

**Significance of Religion as a Social Institution for Common People:
Structural Analysis of Philip Larkin’s “Church Going”**

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ABSTRACT

Social institutions give meaning to our lives and bring social cohesion. This research study is designed to do the structural analysis of “Church Going”. It aims to analyze the signifiers used in the text about religion and how these signifiers explain the significance of religion as a social institution for twentieth century people. We have found a few studies about Larkin in which critics have taken into consideration the context and biography of Larkin for criticism of his works. But this study is an initiator to analyzing Larkin’s works by applying the Structural approach and does not get attached to the context or prevailing situation of the poet. This research article will give a rich and valid explanation of “Church Going” because as Booth said, “trust the poem and not the poet” (1995, p. 129). After paradigmatically and syntagmatically analyzing and interpreting the structures of the poem, we have found that the speaker of a poem is a modern man who is curious about the role of church for its believers and continually inquiring about it through predictions and rhetorical questions. Tone and diction of the first five stanzas reveal the mocking and sarcastic attitude of the speaker but in the last two stanzas the tone is changed and the speaker gets to the satisfactory and reliable conclusion that whatever happens churches or Christianity will never be barren because of the rituals performed there (birth, marriage and death) and it is also the house of cure and wisdom. This research is limited to “Church Going” but for a more valid interpretation of the significance of religion for twentieth century people, multiple researches need to be carried out on other texts of that time.

Keywords: Structures, Signifiers and Signifieds, Church, Religion, Modern man and Existentialism

INTRODUCTION

Social institutions are bridge to the culture’s past and guidance to the future. Without institutions, our life would be devoid of meaning. In the 20th century, writers and philosophers challenged everything and even did not give room for tolerance to religion. Foundations of religion are shaken by this existential and nihilistic attitude of modern and materialistic man. Poets discussed the theme of religion and tried to probe its use in

current society. Likewise, the themes and motifs of Larkin's poetry are also religion, morality, the presence of God and the effects of commercialization and "he is truly a representative poet of his age" (Ali et al., 2017, p. 124). So, this research is designed to do the structural analysis of Larkin's poem, "Church Going" and as Nadia mentions the validity of Larkin's works for contemporary researchers, "there have been a few studies on Larkin's poetry, it still invites comments and further exploration, because of its richness and appeals to the professional as well as common reader" (2013, p. 47).

We have found a few research studies on Larkin, but all studies are done while taking into consideration the biography, interviews of Larkin and especially the context of that time. In this study, we will restrict to the structures of the text, "Church Going", and on the base of structural analysis, we will argue about the context. Our claims will be on the base of evidence from the text. If we look through this approach at Larkin's poetry, we can see a new stream of dimensions in his works.

The motifs of Larkin's poetry revolve around daily life issues that intrude us to contemplate the unforgettable events of this world: death, religion, wars, materialism, industrialism, physical comforts and skepticism. Speakers of Larkin's poems are disturbed by the prevailing situations. Larkin wrote in a simplistic style and was not in favor of flowery phraseology and mythical references. In his poetry, we see the influence of movement poets, Yeats and Hardy. "Hardy gave freedom and liberty to the thoughts of Larkin" (Thwaite, cited in Nadia, 2013, p. 48). Al-Qaysi quotes the importance of Hardy in the life of Larkin, "Hardy taught me to feel rather than to write and taught me to have confidence in what I felt" (1995, p. 22). Larkin says that his poetry is not religious and the basic question about "Church Going" is whether it is religious or not (Spacey, 2020). So, this study is bound to structures and what their analyses reveal about the significance of religion as a social institution for common people.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research article is designed to do the structural analysis of, "Church Going" in the light of its significance for religion. There are a few critical studies about "Church Going" in which critics have just interpreted the text by considering the context and the factors surrounding it. But there is one more approach that restricts the critics to the text that we have on the page and there is no need to know about the author's biography and environmental influences. Everything is present in those structures and researchers argue about the context on the base of those structures.

