

## Philip Larkin: A Shift Away from Individualism to Socialism

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### Abstract

Philip Larkin in his two poems 'Church Going' and 'The Whitsun Weddings' moves away from doubt to certainty as regards the function of the two social institutions of church and marriage. This is a shift away from doubt in the functionality of these two institutions to certainty of their functionality and usefulness for society. These poems are the poems of thought in which he starts off by looking doubtfully at church and marriage so much so that when one reads the poems one thinks that Larkin is a disbeliever but gradually Larkin confirms church and marriage as great institutions. The shift in pronoun from 'I' to 'we' and 'my' to 'our' at the end of these two poems endorses his shift from individualism to socialism and makes the poems humanist poems.

**Keywords:** Larkin; Churchgoing; Church; Marriage; Whitsun Wedding.

پژوهشگاه علوم انسانی و مطالعات فرهنگی  
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## Introduction

Philip Larkin (1922-85) did not get marry and did not attend church. However, he composed 'The Whitsun Wedding' and 'Church Going' which are about marriage and church. Many critics accuse Larkin as a pessimist poet who is against social institutions. Larkin himself in one of his interviews, when asked about the predominance of negative and pessimistic ideas in his poetry, declares: 'People say I'm very negative, and I suppose I am, but the impulse for producing a poem is never negative; the most negative poem in the world is a very positive thing to have done' (Kamel, 2012: 131). Thus positively speaking, we demonstrate that Larkin's poetry valorizes and romanticizes social institutions in 'Church Going' and the 'Whitsun Wedding'.

## Literature Review

Scofield (1976) in 'the Poetry of Philip Larkin' believes that Larkin in 'Church Going' is attracted to paying stroppy visits to churches while he is incapable of having faith in them. While according to Scofield, Larkin does not believe in the church in the poem 'Church Going', Pat Moore (1998) maintains that Larkin is conscious that he is standing on a cross of ground and can, consequently, conclude that the church he has visited is certainly a serious house. Siding with Moore, Fergusson concluded 'the whole tone of the poem expresses doubts about the validity of atheism' (Fergusson, 1985: 278). Watson went further, finding Larkin as an essentially religious sensibility: 'Under the pose he is *homo religiosus*, with an awareness of sacred time and sacred place' (Watson, 1954: 84-5). James Booth argues 'some Christian readers detect in it a deep sympathy with Anglicanism' (Booth, 2005: 126). Whalen has identified the poem to be "strongly sarcastic"

yet "moving carefully and ironically toward praise" (Whalen, 1986: 17), whereas Petch has maintained that "the poem is concerned with felt needs rather than with belief" (Petch, 1981: 57). Stojkovic (2006) argues there is something in churches which continuously makes him feel at a loss and induces an uncomfortable admiration in him—an emotion which leads him to a sort of epiphany in the last two stanzas. Whalen (1986) maintains 'Church Going' moves prudently and ironically toward praise of the church. In keeping with Whalen, Rudnytzky (2002) maintains, Larkin is unremittingly preoccupied with the concepts and language of Christianity—life, death, eternity, love, sin, all these are persistently happening in different contexts and from different angles. The language and history of the Church of England and its liturgy, Rudnytzky believes, are in his blood, but so is doubt. Taking the side of those who believe Larkin is against church, Richard Rankin Russell believes the loss of faith in organized religion is evident in the poem 'Church Going'. Hira Ali, *et al.* (2017) maintain that Larkin is an *agnostic poet* who went against the spiritual and pious force of Christianity. The writers conclude that even being agnostic and skeptic, Larkin still have some admiration for Christianity.

Concerning the 'Whitsun Weddings', Antony Easthope (1999) holds the moment of alienation provides a catalyst to push the poem into an apparent reconciliation, the disturbing other recuperated into a significant experience. DeSales Harrison (2006) concludes that in "Whitsun Weddings" Larkin imagines the transformative understanding of being involved with others in an exceptional hour, an hour joint through ritual with the most rudimentary forces of fecundity and renaissance. Russell (2012) believes Larkin's

touristic speaker in “The Whitsun Weddings,” often astonishes himself with a finding of the transcendent in his voyeuristic watching.

Though the above scholarship on Larkin maintain that Larkin is for and against the church and marriage, this paper, while comparing the two poems, syntactically proves that Larkin deems church and marriage *useful*. It is this usefulness of the church and marriage which he copes with.

