

Symbolism in Philip Larkin's *Church Going*

Philip Larkin's poem "Church Going" is a contemplative exploration of the role of religious spaces in a secular world. Through rich symbolism, Larkin delves into themes of spirituality, cultural heritage, and the search for meaning in a post-religious society. This analysis will explore the key symbols in the poem, illustrating how they contribute to its overarching message.

1. The Church as a Symbol of Tradition and Decline

The church itself is the central symbol in the poem, representing both the persistence of tradition and the decline of religious belief. Larkin describes the church as a "serious house on serious earth", highlighting its enduring presence in the landscape. However, his initial approach to the church is marked by a sense of detachment and irreverence:

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

The speaker's hesitation to enter suggests a disconnect from the sacred, and the empty church underscores the waning influence of religion. The "door thud" is a harsh, physical sound that breaks the silence, symbolizing the intrusion of the secular into the sacred space.

2. The Church Furnishings: Symbols of Ritual and Redundancy

Larkin meticulously catalogs the objects within the church—"matting, seats, and stone, / And little books"—which symbolize the remnants of religious ritual. These objects are mundane and unremarkable, reflecting the speaker's inability to connect with their spiritual significance. He dons a "brownish, sprawl-curl'd" hat in mockery, emphasizing his skepticism.

Yet, there is an underlying sense of respect. When the speaker fumbles through a "bible" and "donates an Irish sixpence", his actions, though half-hearted, acknowledge

the traditional practices of reverence and charity. The Irish sixpence, a coin no longer in circulation, symbolizes outdated customs and the church's struggle to maintain relevance.

3. The Building's Decay: Symbol of Spiritual Erosion

The church's physical state mirrors the decline of faith. Phrases like "musty, unignorable silence" and "some brass and stuff" evoke neglect and disuse. This decay is not just physical but also spiritual, suggesting that the rituals and meanings once housed within these walls are fading away.

The "church" itself becomes a metaphor for the human spirit's search for meaning. The emptiness and "echoes" in the building reflect a broader existential void in a world that has largely moved past organized religion.

4. The Church as a Symbol of Continuity and Memory

Despite his skepticism, the speaker acknowledges that churches will always have some role to play:

"A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies."

Here, the church symbolizes the continuity of human experience. It is a place where "compulsions"—from grief to hope—are given form and meaning. Larkin suggests that even if religious belief diminishes, churches will remain as monuments to the rituals and ceremonies that mark the passage of life.

5. The Future of Churches: Symbols of the Enduring Need for Ritual

Larkin contemplates the future of churches, imagining them as potential ruins:

“What will survive of us is love.”

This line, while not directly from “Church Going”, echoes the sentiment that the human need for connection and ritual will outlast formal religion. He speculates that even when faith is gone, people might visit churches out of “curiosity”, for a “Christmas-addict”, or as tourists admiring relics of the past.

The church thus transforms into a symbol of humanity’s enduring need to find meaning, whether through religion, tradition, or simple reflection.

6. The Speaker’s Transformation: From Skepticism to Respect

As the poem progresses, the speaker’s attitude shifts. He moves from mockery to a deeper, almost reluctant respect for what the church represents. His acknowledgment that churches are places “which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in” indicates a recognition of the role these spaces play in guiding human thought and providing solace.

This transformation suggests that while traditional religious belief may wane, the human quest for wisdom and understanding remains, with churches standing as symbols of this enduring search.

Conclusion

Through its rich symbolism, “Church Going” presents a nuanced exploration of the evolving role of churches in modern society. Larkin uses the church as a symbol of both decay and continuity, capturing the tension between the loss of traditional religious faith and the persistent need for places of reflection and ritual. The poem ultimately suggests that while the specific doctrines of religion may fade, the spaces that housed them retain a deeper, more universal significance as markers of human experience and the quest for meaning.