In the 1950s, Structuralism began in France as an intellectual movement and provided stability to the modern world of doubts, anxiety, nihilism and chaos because structuralism wanted to see everything through the lens of the whole system of structures as Barry has explained, "its essence is that things cannot be understood in isolation – they have to be seen in the context of larger structures they are part of" (2009, p. 38). It affected various fields of knowledge, "especially philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, history, sociology and literary criticism" (Cuddon, 1980, p. 868). There are four major domains of Structuralism, "Linguistics, Anthropology, Semiotics and Narratology" (Carter, 2012, pp. 41-54). Structuralism is concerned with the study of signs and the underlying mechanisms surrounding them (Jang, Ali & Ameen, 2019).

Ferdinand de Saussure is known as the father of linguistics and structuralism (Mambrol, 2018, para.1). Some of his important concepts of Saussure are:

“Sign” consists of “Signifier” (written or spoken word) and “Signified” (mental concept of the signifier) and there is an arbitrary relationship between them; “Langue” is the sign system that we all share and “Parole” is the individual utterances and structural linguistics deal with the underlying systems and not the individual utterances; the study of language must be “synchronic” (study of language how it is used at the current time) and “Diachronic” (historical study of language); the whole system runs through the relationship of “Syntagmatic” (chain relationships) and “Paradigmatic” (choice relationships) and “Negative Value”. (Carter, 2012, pp. 41-44)

There are two basic levels of every structure: “surface structures refer to those that are in front of us and deep structures are the underlying and basic meanings of a text and what texts’ signs refer to” (Tyson, 2006, p, 20). Siswantoro (2010) has explained three properties of every major structure, “wholeness (internal cohesion among the elements), transformation (structures are not static and they are dynamic and changeable) and self-regulation (new elements are added into the system according to the laws of the system and the whole structure stands as an independent and autonomous unit)” (cited in Mazany, 2014, pp. 24-25).

The renowned modern poet, who realistically depicted the scenery of his age, “Philp Arthur Larkin (1922-1985) was born at Coventry, Warwickshire” (Britannica.com, 2020). From childhood, Larkin liked to live in isolation and talked about his childhood in depreciatory terms. Larkin had retiring habits and remained in his shell. He was unsociable and he always tried to preserve his privacy. He started to write when he was just fifteen. First, “he tried his hand at novels, *Jill* and *A girl in love*” and then he published four major volumes of poetry: “*The North Ship* (1945), *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) And *High Windows* (1974)” (as cited in Nadia, 2013, p. 48). His poems explain the political and social context of his time. Jim Hunter says, “the subject matter of his poetry deals with the materialistic attitude of faceless urban civilization towards the issues of work, love, death, religion, knowledge and beliefs” (as cited in Upadhyay, 2017, p.21). Larkin himself said, “his poetry would be sad eyed realism and clear-eyed” (Waheed, 2004, P. 5). Larkin has provided the answer to allegations put against him that he was pessimistic, “people say I am very negative, and suppose I am, but the impulse for producing the poem is never negative, the most negative poem in the world is a very positive thing to be done” (Kamel, 2012, as cited in Roozbeh, 2017, p. 59).

Societies run on the base of social institutions and there are five basic institutions that are required for any balanced and harmonious society, “family, religion, economy, politics and education” (Horton & Hunt, 1984). Religion brings social cohesion, positive development, social control, and psychological support and explains the unexplained. The religious content of Larkin’s oeuvre is very vast. There are multiple views about him and no one exactly knows what to exactly call him, “firm believer, agnostic or an atheist” (Motion, 1993, cited in sckool.org). There is no research on the structural analysis of Larkin’s poems and it would be the first. So, it will give a new angle to studying Larkin’s poetry. After this analysis, we would be better able to argue about the role of religion in the lives of persons who have faced a modern, bleak and cruel time of wars.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY

- Do the Structural analysis of the poem, “Church Going”
- Find out paradigmatically and syntagmatically the structures used for church or religion and analyze those structures to validate whether these structures appreciate or devalue the status of religion in the lives of common people in the twentieth century
- Critically evaluate the symbolism used in the poem for religion and analyze whether the poem follows the three parameters of structuralism: wholeness, triangulation and self-regulation.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

This research is designed to structurally analyze the poem “Church Going” by applying the theory of Structural Linguistics. First of all, we will do the structural analysis of the poem in this research study; secondly, we will find and critically analyze the signifiers used in the poem about religion or church in paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations and thirdly, this research is meant to symbolically analyze signifiers related to religion. We will analyze the text qualitatively. We have to look at the poem and not at the poet as Booth mentions, “trust the poem, not the poet” (2005, p, 129). This frame work is best because researchers will not be attached to any biographical or contextual factor and will just focus on the structures for a more valid and rich interpretation of the text. In appendix, link of the poem is provided from where I have taken this text for analysis (see appendix at the last page).

