

Church Going

A Critical Appreciation

By Philip Larkin

Philip Larkin wrote 'Church Going' in the early 1950's, after World War II, when the shattering influence of war was at its peak and there were constant social changes. He noticed the people's dependence on the church was fading, which leads us to the two possible meanings of the title 'Church Going', the first being the weekly act of going to a church, or the fading away of the church. The poem talks about the speaker's thoughts as he enters a vast, empty church and wonders what will happen when the churches fall into disuse. At a deeper level the poem becomes an inquiry into the role of religion in their lives today.

It is about the condition of people after world war II. The poet prophesies the future of churches. He is of the view that in futures churches would no more be used for the religious purposes. He predicts the decline of churches in upcoming years. Though the poem is about churches yet it is not a religious poem, says Philip Larkin. Many readers and critics have misinterpreted it as a religious poem but Philip Larkin has denied this interpretation. According to him, it is a pure secular poem, in which no specific sect or religion has been criticized; instead, he just talks about the future of churches. He just expresses his view on churches. He also depicts the future of people with respect to religion and superstition beliefs. World war left impact on many prudent minds.

Summary

- The poet describes a visit to an empty church.
- He goes into the church and speaks from the lectern.
- He muses on the fact that he often visits churches. He wonders will they fall out of use completely.

Summary

- He wonders if the churches will become symbols of superstition – will people come because they believe the churches have a kind of ‘power’?
- Will they become merely ruins?
- He contemplates the times in life when we use the church.
- The final stanza is the most ‘serious’. He points to human desires and destinies – birth, marriage, death. He acknowledges that the church recognises all of these and gives them the solemnity and ceremony they deserve.
- He muses that a church that has honoured so many lives in this way will never go ‘out of date’.

Title/Summary – Church Going

- Church Going – going to church regularly
- The title is worthy of examination. Deceptively simple, the title "Church Going" is very clever as it has two interpretations. The first refers to the act of weekly worship, usually on a Sunday, and Larkin goes on to consider the traditions and future potential of this practice. The second interpretation of the word "going" refers to the action of the buildings and institutions themselves and which way they will be going in the future. Will they be 'going away' disappearing?

Summary

- Larkin lays out his thoughts about this as the poem develops, and his prognosis is not good. He views the churches as falling into disrepair as society moves on from blind adherence to religion, and wonders where it will all lead. He imagines in his mind's eye, the churches as ruins with weeds and grass growing up between the floor slabs and wonders whether anyone will want to buy them and what use they might put the buildings to.

TONE

- The tone of the poem engages the reader in a sort of conversation with the poet as he thinks aloud in the silence of the musty old building.
- We are deliberately told that, even for Larkin himself, his visit to the church is just an add-on, a convenient stop-off on a cycling trip. With the first words of the poem being: "Once I am sure there's nothing going on I step inside, letting the door thud shut. " Larkin puts readers in a particular spot in time, as if they too, had come along with the poet for the ride, and are breaking their journey with him

Themes

- The demise of the church/religion
- Ritual/superstition/beliefs
- The church and it's place within society
- Can you see other themes in this poem?
- Think of other poems by Larkin – is there a thematic link?

- **Title**

- "Church Going" seems like a very simple and straightforward title, just as the poem itself seems to be simple and straightforward. On the most literal level, it refers to the way that regular "church goers" attend mass every week. For the speaker of this poem, though, church going has a completely different set of meanings, because he's not connected to the official teachings of Christianity.
- Church going for him refers to the way that he continues to return to the church even though he can't find anything in it that's believable. This double meaning of "church going" helps to highlight the tension this poem explores between traditional religious meaning and the speaker's personal relationship to the church.
- On another level, "Church Going" could refer to the fact that the speaker of this poem spends much of his time wondering about what will happen to churches once people's belief in religion has vanished from the Earth. In other words, the title also hints at the possibility that the church might "go" away someday and never come back.

- **Setting**

- Throughout the poem, the speaker focuses very closely on his setting. The irony and wit of the poem, however, comes from the fact that the speaker doesn't focus on any of the things he's supposed to when he's inside the church. Instead, he wonders about practical concerns like whether or not the roof's been cleaned or restored.
- Overall, the speaker's reactions to the setting of this poem (the church) symbolise the major theme of this poem, which is the gap between a person who's interested in religious faith and the deeper mystical meaning that only full-blown believers are familiar with. Setting up this relationship between the speaker and the setting shows us that the objects inside the church don't have any inherent meaning, but just the meaning that we give to them. But it also shows that the church does have a vague mystique that keeps the speaker coming back to check out the insides of churches.
- Ultimately, Larkin uses the tension between the speaker's ignorance of church symbolism, and his grasp on the physical church itself, as a staging ground for the tension between religious faith and secular skepticism. Eventually the speaker lands somewhere in the middle, in a place of questioning

The Speaker

- The speaker feels like church and faith might be declining in the modern world, and he's curious about what will happen to the church when the last of the believers are gone. While he doesn't come to any great conclusions, he figures that something of the church's influence will remain. He just doesn't know what. As a whole, the speaker in this poem is characterized by his tendency to ask questions. In fact, the poem is almost all questions between line 23 and 52. He doesn't seem to come up with many definitive answers, but that doesn't stop him from asking them in the first place.