### Methodology

The methodology of this research is a close reading of the poem with reference to syntax and semantic dimensions of the poems paying attention to the details of grammar of the two poems. We set the two poems against each other and compared them in terms of the use of language paying detailed attentions to words and their grammatical and syntactical dimensions. This kind of method is a formalist method which pays attention to a specialized mode of language which is self-focused, since its role is not to transport information by making extrinsic references, but to give the reader a special mode of experience by attracting attention to its own "formal" features—that is, to the qualities and internal relations of the linguistic signs themselves. This method is a close reading of the two poems of ‘Church Going’ and ‘Whitsun Wedding’ which pays attention to parts of speech, pronouns, syntax and grammatical nuances.

### Research Questions and Hypothesis

The research questions of this paper include:

1. Is Larkin for or against religion and marriage as two institutions of society in the two poems of ‘Church Going’ and ‘Whitsun Weddings’?
2. Is Larkin a socialist poet or an individualist in the two poems of

### ‘Church Going’ and ‘Whitsun Weddings’?

Based on the above questions, our hypothesis is that Larkin is not against religion and marriage and is a socialist poet. This is evident from the shift from the pronoun ‘I’ to ‘we’ in his two works.

### Discussion

#### *Church Going*

Initially the researcher examines ‘Church Going’ to demonstrate that Larkin supports church. The nature of this support is not at all religious, that is to say, it is not a kind of support which makes Larkin a religious person in the end. Rather, this is a mere change in perspective, in the sense that he changes his perspective from doubt *in the functionality of church* to certainty in that functionality. It means he studies not church itself but rather its functionality and its usefulness for society: ‘it held unspilt/so long and equably what since is found/only in separation -- marriage, and birth/and death and thoughts of these’ (Goldrick Jones, 2008: 684). As stated earlier, Larkin was not a religious person himself, yet the speaker of ‘Church Going’ believes that church makes some people wise: ‘Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in/if only that so many dead lie around’. This is a kind of contradiction. Our job will include going through the nature of this contradiction in order to solve it. To do this, we ask several questions. Does the speaker himself become wise at the end of the poem? What was the intention of writing the poem ‘Church Going’? Larkin calls himself a poet of experience. It means that he writes and records his own experiences. Mere experience is his only motivation for writing poetry ‘my prime responsibility is to the experience itself’ (Harrison, 92). But when we

get to the bottom of 'Church Going', we confront something more than an experience. In fact, churchgoing is a kind of preoccupation for Larkin since he is a churchgoer himself not in the sense that he is a religious person but in the sense that he has gone to many churches to ponder about church, which is indicated in the phrase 'another church'.

The speaker of the poem is a detached and impartial observant. But his detachment and his impartiality are not sustainable. He goes through a process of change and transformation in the end. It is not wrong to say that the speaker becomes a religious person at the end. It is logical to argue that the speaker may become a real churchgoer himself at the end but because we tend to identify the speaker with the poet this conclusion will not commend itself very well. However, as the new critical argument goes, we should 'trust the poem, not the poet' (Booth, 2005: 129). 'Poetry,' T. S. Eliot declares, is 'not the expression of personality but an escape from personality' (Eliot, 1932: 21). Wallace Stevens agrees: 'Poetry is not personal' (Stevens, 1959: 159). In a dissimilar character, but to similar conclusion, D. H. Lawrence urges 'Never trust the artist, trust the tale' (Lawrence, 1951: 13). Therefore, in the light of these critical statements, we can argue that the speaker is pleased with the church: 'it pleases me to stand in silence here'. In fact, the speaker of 'Church Going' is too much preoccupied with church.

Larkin confesses he is not a Christian. "I'm not someone who's lost faith," he said in an interview, "I never had it" (Haffenden, 1981: 124). Larkin deems all ancient, classical, and biblical mythology as having "very little" meaning and having no place in poetry. In his 'Church Going', he is concerned with faith and Christianity's usefulness for society not

with the belief and faith in general. This is evident from all of his poems in which he is dealing more or less with religious imageries and certainly, there is a great deal of "church going" in his poetry which contains explicit references to religion (Rudnytzky, 2002: 53). A quick look at Larkin's poetry shows his acquaintance with faith and its accouterments, and offers the emotional setting for "Church Going." For instance, in his desolate poem "Autobiography at an Air-Station" (1953), "Larkin puns on the word Assumption, the Catholic doctrine of Mary's being taken up body and soul into heaven proclaimed by Pope Pius XII in 1950" (Ibid).

