

## Depiction of Modern Man in “*Church Going*” by Philip Larkin: A case study through Modernism

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### Abstract

This study aims at analyzing the poem *Church Going* by Philip Larkin through the perspective of Modernism that how the aspects of modern man and society are depicted in the poem. The modern man image in the present world is careless, spiritually dead, agnostic, materialistic, secularist and pessimist. The researcher attempts to scrutinize that, how Philip Larkin has portrayed the modern man in his poem. To highlight the loss of religious values in the modern society Philip has deployed the theme of religion in *Church Going*. Philip has portrayed the three important stages of human life through the poem's title. The research worker will analyze the depiction of modern man by interpreting the lines and through interpreting the implicit and explicit meanings of the poem. This study on one side revives the religious values where as on the other side also present the current situation of the church and its importance in the lives of modern man. Apart from the side of entertainment, the poem makes people understand the society of the era and infuse some self esteemed Christian values and realization into the minds of the people.

**Keywords:** Modernism, Church, Philip Larkin, Modern society, secularism.

### Introduction

Philip Larkin (1922-1985), a British poet, critic and novelist. He was born in England and studied at Oxford University. “A great poet, in writing of himself, writes of his age”, said T.S.Eliot. This statement is equally applicable to Philip Larkin. His poetry is deeply influence of his age from all perspectives, just as social, political, economic and literary tendencies. He is the real representative poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Philip Larkin is also known as an *agnostic poet*. In the post war era there were many poets, writers who went against the spiritual and pious force of Christianity. In the flow of non-religiousness Larkin became agnostic, skeptic and rationalist. This very notion is clear in his poem *Church Going* that Larkin dislikes the form of Christianity in modern era as its is based on faith rather than reason. But after reading the whole poem we can say that even being agnostic and skeptic, Larkin still have some respect for Christianity and believes that even after the people's rejection church will still serve its religious, spiritual and emotional role in the society.

Larkin is famous for his *Dramatic monologues*, he is known as Browning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as Browning was famous for his monologues. *Church going* is also one the famous dramatic monologues of Larkin. A Dramatic monologue is a narrative or lyrical poem in which one speaker narrates throughout the poem. Larkin's monologues are simple and colloquial in its nature. Larkin's monologues are rich in its themes; the basic themes of Larkin's monologue are religion and Death.

Larkin is also a member of *movement poetry*. Movement poetry consists of the poets who wrote in the fifties, sixties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was the group who worked against the romanticism. This type of poetry gave a new turn to previous modes of the poetry. This mode of poetry is known as poetic movement. This group gave a rational approach to the themes of the poetry and language was colloquial, simple, and coherent, they avoid pompous and an artificial

language. The main features of this poetry are wit and satire. These all qualities are found in Larkin's poetry that's why he is known as Movement poet.

Like Hardy, Larkin also had a *pessimistic approach* towards life. He believes that there is a lot of hopelessness in life. We see Larkin's pessimistic side in most of his poems. We mostly come across the pessimistic thoughts and obsession with death. In almost all of his poems we find a constant reference to the melancholy, sadness and gloominess. We see a clear note of death, melancholy and sadness in his poem "Ambulances".

Larkin is a modern poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who gave us a new form of poetry and verse. His imagery is vivid and realistic. His poetry deals with the everyday experiences. Larkin is a poet who has converted his experiences into his poems. We can see Larkin's poetry in two different ways one is in an autobiographical way and the second way is as a fiction. Another important feature of his poetry is that his poetry is taken as a confessional poetry. If we read Larkin's poetry in a chronological method we come across two things, first is his psychological history and the second thing is the creation of his identity. The main subject matter of his poetry is the "passing of time". Some of his famous poems are:

1. Ambulances
2. Church Going
3. Mr. Bleaney
4. The Whitsun's Wedding
5. The less Deceived

#### **Research Question**

1. What is modernism?
2. What are the characteristics of modern man?
3. Does Philip Larkin satire on modern man in *Church going*?
4. Does modern man lack religious values?
5. Has Philip Larkin been a modern man?
6. Has Philip Larkin been a Movement poet?

#### **Objective of study**

This study aims at investigating the poem *Church Going* by Philip Larkin from the perspective of modernism. In this paper the researcher has tried to examine the poem to find out that how Philip Larkin has portrayed the Modern man in regard to religion and church. The main objective of this study is to find out the role of Larkin as a poet and as a narrator himself in the poem. We will analyze that how Larkin has presented modern man image through his own personality.

#### **Methodology**

The selection of a competent research methodology is an essential stage in the collection of data in any research (Chitando, 2011).

The content analysis of this study is qualitative and descriptive in its nature. We have analyzed the whole poem through the perspective of modernism.

