

Philip Larkin's 'Ambulances' (1964) and 'Church Going' (1955): An Overview

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The Context: 1950s Britain

- The decades following the **Second World War (1939-1945)** experienced jolts of liberation movements across the world in colonies under the British Empire. As the entire world was recuperating from massive destruction of life and properties, joblessness and the aftermath of the atomic explosion, Great Britain's political identity suffered from a loss of integrity.
- Through the 1940s, 50s and the 60s the wave of **decolonization** liberated the African, South Asian and the Caribbean nations from the folds of the British Empire and the **Commonwealth of Nations** was formed through London Declaration of **1949**. *Moreover, the mass immigration of labourers to London from different colonies of South Asia, Africa and the Caribbean islands gave rise to a composite culture in Great Britain.*
- This multicultural and multiracial identity of Britain in relation to the New Commonwealth brought a cosmopolitan feel in British literature of the 1950s and the 1960s that follows till date.
- While the emergent postcolonial writers were recording untold histories of colonisation and representing hybrid identities in a vibrantly creolized vocabulary, the British literature following World War II was marked by post-imperial **anxiety**, **cynicism** and **exhaustion**.
- The interface between the Anglo-Saxon concept of Englishness and the emergent multiethnic reality of English society prompted a rethinking of national identity in Britain.

Changing Society

- In Post-war Britain women came out to work in factories. They replaced male workers who either died in war or became maimed.
- 1950s and 1960s celebrated new cultural forms that experimented with hippie lifestyle and a vibrant subculture, which included casual dressing, and advertisement-oriented consumerism.
- It was related to other socio-cultural movements such as, Civil Rights Movement, Free Speech Movement, Women's Rights Movement and Gay Movement and other anti-establishment forums. During this time wearing jeans became a unisex fashion statement, which accommodated both men and women and the trend continues till date.

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Poetry of the Movement

- In English Literature the **Movement** denoted a departure in English poetry from the Modernist tradition. The poets of the Movement expressed their disillusionment about the post World War II social set up and economic drainage. The scarcity of jobs and the gradual fragmentation of the British Empire in African, South Asian and the Caribbean colonies bred a sense of dissatisfaction within the mind of the Englishmen, which found its vent through anger. **Anger thus became a guiding force in the English literature of the 1950s.**

Important Features of Movement Poetry

- The Movement poetry made a conscious choice of **traditional rhyme schemes and simple, terse imagery** over the free-verse pattern and elaborate myth-making.
- Among the British poets, **Philip Larkin (1922-1985), Elizabeth Jennings (1926-2001), Thom Gunn (1929-2004), John Wain (1925-1994), D. J. Enright (1920-2002)** and **Robert Conquest (1917-2015)** in their poetry of the **Movement (1950s)** made cynically caustic commentaries on the emasculated state of the British Empire, the joblessness of the gang of war-beaten soldiers, the young demobilized officer class and expressed their satirical disgust on the shabby middleclass provincial lifestyle.
- **'The Movement'** was a term coined in **1954** by **J.D. Scott** to describe these poets and their poetical approach. The Movement produced Two Anthologies: *Poets of the 1950s (1955)*, edited by D.J. Enright and *New Lines (1956)*, edited by Robert Conquest.

Philip Larkin (1922-1985)

- British poet and novelist Philip Larkin was a librarian by profession. He studied English Literature from Oxford University.
- In 1940 Larkin met **Kingsley Amis**, the famous English novelist of his times and their friendship endured.
- Amis admired Larkin's cynical and satirical stance about society.
- Larkin's pseudonym was Brunette Coleman

Influences

- Larkin's early poetry was influenced by the poetry of W. B. Yeats
- Later Larkin's imbibed the simplicity of his style and Scepticism of tone from the poetry of Thomas Hardy

Discussion on 'Ambulances' and 'Church Going'

'Ambulances' (1964)

Closed like confessionals, they thread
Loud noons of cities, giving back
None of the glances they absorb.
Light glossy grey, arms on a plaque,
They come to rest at any kerb:
All streets in time are visited.

Then children strewn on steps or road,
Or women coming from the shops
Past smells of different dinners, see
A wild white face that overtops
Red stretcher-blankets momentarily
As it is carried in and stowed,

And sense the solving emptiness
That lies just under all we do,
And for a second get it whole,
So permanent and blank and true.
The fastened doors recede. Poor soul,
They whisper at their own distress;

- The poem deals with the everyday incident of someone being taken away in an ambulance, but this common everyday incident leads the poet reflect upon the transient nature of human existence.
- Warmth of family and friends become futile in the stark face of Death.
- Just as an ambulance visits all streets in time, death can come at random and at it strikes everyone. Its steel-gray colour is connotative of the biblical pale-horse, that symbolizes death.
- Roads, shops, dinner-smells, children on the streets are symbolic of the casualness of human existence.
- In this poem an ambulance takes away a pale-faced war victim. Looking at the victim, the onlookers realize that they are all vulnerable to sickness and death: **“the solving emptiness/ That lies just under all we do”**.

