmas-addict” or someone who is there solely to seek out “organ-pipes and myrrh,” and all the religious ephemera of the church? Lastly, he considers the option that the seeker will be as is he, someone who is “uninformed” and unclear on the purpose of religion.

As the poem begins to conclude the speaker continues his prospective description of who the last visitor of the church will be. This person might be as he is, curious about the place because of its long-lasting nature. It has “held unsplit” for so long, one might wonder what has allowed it to survive. The onlooker might think on further in the same vain as he, wondering what the “frosty barn is worth” and how, without knowing its worth, it can please one to “stand in silence here.”

The final stanza of the piece returns to the speaker’s own thoughts, he has finished contemplating what could be, and resumes his own present musings. Up until this point the reader might be under the impression that the speaker holds no real regard for religion, or the true structure of the church. This is quickly dismissed with the first line of this stanza. He states that the church is, “A serious house on serious earth.” It

has a true and worthy purpose and should not be made fun of. It is a place where all the “compulsions” or impulses of human beings meet.

Here, the truth of human existence is “recognized” and celebrated. The fact of this, he thinks, should not ever become “obsolete.” It is important enough to be remembered forever. The church will “forever” bring out a “hunger” in one that cannot be discovered through any other means. The discovery of “serious[ness]” will remain with one until the end. A man or woman who has rediscovered something in themselves, will take it with them to “this ground.” They will return to the churchyard and the place where “so many dead lie round.”

Indeed, once he has briefly explored the church, Larkin begins to meditate on the future of the church, and whether it will continue to have significance. Will ‘dubious women’ who are fond of superstition (perhaps with ‘Gypsy’ blood?) bring their children to touch a stone of the church as a good omen? Or people come to pick herbs and ‘simples’ from the churchyard in an attempt to cure cancer? Who will be the very last person to visit the church – a ‘ruin-bibber’, one who likes to go in search of old antiques? Or someone who retains a fondness for the ceremony and trappings of Christianity (Christmas, and the like), but harbours no religious belief? Or will it be someone like Larkin himself, who values churches because they were once a distillation of some of the most important aspects of our lives: birth (Christenings), marriage (weddings), and death (funerals).

This is a poem of unusual reflection although it starts out ordinarily enough. He's only there for the history and the architecture, and to have a laugh with a biblical text - yet he is humble in one respect: This humble cyclist is more than he makes out, for he starts to ask himself serious questions about churches in general, what sort of future have they in a world that seems to be ignoring religious tradition. This is the world that's becoming more secular and more materialistic. Has it been mere superstition holding the fabric of the church together for so long? Power of some sort has to continue but how? Just imagine a time when the last ever person leaves a place of worship such as this. It could a carpenter, a pious tourist, an aged worshipper - or someone else with a religious impulse who wants to rebuild and start over?

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Larkin's poem has a weak rhyme scheme. Larkin's weak rhymes such as “here” and “idea” in stanza 6 and “were” and “myrrh” in stanza 5 suggest uncertainty and weak ideas. The narrator in the later stages of the poem is doubting his initial thoughts, realising there is more to the church than he first thought, and is struggling to come to a conclusion. A poem of seven stanzas, each with nine iambic pentameter lines mostly, all with end rhymes, a mix of slant and full. Larkin uses an interesting rhyme scheme too; ababcaee, which is sometimes full and often slant: on/stone/organ from the first stanza, come/some/random from the fourth, and is/destinies/serious from the last. Full rhyme confirms sense whilst slant rhyme questions it. The fact that Larkin uses a lot of slant rhyme in this poem must be significant.

#### **Annotated the following**

“I step inside, letting the door thud shut.  
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,”  
“Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.”

“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?"  
"But superstition, like belief, must die,  
And what remains when disbelief has gone?"  
"It pleases me to stand in silence here;  
A serious house on serious earth it is,"

### Conclusion

"Church Going" is one of his best-known and most admired poems. It first appeared in an anthology called *New Lines*. Larkin is also often referred to as a "Postwar poet," meaning that his writing grapples with many of the big questions that people were forced to ask after living through the death and destruction of World War II. The poem Church Going reveals the truth about the modern man relating to his religious part that modern man has moved away from the religious path and is just focusing on the material one. The modern man is depicted from the Philip Larkin's own character as he is himself the speaker in the poem 'Church Going' is a record of the poet's reflections on visiting a church. The church is vast, empty and the poet wonders what will happen when the churches fall into disuse. Then the parchment, plate and pyx will be kept in closed cases. The churches will become deserted places.

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