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

This research article is meant to do the structural analysis of the poem “Church Going”. We are not taking into consideration the context of the poem and the biography of the poet. We will only concentrate on the structures and what those structures tell us about the speaker, religion and the community to which the speaker belongs.

STRUCTURE OF THE POEM

It is a slant lyrical poem of seven stanzas. There are nine lines in each stanza. It is in the form of a dramatic monologue. It seems as if the poem is going on in the mind of the reader and the text is inviting the reader to be part of it. The structure of the poem shows that the poet through his master stroke of stylistic variation is introducing different kinds of pauses, caesuras and enjambments and allowing the poem to move from the scale of concrete level to the scale of speculation, abstraction and philosophy. This poem is enriched with irony, sarcasm, wit and symbolism. The speaker of the poem is asking different questions, using imagination and wondering to find solution to all his problems and the role of religion in his times. In the first two stanzas, poet has used “I”, in the next inclusive we and in the last stanza there is use of “someone” as speaker is taking himself away from the situation. Whole poem is written in the present and future tense. It seems the poem is about the present event that has its roots in future.

Rhyme

The general rhyme scheme of this poem is “ABABCADCD”. Both full and slant or half rhymes are used in this poem. “Full rhyme is the one in which the last stressed vowel and proceeding consonants of different words have same sound but in slant-rhyme last

stressed vowel is not same but the consonants coming after it is giving same sound” (Cuddon, 2012, p. 751). Some of the examples of full rhyme are on / stone from first stanza, font / don’t from second stanza, come / some from fourth stanza and week / seek from fifth stanza. Some of the examples of slant-rhyme are stone / organ from first stanza, font / meant from second stanza and some / random from fourth stanza. This means that there is a continuous fluctuation in the use of full and slant rhyme in the poem.

Rhythm

As the rhyme of the poem varies, in the same way the rhythm of the poem is not constant. But we have noticed that mostly, ‘iambic pentameter’ (five meters repeat themselves following the sequence of unstressed/stressed syllables) is used.

“Once I am sure there’s nothing going on”

U / S / U / S / U / S / U / S / U / S /

“From where I stand, the roof looks almost new”

U / S / U / S / U / S / U / S / U / S /

Variations are made to break rhythm and give the readers the taste of colloquial or conversational language. There is use of spondee in second line of the first stanza; two stressed syllables are used at the same time, “thud shut”. This brings to the mind of the reader how the door is shut and it shows disrespectful way of shutting the door. There is also use of trochee in which a stressed syllable is followed by unstressed syllable, “sprawlings” follow trochee sequence of S / U/. So, this shows us how variety of meters is used in this text.

Caesuras and enjambment

There are many caesuras and enjambments used in the poem. This means that variation in the musical pattern of the poem is not only made through various meters but also the use of caesuras and enjambments and these two devices are the recurrent features of modern human conversation and poetry. As we know that different punctuation marks are used at the end of different verses and stanzas to give us the feeling of that pause of termination or continuation of thought. We have found that a comma is used at the end of stanzas’ one, four and five. It shows that there is a slight pause and the thought presented in this stanza is connected with the coming stanzas. Second and last stanzas end on period, third on the question mark and six on semicolon. “Caesura is the inclusion of any pause in the verse” (Cuddon, 2012, p. . It makes the poem slow and allow the readers to think: about what they have read previously and what can come next. As in the fifth stanza, there is the use of caesura.

“A shape less recognizable each week,

A purpose more obscure. I wonder who”

On the other hand, as Cuddon says, “in enjambment the thought does not end in the same line or stanza but it is continued to the next line or stanza. There is no use of punctuation to end the line” (2012, p. 261). There are many lines where it is used. Let us take the example of sixth stanza,

“Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
Dispersed, yet tending to this ground
Through suburb scrub because it held unsplit
So long and equally what since is found
Only in separation – marriage, birth”

Here we can see how the thought and sense are continued from the first line of the sixth stanza to the fifth line.