Therefore, religion bulks large in his poem because he is considering it as a panacea for the society. He tries to show that church is useful to members of society and uses a technique in order to bring home a lesson to his readers that church is good. His technique is that he starts doubting the *use* of church and detaches himself from church in order to study its usefulness completely. He sets the scene and attracts the attention of the readers any readers whether they are followers of church or people of the opposite group. For example, when he starts talking about church, he says "once I am sure there is nothing going on, I step inside letting the door thud shut". This kind of starting is very much Larkinian. He is a master of suspense in 'Church Going'. This sort of beginning creates suspense by which he takes with him both atheist readers and Christian readers since the atheist readers are attracted to see how Larkin wants to reject the church and the Christian readers come to see how he is going to object to Christianity so as to guard against him and find a way to attack him. However, at the end Larkin shocks both readers and makes Christian readers happy

and the atheist readers thoughtful about the use of religion and church.

Let's examine his technique in 'Church Going'. At the very beginning of the poem he says: 'Once I am sure there is nothing going on' the first question to ask is why does he want to make sure that nothing is going on? Multiple possibilities come to mind as answers to that question. Still we cannot answer that question precisely. Since we do not know the answer, we have to read to see whether the poet himself gives any answer. The next line reads 'I step inside letting the door thud shut'. At this very moment the reader can think that the speaker is going to enter a church because the title helps a lot. But why does he want to step inside a church when there is nothing going on? Normally people enter a church when there is something going on. But here the case is completely different. The reader does not consider him a thief. In the third line he says 'another church' it seems that he is a churchgoer himself. But if a churchgoer, why does he go when *there is nothing going on*? The answer is that he goes to study church and in fact he has studied many churches before and here with this one he is going to share his findings of the church with the readers. The phrase 'another church' demonstrates that he thinks that all churches are similar, because they all have the same stuff, like "matting, seats, and stone/ and little books". The nature of their similarity is not yet clear. Are they all bad or good? Line '*And a tense, musty, unignorable silence*' shows that he finds the church to be an obsolete and boring thing. It seems he does not believe in church and faith: 'Move forward, run my hand around the font.../Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few/Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce/'Here end the' 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'. The phrase 'not worth stopping for' makes reader understand the speaker is an atheist. The terms 'snigger', 'Irish six pence', and the whole last line endorses this view. Yet we should claim that the speaker is not an atheist because the poem has not yet ended. It seems that the speaker can't help stopping at churches. It is highly likely that there is something significant in churches that makes him stop and see them: '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?'

Certainly, the readers will believe that the speaker is an atheist who criticizes church in particular and religion in general. What he has in mind we may wonder, is to study the immorality of church and to tell the reader that it is not good to believe in church any longer, since going to churches is a 'loss', he proposes that we should avoid them as 'unlucky places'. In fact, Larkin puzzles readers. As we see in this stanza and the stanzas following this one, he takes the side of an atheist and atheist readers are happy with that and the religious ones are angry. He describes church as '*A shape less recognizable each week,/A purpose more obscure*'. But the penultimate stanza reads 'For, though I've no idea/What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth/it pleases me to stand in silence here.' This is a moment of revelation, an epiphany. The last stanza is a conclusion as to whether church is necessary:

'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'.

In fact, this very last stanza is his findings about churches, about so many pains taken on his part for studying churches. Perhaps he is playing the role of a teacher to teach his students to look at things rationally rather than to accept them blindly. Larkin himself has declared 'Church Going "a humanist poem"'.

### **Alienation and Reconciliation**

The shift in pronoun is very significant because he started individualistically and finished pluralistically. At first he alienated himself from church and in the end he achieved reconciliation with it. It is a meaningful shift. It is a change from individualism to socialism. This is the technique of Larkin starting from denial and then reaching acceptance. In fact 'church going' is a journey from rejection to acceptance, a journey from doubt to certainty in the functionality of church in particular and religion in general. If some people become wise enough by going to church and watching dead people around, so church is good and useful. Certainly Larkin himself is a doubtful person. But he sees the power of faith and church in making people wise and it is good when it does so to people but certainly not to himself. The poem can be considered as an act of amelioration; one which tries to repair something in people.

