Church Going

SUMMARY

As soon as I'm positive that there's nothing happening inside the building, I enter and let the door close loudly behind me. I'm visiting yet another church: one with floor mats, pews, and stone architecture; displays of cut flowers that were laid out for Sunday services and are starting to brown; some brass objects and the like up near the altar; the trim little pipe organ; and an uncomfortable, stale-smelling, distracting silence, which has been settled here for ages. Since I don't have a hat to take off, I remove my bicycle clips as an awkward way of showing respect.

I move further inside and touch the rim of the special vessel for holy water. The church roof looks almost new from my vantage point, and I wonder if was recently cleaned or totally restored. I'm sure someone could answer that question, but I can't. Stepping up to the pulpit, I browse a few imposing, moralistic biblical verses and read out the words "Here endeth" with more volume than I'd anticipated. The sound of my voice echoing through the church briefly seems to mock me. Heading back out the front door, I sign the church's guestbook, drop a small Irish coin into the donation box, and think that it wasn't worth taking the time to go in.

And yet, that's exactly what I did; in fact, I stop by churches all the time. Each time I do, I end up feeling this same kind of uncertainty, wondering what I should be trying to find—and wondering what society will do with churches once people completely stop attending them. I wonder whether we'll leave a few of the grander ones around as tourist attractions—with their holy documents, ceremonial plateware, and vessels for the Eucharist locked up in cases—and just let the others get taken over by sheep and the elements (i.e., let them decay). Will we steer clear of those churches, believing they bring bad luck?

Or will shady women visit them after dark to make their kids touch a certain stone for luck, pick herbs that are supposed to heal cancer, or wait around on some specific night they've been told that a ghost will show up? The power of the churches will endure in some form, in games, riddles, or other random-seeming ways. But superstition, like religious belief, has to end at some point—and what will be left of churches when even the need for active *disbelief* has ended? Just the grass, pavement with weeds poking through, prickly vines, some bits of the old buildings, and the sky above.

The decaying church's shape will be harder to recognize over time, its purpose harder to remember. I wonder who will be the absolute last person to seek this church out *as* a church. One of the history buffs who touch things curiously and jot notes and know what "rood-lofts" and other obscure parts of the church were? Someone who's hooked on visiting old ruins because they crave antique artifacts? Someone who loves Christmastime and hopes to catch a whiff of clerical garments, organ pipes, and fragrant incense?

Or will he be someone like me: bored, ignorant when it comes to religion, knowing that the church has no supernatural aura, yet gravitating past suburban shrubbery toward this spot because it held together—so long and so calmly—things that now exist only in scattered form? For example, marriage, birth, death, and thoughts of all these things—the very things this special container (the church) was built to hold? Because while I don't know what this decorated, stale-smelling, barn-like building is worth, I like quietly standing here.

This church is a serious and meaningful place, built on meaningful ground. Inside it, all our combined human instincts are acknowledged and dignified as fate. And that aspect of it, at least, can never die out, since someone, somewhere, will always discover in themselves a desire to grow more serious. And that desire will always lead them toward this spot, which they once heard was an appropriate place to seek wisdom—if only because it's surrounded by so many dead people.

THEMES

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN SOCIETY

"Church Going" is a meditation on how society will (and won't) change when religion no longer holds any place in it. The speaker, a skeptic who visits a church while biking through the countryside, assumes that religion is dying and churches are sliding into irrelevance. Yet as he tries to imagine the fate of churches in a future without any religion at all, he decides that even non-believers like himself will still find *some* kind of power in what these buildings represented. Though old doctrines will fade, the poem suggests, some people will always seek out the "serious," ceremonious attitude that religion took toward life and death, because it's part of human nature to search for purpose and meaning.

The speaker visits an empty church despite being a non-believer, and his behavior in this setting shows a mix of respectful fascination and irreverence. He stops by as if on a whim, while cycling through the countryside, yet also admits that he does this "often." He removes "[his] cycle-clips in awkward reverence," a comic detail suggesting that he's not sure how to act in this setting, but feels some instinct toward respect even as a non-believer. He clowns around a bit in the empty church, but also leaves a donation—though it's essentially worthless. He describes his attitude toward the church as "Bored, uninformed," and well aware that the place

holds no "ghostly" aura. His actions, however, reveal ambivalence: even in his skepticism, he's drawn to the place.