TITLE OF THE POEM

The title of the poem, “Church Going” is itself very significant. It is like a play on the words. There can be two meanings to it. One denotes the usual practice of going to church from the time of its establishment and its continued. The other meaning is that church is going; which means the value of the church is decreasing with the passage of time.

Stanza 1

The first stanza has an important setting. The first two lines of the poem are used to catch the attention of the reader. Readers become curious to know where speaker is going because it is not mentioned by the speaker in the first two lines. After all, it is just mentioned that the speaker enters the gate of any place and shuts its door insultingly and disrespectfully. With these two accented sounds, “thud shut” the speaker closed the door with bang and cut himself off from outside world, and gets into a new world. From the third line, we get to know that he entered the church. “Another church” tells us that he has been to different churches. Flowers are symbolically suggesting the death of church as the flowers are getting brownish; likewise, church importance is fading day by day because speaker has entered the church after Sunday prayer. Silence is tense and musty for him. When speaker enters, he decides to take off his cycle clips and not with respect but with “awkward reverence”. Speaker’s style of saying about the church or generally religion shows his agnostic or atheistic attitude. The signifiers of the first stanza show that the speaker of the poem is the modern man who has little faith in church and he is also not rich because he is coming on bicycle. We are intrigued and curious to know whether the attitude of speaker will change towards the church or whether something polite or respectful will be told by the speaker or not.

Stanza 2

The speaker starts to perform rituals. This gives us a shock because he does not like the church but he is still performing all the practices. He is not interested to look at the Cross or Virgin Mary signs but at roof whether it is “cleaned or restored” like a materialistic man. Signifiers of cleanliness and flowers explain that Sunday prayer has been performed and speaker was not there. He read “hectoring” verses. Speaker is very sarcastic because he read the verses in loud voice and spook about them badly and said, “here endeth” that echoed in the whole church. He said, “the place is not worth stopping for”. He could have used the place is worth stopping for but he is against this argument. After analyzing these structures, we think that now he would leave the church because he is a materialistic man who has no time for religion.

Stanza 3

We think that the monologue will end because Church is not a worth stopping place for the speaker but with the use of “yet” as a coordinating conjunction speaker continues the thought of the previous sentence and says about his routine of stopping in church even there is nothing for him to look for, “I am stopped”. This means that the bond is not completely broken and there might be still love and affection for church in the corner of his materialistic and commercialized heart. We think his sarcastic tone will change now but it is continued. Speaker is using rhetorical questions and wonders about the future of the church. He thinks one time will come when churches would be places for no humans and they would be barren lands. Then he gives suggestions to the readers and listeners about the possible future of churches: some churches will be for showing to upcoming generations and objects of church would be in the lock, like “plate and pyx”. The speaker has not used the signifier of holy which every Christian use about the holy objects of the church.

Stanza 4

When churches have fallen out of use, they can become part and parcel of superstitions. Speaker has used pun in these signifiers. How a church that cures the sick of their diseases can become obsolete because for the speaker a woman who would be thinking like this would be “dubious”. “Particular stone and pick simples” are symbolically suggesting the importance of churches even after their decline because they have cure for our physical and spiritual maladies. Speaker is sure about the overall death of churches because all superstitions would die and this place will be having “grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress and sky”. But the list of structures provided by the speaker in the last lines of stanza five again gives us the hint that churches will never be obsolete and they will continue to serve the creations of God.

Stanza 5

The significance of church is not recognizable physically and spiritually. It is an obscure place without any value. Speakers think about who will be the last person to visit the church. He can be a devoted Christian or antiquarian who is visiting an ancient place or the last person would be his representative. This means that there will always be someone at church and some of them would be there to search for spiritual solace and some of them would visit for physical and material gains. But speaker is also sure that some people would be there who would like him are curious and want to inquire about the importance of church or religion in their lives.