### **The Whitsun Wedding**

'Whitsun wedding' represents an 'I' on an expedition from the countryside to the megalopolis who timepieces while the train progressively fills up with newly married couples: 'That Whitsun, I was late getting away/Not till about One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday/ Did my three-quarters-empty train pull out'. The phrase 'that Whitsun' is very much Larkinisque since he has experienced many Whitsun before and is going to share his knowledge and findings of this very especial Whitsun with the readers. The phrase is very much like the phrase 'another church' in the poem 'Church Going' which establishes the idea of selecting one among many other Whitsuns in order for Larkin to analyze, to scrutinize, and to examine with his detached observation in a detailed way: 'All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense/Of being in a hurry gone./We ran behind the backs of houses, crossed a street/of blinding windscreens, smelt the fish-dock; thence/The river's level drifting breadth began,/ where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet.'

The word 'hot' in the poem has been chosen intentionally in order to contribute to general tone of the poem which celebrates marriage. This is in alignment with the choice of train as a vehicle which is phallic and no other vehicles would have been good candidates. The train also makes the journey tangible and concrete since it passes different places as the train of married life passes different stages from peccadilloes to quarrels through reconciliations. 'The train journey' writes Adam Grearey 'is itself a metaphor for an experience that holds together observations of the country and its people' (Grearey, 2007: 389). All the vicissitude of life is dramatized through the movement of train: 'All afternoon, through the tall heat

that slept/ For miles inland,/A slow and stopping curve southwards we kept/Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and/ Canals with floating of industrial froth;/a hothouse flashed uniquely: hedges dipped/And rose: and now and then a smell of grass/Displaced the reek of buttoned carriage-cloth/ Until the next town, new and nondescript,/approached with acres of dismantled cars’.

The speaker initially doesn't notice the clamor of the weddings, presumably because he does not like marriage at all as he hated women and was a misogynist. ‘At first, I didn't notice what a noise/the weddings made/Each station that we stopped at’. He does not like marriage and whatever is associated with marriage ‘We passed them, grinning and pomaded, girls/ In parodies of fashion, heels and veils,/All posed irresolutely, watching us go,’. Gradually his interest is aroused in the event he is observing. ‘Struck, I leant/ More promptly out next time, more curiously,/And saw it all again in different terms.’ This interest in the event makes him undergo a kind of transformation so much so that he does not want to be an alien anymore and begins to consider himself one of the people he is observing.

This is evident from the change in pronoun from ‘I’ to ‘we’: ‘And, as we moved, each face seemed to define/ just what it saw departing’.

### **Alienation and Reconciliation**

In fact, the poem ‘Whitsun Weddings’ deals with the binary opposition of alienation and reconciliation. Throughout the poem the speaker keeps himself at a distance from others but gradually he achieves reconciliation with the people from whom he tries to detach himself. The shift of pronouns in the end from ‘I’ to ‘we’ is the surest

indication the speaker has achieved reconciliations with the people from whom he alienated himself initially. The poem begins with “That Whitsun, I was late getting away” and nearly in the middle of the poem the ‘I’ changes to ‘we’: There we were aimed./And as we raced across/Bright knots of rail/Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss/Came close’.

What is interesting is the connection which the speaker creates between marriage and religion. He connects religion and marriage as indicated in the phrases like ‘happy funeral’ and ‘religious wounding’ which signify the loss of virginity under the rule of religion which is a big supporter of marriage and helps materialize it in society. This is in fact, one of the functions of religion which Larkin himself alludes to in ‘Church Going’. Easthope argues ‘marriage also helps because it shows the masses willing to submit to the customary sacrament’ (Ibid). Not only the masses but the speaker also submits to the ‘customary sacrament’. This is not conscious on the part of the speaker. This is very unconscious, the speaker cannot help it. This experience is very much connected to the shift of pronoun from ‘I’ to communal ‘we’: ‘There we were aimed/ and as we raced across/... We slowed again’.

The lines: ‘There we were aimed./And as we raced across/Bright knots of rail/Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss/Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail/Traveling coincidence; and what it held/Stood ready to be loosed with all the power/That being changed can give./We slowed again,/And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled/A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower/Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain’ which comprise the whole last stanza, refer to the act of sex itself. These lines were considered by critics

very apocalyptic, mystic and visionary. John Reibetanz writes 'Larkin's denouement is ...visionary' (Reibetanz, 1976: 535). John Powell Ward believes that 'The train journey ends apocalyptically' (Ward, 1991: 186). Neill Powell maintains 'this conclusion is magical' (Powell, 1979: 93). This apocalypse is in accord with the title of the poem itself in that 'Whitsun, or White Sunday, falls on the seventh Sunday after Easter and is celebrated in the Christian calendar as the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples of Jesus in Jerusalem empowering them to speak in tongues' (Osborne, 2008: 63). If Whitsun is going to commemorate marriage, likewise, it commemorates church or Christianity which institutionalizes and materializes marriage.