The speaker's combined interest in and rejection of the church leads him to imagine a future in which religion has vanished, yet churches themselves still hold a peculiar appeal. In asking "When churches fall completely out of use / What we shall turn them into," he assumes that this change *will* happen: he's a modern skeptic who views religion as archaic and dying. He speculates about a future in which "belief," "superstition," and even "disbelief" are gone—that is, in which religion no longer holds any claim on human society, even as a rejected idea. Even then, however, he suggests that people like himself will still find power in the mere *atmosphere* of the church, which they may go so far as to seek out in defunct, decaying houses of worship.

Ultimately, the speaker identifies the primary power of the church (or religion) as its "serious[ness]," suggesting that this aspect will endure even after all the church's doctrines, rituals, and physical structures have crumbled. He admits that, for all his religious skepticism, he likes visiting the church because it's a "serious house on serious earth." That is, it's devoted to solemn respect for matters of life and death that may be trivialized elsewhere.

Though he does think that churches and organized religion will die out, he also sympathizes with their serious purpose and believes that some people will always share this sympathy. Thus, he asserts that this aspect of religious life "never can be obsolete," even as all others fade. Even unused churches will still draw some people, if only because their proximity to death (graveyards) makes them seem natural places to ponder the meaning of life.

While "Church Going" is sometimes irreverent in tone, it takes churches, and the human needs they're supposed to serve, very seriously. Though it never tips toward actual religious belief, it assumes that those needs will live on even as churches die out and thoughtfully considers how society will respond.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-63

THE DESIRE FOR HUMAN CONNECTION

The speaker suggests that churches, besides offering a "serious" atmosphere, once played a vital role in uniting communities. While this communal spirit has largely deteriorated, according to the speaker, its lingering memory still attracts even skeptics. Though he himself (ironically) visits churches only when they're empty, he finds their communal purpose part of their appeal. "Church Going" concludes that, if nothing else, churches remain ideal places to contemplate what all human beings share in common, including their mortality.

The speaker's visit to the church suggests both an avoidance of *and* a subtle hunger for the company of others. He stops inside only "Once I am sure there's nothing going on"—that is, once he's sure the place is empty. Yet he immediately removes his cycle-clips as if in a social gesture of respect, thinks of a question "Someone" could answer if they were around, and half-jokingly reads from the lectern as if to an actual congregation. He also donates a small coin and signs the church's guestbook: subtle gestures of community.

In the end, the speaker acknowledges that people have long gone to churches precisely for this sense of community. He predicts that, even after religions have dispersed, people will seek out former sites of worship in order to contemplate their connection with the rest of humanity. He admits that churches appeal to him because they once brought communities together to honor marriage, birth, and other events now "found only in separation." He depicts them as unifying, equalizing places where "all our compulsions meet" and "are recognized" as part of a common humanity. As long as churches exist in some form, he argues, people will seek out this communal atmosphere—if only by visiting the graveyards around them and contemplating our shared fragility.

Just as the poem reflects a tension between respect and irreverence, it reflects a tension between the desire for solitary contemplation and the desire for belonging. The speaker doesn't want to join a church, but he finds churches productive sites for thinking about what unites all people. He believes that this impulse toward connection will survive organized religion.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 8-18
- Lines 43-63

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Once I am ...
... door thud shut.

The poem begins with a punning title. "Church Going" literally means the practice of attending church (usually spelled as one word, *churchgoing*), but as the poem soon makes clear, it also suggests "the disappearing church" (as in, the church is "going" away, or becoming obsolete). The speaker, it turns out, is a non-religious person who believes that churches and organized religion are dying out in a secular age. Nevertheless, he has a habit of visiting old churches, for reasons that he tries to explain or work out in the poem.