For borne away in deadened air
May go the sudden shut of loss
Round something nearly at an end,
And what cohered in it across
The years, the unique random blend
Of families and fashions, there

At last begin to loosen. Far
From the exchange of love to lie
Unreachable insided a room
The traffic parts to let go by
Brings closer what is left to come,
And dulls to distance all we are.

- The ambulance rushes with the patient towards hospital and towards death. Death is “what is left to come” in our life.
- Thus an everyday incident from city life becomes a powerful metaphor for the poet to reflect on the apparent futility of life.
- The poem reflects Larkin’s pessimism and melancholic attitude. In post-World War society people grew insensitive to loss of human life.
- In this poem the ambulance becomes an ominous character and a harbinger of death.

‘Church Going’ (1955)

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting seats and stone
and little books; sprawlings of flowers cut
For Sunday brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense musty unignorable silence
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence

Move forward run my hand around the font.
From where i stand the roof looks almost new--
Cleaned or restored? someone would know: I don't.
Mounting the lectern I peruse a few
hectoring large-scale verses and pronounce
Here endeth 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 title of the poem suggests a pun. ‘Church Going’ refers to the regular ritual attendance to the church. Church ‘going’ also indicates the decline and ruin of the Churches in England. We should read the poem keeping in mind the double meaning of this phrase.

- The poem reflects upon the place of churches in society and their ultimate fate.
- The poem reflects Larkin's cynical attitude towards institutionalized religion.
- The depiction of a suburban church and its shabby ambiance are symptomatic of the post-World War morose lifestyle of the English middle class.

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 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?

Or after dark will dubious women come
 To make their children touch a particular stone;
 Pick simples for a cancer; or on some
 Advised night see walking a dead one?
 Power of some sort or other will go on
 In games in riddles seemingly at random;
 But superstition like belief must die
 And what remains when disbelief has gone?
 Grass weedy pavement brambles butress sky.

- The poet persona is a middle-class shabby English gentleman, who is underfed, under-paid, clumsily dressed, overtaxed, rides a bicycle. He is hopeless, bored and also disillusioned. The Movement poetry portrayed such cynical characters.
- Plants and weeds cover up the church spires suggests how it gradually merges with its surrounding.
- The poem is written as a monologue. At the end of the poem Larkin arrives at a belief that though attendance to the church has declined, fate will bring each and everyone for burial at the cemetery of the churchyard. Man's existential quest will bring him to the church.

A shape less recognisable each week
 A purpose more obscure. I wonder who
 Will be the last the very last to seek
 This place for what it was; one of the crew
 That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?
 Some ruin-bibber randy for antique
 Or Christmas-addict counting on a whiff

Of grown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
Or will he be my representative

Bored uninformed knowing the ghostly silt
Dispersed yet tending to this cross of ground
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt
So long and equably what since is found
Only in separation--marriage and birth
And death and thoughts of these--for which was built
This special shell? For though I've no idea
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet
Are recognised 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 post World War II Europe there was a general decline in Church attendance. Between 1945 and 1950 less than 10% of the population visited the church.
- However Larkin suggests, though faith in religion can die, tradition cannot die. It is this tradition and social customs that bring people to church during baptism, marriage and burial. **Even after the collapse of religion the church will serve some emotional purpose for people around.**
- The church now ceases to be a religious haven but has become a historical relic. Like the 'Ambulance' it becomes a character verging on death and extinction **like the human civilization.** Death and Mutability thus become recurrent themes in Larkin's poetry.
- The tone of the poem is sceptic, half-mocking, half-serious. Larkin's thoughts are symptomatic of the Postmodern era. During this time philosopher Nietzsche's utterance "God is dead" marks a general loss of faith in institutionalized religion.
- **Larkin's Style**
- Larkin's poetry is characterized by an ordinary, colloquial style and a quiet reflective tone.
- He applies Cockney English (London's slum-dialect) in many of his poems.

- His poems bear ironic understatement at the emasculated state of society and the degeneration of humanity.
- He takes the stance of a detached observer and recorded ordinary life-experience.
- Death and fatalism are recurrent themes of his poetry.
- Larkin's poetry captures the cynicism of English Middle Class in post-World War II society.
- He subverts conventional attitudes towards class, gender, authority and sexual relations.


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