Stanza 6

Speaker again continues the thought of the previous sentence. The last person visiting the church would be bored with the monotonous routine of life and he would try to know the events that happened in churches. There is a long enjambment as speaker wants to pass these lines hurriedly. Marriage, birth and death ceremonies are performed there. “Shell” is symbolically used in stanza six and it suggests that church is like a prison and we are bound to it. For us, there is no way out. Whatever we think or say about church, we will have to come for our important ceremonies into it. We again find the use of paradox in the last two lines of stanza six. Speaker thinks this place is like “accoutred frowsty barn”

and it is of no worth but still “the speaker feels pleasure to stand there”. When something is of no use and of no worth then why speaker is standing there in silence and it gives happiness and pleasure to his heart. It is because speaker is a confused and ambivalent modern man who has positivistic attitude. Clearly, there is a battle going on between his mind and heart. Anyhow, the signifiers of stanza six show that the sarcastic and mocking attitude of speaker towards the church has reduced and finally he is moving towards the satisfactory conclusion that whatever happens this place will be a place of solace for him.

Stanza 7

In the last stanza, speaker is giving a final remark about the discovery that he has made. It starts as,

“A serious house on the serious earth it is,

In whose blent air all our compulsions meet”

Church is a serious house and it is performing all religious ceremonies that can never be neglected. All our important activities from birth to death are part of this institution. This place would never be obsolete because of its spiritual importance. Here, “Hunger” symbolically suggests the void that can be fulfilled only through religion. We, as human beings, need both spiritual and physical edification and we get wise when we see “Many dead lie around” that symbolically tells us the meaning of life and the role of church in peoples’ life. We become wise by watching those dead ones because due to this we think about our lives and can have answers to many philosophical questions. There is use of someone and not we or I. So, the last stanza defines the whole poem and concludes it, the significance of Christianity as a social institution has decreased because of the materialistic attitude of people but it will never be barren because of the rituals associated with it. The paradigmatic and syntagmatic choice of signifiers has resolved the major debate of twentieth century: the purpose of religion in our lives and even the purpose of our lives in this world. All the answers are associated with the semiotic signs of religion different ceremonies from the first stage of life, birth, to the last stage are performed and they are buried there to give the lesson to viewers the temporariness of life.

ANALYSIS

Speaker has used an informal and conversational style and this can be seen in the use of contractions. In the first two stanzas the tone is different, it is most curious and disdainful of the church and the signifiers explain that a speaker is a modern man who has little faith in church and he is also not so rich because he is coming on cycle. He knows each and every practice and Holy objects of church but he is very sarcastic and does not mention the reason of it. In stanzas 3, 4 and 5, there is a clear shift in tone and diction. Now, the speaker is curious about the people who will visit the church. Structures used in these stanzas give pleasure to atheists and agnostics but grief to staunch church goers. But he has given a clear clue that religion or church will always be there for people. Even the person come for spiritual or physical edification or a person like speaker will be visiting them so churches will always have someone.

In stanza 6 and 7, we find the drastic change in tone. We think the speaker of the poem has changed because now his tone is of all appreciation and praise for church. If we have not read previous stanzas, stanza seven easily gives us the opinion about the speaker by

the analysis of his structures that he has affirm faith and church is associated with three important phases: birth, marriage and death. Human is incomplete without these, so church or religion will always be present even people like it or not. And this poem follows Siswantoro (2010) three properties: wholeness, triangulation and self-regulation.

CONCLUSION

After structurally analyzing and interpreting the whole poem, we have come to the conclusion that structure of the poem is moving from curiosity of the speaker to his inquiry and from his inquiry to reasonable and satisfactory conclusion. Through predictions and rhetorical questions speaker is inquiring the value ability of churches or Christianity. Signifiers and diction of first five stanzas explains the sarcastic and bitter attitude of speaker about churches or Christianity. He does not even like to stand there and attend the Sunday prayer. But the ironical situation is that he performs all the practices of church. Speaker of the poem is confused about the role of church in his life, whether it is a prison or a house of wisdom. He is thinking for answers. He finds his answers in last two stanzas and we see a drastic change in the tone and signifiers that speaker used for church. He is appreciating churches because they cure our physical and spiritual maladies and it is a house of wisdom that provides answers to many of our questions. Speaker is sure that churches will never be obsolete because our three major stages of life are performed there: birth, marriage and death.

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Appendix

- For reading "Church Going" and other poems, visit this site:
www.aofesnotes.com