In the last third lines 'And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled/ A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower/Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain' we have the images of marriage itself represented in the two symbols 'arrow' which is phallic and 'somewhere' which is yonic. This is in accord with what Easthope maintains:

...in the 1950s many couples might well first have sexual intercourse on the train after the wedding. It is the thought of the young in one another's arms that enables the speaker to identify with these others in the excited rhythms of this Yeatsian ending, imagining a transcendence which unites: social and individual (them and him); body and mind ('None thought' this though he could think it for them); organic and mechanical ('knots of rail'); pastoral and urban ('postal districts packed like squares of wheat'); England's past

and its present and of course, subject and object. (Easthope, 187)

In the light of this statement, the rain becomes symbolic and it stands for the semen. This is also in accord with fertility in nature and hotness of the time.

Regarding his experience Larkin says 'you couldn't be on that train without feeling the young lives all starting off and that just for a moment you were touching them.... It was wonderful, a marvelous afternoon. It only needed writing down. Anybody could have done it' (Gervais, 1993: 206-7). However, nobody could have done it except as in the words of Coleridge 'a man of deep feeling and deep thinking' (Greenblatt et al. Vol. 2, 2006: 11). Our life is replete with experience but we tend to note those which are turning points and here this is true about Philip Larkin himself writing and composing poetry for those experiences which leave a great impression on him that he wants to preserve them. As he himself confesses: 'I write poems to preserve things I have seen/thought/felt (if I may so indicate a composite and complex experience) both for myself and for others, though I feel that my prime responsibility is to the experience itself, which I am trying to keep from oblivion for its own sake. Why I should do this I have no idea, but I think that the impulse to preserve lies at the bottom of all art' (Harrison, 2005: 92). One thing which is noteworthy is that as a poet, he is preserving experiences not only for himself but for others as well. He has others in mind when writing poetry and this makes us believe that he is not an ivory tower poet like Romantic writers who sit in their ivory tower and do not give a damn to readers or others. This is his humanist side as well which makes him similar to his master, Thomas Hardy, an ameliorant.



## Results and Findings

To conclude the essay, we have to say that in both poems Larkin moves from the single pronoun 'me' 'I' to 'we' at the end of each poem. He achieves reconciliation against alienation. It is a movement of becoming and participating in the experience of the other people. The speaker in 'Whitsun' has been stimulated by the vital importance of marriage itself, in much the same way as the speaker in "Church Going" was transported by the significance of the church. In both poems Larkin discovers a fundamental seriousness. In the 'Whitsun Wedding' the ending provides us with images of productiveness and fertility. He has shifted away from empty detachment to inquisitiveness, to a valorization of the marriages. In the 'Church Going' the ending provides us with images of seriousness and solemnity. He has shifted away from empty disinterestedness to curiosity, to a valorization of the church.

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## فیلیپ لارکین: گذار از فردگرایی به اجتماع گرایی

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### چکیده

فیلیپ لارکین شاعر انگلیسی و رهبر جنبش در انگلستان در دو شعر «کلیسای رفتن» و «عروسی های ویتسون» از فردگرایی به سوی اجتماع گرایی یا از شک و تردید در مورد نقش و عملکرد دو نهاد اجتماعی کلیسا و ازدواج حرکت می کند. این یک حرکت از شک به عملکرد این دو نهاد به سمت اعتماد و اطمینان به عملکرد و سودمندی آنها برای جامعه است. این اشعار، شعر اندیشه ای است که در آن با شک و تردید در کلیسا و ازدواج شروع می شود به طوری که وقتی خواننده این اشعار را می خواند فکر می کند که لارکین کافر است اما به تدریج لارکین از طریق منطق کلیسا و ازدواج را به عنوان نهادهای بزرگ تأیید می کند. تغییر در ضمائر «من» به «ما» و «من» به «ما» در پایان این دو شعر از تغییر فردگرایی به اجتماع گرایی حمایت می کند و این اشعار را شعرهای اجتماعی و انسانی معرفی می کند.

واژه های کلیدی: لارکین، کلیسا رفتن، کلیسا، ازدواج، عروسی ویتسون.

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