#### **Literature review**

*Church Going* is a poem that lies under the category of modern literature which starts from 1910 and lapse till 1960's. *Modern literature* outset is due to the acceleration in globalization and industrialization. With the termination of World Wars, a question aroused in the minds of human

beings about their future, they started to question the reason for everything and this question forced the writers of that time to twist towards the perceptions of the new age. Modernist writers recess to write about the brighter side of nature, its beauty, romance, imagination, emotions and they initiate to write about degeneration, deterioration, advertence, internal-self, loneliness, fragmentation, destruction, and deprivation. These characteristics have been portrayed by satire, mockery, wit, irony, stream of consciousness, dramatic monologue and comparison.

In the reaction of modernism a new moment emerged which is known as *postmodernism*, these both moments have the same characteristics so that's is why critics sometimes fail to differentiate between these two movements, except to some of the features like; according to modernist truth is a relative term but post-modernist says truth is not presenting in human mind rather it is ones on constructed reality. Modernist credence on the culture, merit, grace, norms and virtues of the West but post-modernist denies the culture, grace, merit and values of the west. Modernism tries to find out the inner meaning of everything but post-modernism stick around the superficial things and hesitate to give deduction or consequences.

### **Characteristics of Modernist literature**

There are some of the characteristics of modernism which distinguish modernism from other literary theories (Lodge, 2015).

- **Symbolism:**

Symbolism is a movement in which poets used a word or an object which represents an abstract idea.

- **Imagism:**

It is a 20<sup>th</sup> century movement in which the expression is given clarity through the use of specific images.

- **Pastiche:**

This term means to combine different ideas or elements. The modern authors combine different genres and style to make a new voice or to comment on the writing of previous authors.

- **Inter-textuality:**

Inter-textuality means to shape the meanings of a text with the help of another text. In the literature of modernism, there is a deficiency of originality, the authors used to adopt styles and stories of the previous ones like; myths, folklores, literary allusions, etc.

- **Meta-fiction:**

There are different authors who use the feature of meta-fiction means to make the readers aware about the functionality of writing and the author himself is present in his writing, sometimes as a speaker or narrator and sometimes as an implied poet as a connecting force between a poet and a reader.

- **Temporal distortion:-**

It is a technique used by modern authors in which they move towards forward or may be backward, they use references from the history that are misfits, but they juxtapose the two heterogenous ideas to innovate some new poetic form or idea.

- **Magical Realism:-**

It is the most important feature of modern writings, in this technique authors used to give impossible elements and narrative that looks real like they convert a dream into real life, fairy tales or some characters who are dead they became alive. For instance, the use of supernatural elements and some fictitious heroes.

We have seen different conflicting views about Philip Larkin as a poet. Larkin has faced different hurdles in his way, some of the critics have severely criticized him like *Alfred Alvarez* and *Charles Tomlinson* but on the other hand, there are some critics who have defended his poetry and boosted him up, these critics include *Donald Davie* and *Andrew Motion*. According to some of the critics Larkin is rigid in his themes, his poetry just revolves around the themes of death, choice and chance, but his admirers defended him by saying that his poetry carries the realistic, universal and modern issues.

**John Press** said that “Larkin’s poetry is unable to portray the society of England rather it revolves around the sad, hopelessness and uneasy themes”. According to **Eric Hu Burger**, “Larkin’s poetry is not particularly about religion rather he is just a pessimist and his poetry also includes a pessimistic view of the world”.

### Analysis

The poem “*Church Going*” was published in his poetic collection “*The Less Deceived*” in 1954 (Larkin, 2012). This poem deals with the question about the importance of the holy place like Church in the life of modern man. The post-war era after 1945 was marked as the decline in the Christian values, morality and spirituality (Lewis, 2004). *Church Going* is a monologue in which the speaker of the poem (who is Larkin himself) shows the worthlessness of the Church. It clearly depicts the social scenario of that post-war era when the attendance of people had declined in the churches. The main theme in this poem is “religion”, but through the depiction of the Church and the visitor, Larkin highlights some of the main characteristics of the modern man. We are going to analyze the poem in the light of modern era with the specific emphasis on some poetic techniques and also try to foreground the relation of Larkin agnostic nature with this poem.

This poem by Philip Larkin also reveals many modern or postmodern characteristics of poetic genius, which includes satirical tone, mocking tone, ironical statements, use of imagery, agnosticism, skepticism, secularism, rationalism, direct language, melancholic irony, common and worldly subject, universality and use of dramatic monologue. Through these modern poetic techniques, Larkin has dealt with the main issue of his age, which highlights the vacuum and chaos due to secularism, atheism and agnosticism in the European society.

If we look at the title of the poem, “*Church Going*”, it has two meanings. First, that churches are gradually falling down and out of use, and second, this shows the union of important stages of human life in a church- birth, marriage and death. Larkin portrays these two pictures in this poem as an agnostic, secularist and skeptic. Before going to the actual analysis of poem, it should be very clear that Larkin has employed three characters in this poem.

1. Poet
2. Implied Poet (connecting force)
3. Reader

The first stanza of the poem portrays ironic presentation of the Church. The opening lines of this poem consist of colloquial language but it is the beauty of Larkin that he reveals huge realities in a very simple way:

*Once I am sure there’s nothing going on  
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.*

The poet enters into the church after the clarification that there is no ceremony or anyone in the church. It shows that the poet is visiting the church, not for pray, but only to see that what is inside this church which attracts people to come and pray here. Through this picture, Larkin actually tries to mock the modern man who visits church weekly for nothing. This is the main feature of

secularization, which means that nowadays the people who go to church; “just as a visitor not worshipper”.

*Another church: matting, seats, and stone,  
And little books;*

In these lines, the first word “another” depicts that the poet has already visited some other churches and he has a habit of doing so, and all churches are same to each other. The poet also claims that there are silence and stillness in the church which can't be ignored. Secondly, we see that the first concept of the poet is material, which is ephemeral. But this perception highlights the materialistic approach of modern man (El-Komy, 2013).

After that we see that he takes off his cycle clips due to some respect, but in the form of mock reverence and enter into the church:

*From where I stand, the roof looks almost new-  
Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know: I don't,*

When he enters into the church and recites some verses of the Bible in the style of priest to mock in contempt. Moreover, instead of looking to the Jesus (statue), he looks at the roof of the church which appears clean or repaired to the poet but he is unaware of the fact. This gesture shows that he is not a regular visitor of the church and busy in his mechanical routine work.

*Here endeth' much more loudly than I'd meant,*

He speaks loudly “here endeth” that his voice echoes back in the church and disturb the silence of the church. This word has another meaning too, that there is an end to the church going and the speaker of the poem announce it in a loud voice because it shows poet as an agnostic and secularist.

*I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,  
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.*

At the end of his visit, he donates Irish sixpence which had no value at that time and it seems useless to donate this amount. Then the poet confesses or admits that now there is no need to stay here because it gives no benefit to him, but the curious thing is that he still visits the church often in order to satisfy himself or deceive himself.

Further, in the poem, we see that poet asks some question from himself about the fate of the churches when they will completely fall down and when people stop visiting the churches completely.

*When churches fall completely out of use  
What we shall turn them into, -----*

Then he gives answer of this question with different suggestions, which reveals his internal materialistic approach. He says that some churches would be converted into museums with some ancient holy manuscript, or it would be rented to rain (nature) for free in order to give ease to the people.

*And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.*

After this question answer, he asks another question and gives the answer by himself. The question is about the superstitions because obviously, when the real purpose of faith goes out, then there is much place of superstitions in the society. He states ironically about those superstitious women:

*Or, after dark, will dubious women come  
To make their children touch a particular stone:*

But the time will come, according to the poet, that even these false beliefs and superstitions will vanish from the society and no one will go to church and the churches will consider out of use. So poet has another question here that:

-----, *I wonder who*  
*Will be the last, the very last, to seek*  
*This place for what it was; -----*

There is a shift in the tone of the poet, from comical, satirical and ironical to a serious tone. The poet wonders that who will be the last one to visit the church originally for the purpose of worship, not those who come in search for antiques, the researchers, the one who is habitual to visit the church on Christmas as a festival, but the one who really comes for religious purposes.

Finally, to conclude his answers, the poet says that even churches are bored, dusty, unclean or ghostly, people will still come to the churches because the most important events of one's life are celebrated here, like; birth, marriage and death. These events are very important in human life so the churches will remain alive, at least in the minds of human beings. At the last of the second last stanza of the poem, the poet confesses that though he is a skeptic or agnostic, but still standing in the church gives him peace and satisfaction, because it is the place of God not a place to be mocked at:

*It pleases me to stand in silence here;*  
*A serious house on serious earth it is,*

In the last stanza of the poem, the poet concludes that church going will never end and finds its resolution when he says that the bond between God and people can never be broken. The environment empowers us to find out the philosophy of life, if not from the church, then from the church graveyard and you find that your final destination lies here beneath the soil. This ambience promotes a serious thought in you. The church will perform its duties even in the future and give wisdom to the people to change their fate and destiny. At last, the poet reasserts his faith on religion because he has come to know that religion guides us in our lives and show us the way which is good for the human beings.

### Conclusion

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. He unveils the character of modern man as agnostic, materialistic, spiritually dead. One thing that is highlighted throughout the poem is the negation of Church services by modern man. He has depicted Church as a new place as he has not visited it for a long time from this he has tried to show that modern man has stop visiting church now and are busy in their daily routine. Through this poem, Philip Larkin has tried to realize the modern man that they should also focus on their religious duties along with their materialistic duties, because man can only gain wisdom and guidance from his religion.

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