In these first two lines, he walks into one such church: "Once I am sure there's nothing going on / I step inside, letting the door thud shut." This is clearly not churchgoing in the traditional sense, then: churchgoers worship as members of a

congregation, but this speaker goes out of his way to make sure no formal events are happening—and no one else is around—before dropping in. He wants to find solitude in the church itself, not *congregate* with others.

In the overall context of the poem, "nothing going on" could have other possible meanings as well. For example, the speaker seems "sure there's nothing going on" with churches and religion in a larger sense: that is, they're drained of traditional meaning and fast becoming irrelevant. But the poem also contradicts that idea to some degree: for the speaker, something clearly *is* "going on" in the church, a meaningful experience that he repeatedly seeks out even if it isn't social or supernatural in nature.

These opening lines establish the poem's meter as iambic pentameter. This means that a typical line in the poem contains five *iambs*: metrical feet consisting of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable. The baseline rhythm of the lines, then, is "da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM"—but there are many variations from this pattern. Listen to the stresses in lines 1-2:

> Once I | am sure | there's no- | thing go- | ing on
> I step | inside, | letting | the door | thud shut.

Line 1 follows the pattern closely, except for one extremely common variation: the substitution of a trochee (stressed-unstressed) for an iamb (unstressed-stressed) in the first foot ("Once I"). Line 2 is a bit more irregular, substituting a trochee for an iamb in the third foot ("letting") and a spondee (stressed-stressed) for an iamb in the final foot ("thud shut").

These changes make the line sound slightly awkward, evoking the speaker's hesitancy and tentativeness as he steps inside the church. The two stressed beats of "thud shut," meanwhile end with an emphatic bang (like the church door slamming shut!). The assonance in the last two words—"thud shut"—adds a bit of "thud[ding]" emphasis as well.

LINES 3-8

> *Another church: matting, ...*
> *... knows how long.*

Lines 3-8 provide a kind of guided tour of the church the speaker is entering. It's introduced as "Another church"—the poem's first indication that the speaker visits churches often. It contains "matting" (material used for floor mats), "seats" (pews), and "stone" architecture. Also on display are "flowers" that were "cut / For Sunday" services but are "brownish now"; evidently, the speaker is dropping by later on Sunday or on a different day of the week. These decaying flowers may be symbols of the poem's main theme: the decay of churches themselves.

The speaker also notices "some brass and stuff / Up at the holy end" (i.e., decorations and architectural elements around the altar), a "small neat organ" (i.e., a pipe organ that provides musical accompaniment to religious services), and "a tense, musty, unignorable silence, / Brewed God knows how long":

- This "musty [...] silence" (notice the combination of smell and sound imagery) also suggests decay, or maybe even the silence of death. It's a *lonely* silence, reflecting the emptiness of the church—and perhaps, figuratively, the absence of God.
- The fact that it strikes the speaker as "tense" and "unignorable" might speak to his discomfort as a non-believer in a religious environment. It might also reflect his inner loneliness (later, lines 47-52 will suggest that what draws him to the church is the communal atmosphere it once held).
- "Brewed God knows how long," meanwhile, reads as a wry joke: religious people would believe that God *does* know all about this church, but as the speaker soon reveals, he's not religious. In fact, this is the poem's only direct reference to God.

The speaker's casual, imprecise descriptions reflect his lack of belief—the fact that he's *not* a "churchgoer" in the usual sense: he says "seats" rather than pews, "little books" rather than Bibles or hymnals, the vague phrase "brass and stuff," and "holy end" rather than altar. The vague phrasing in this passage conveys humorous irreverence—"holy end" sounds especially ironic because the speaker doesn't believe in holiness—as well as the speaker's emotional distance from the church and what it represents.

That said, the rest of the poem will show how complicated this distance is. The "tens[ion]" the speaker feels in this silent church may reflect his inner conflict over what, if anything, the church means to him. Also later, it will become clear that the speaker is less "uninformed" (line 46) than he's letting on: after all, anyone who's heard of obscure church-related terms like "pyx" or "rood-lofts" (lines 25 and 41) certainly knows what an altar is!

Finally, the heavy alliteration in these lines ("seats"/"stone"/"sprawlings"/"Sunday"/"some"/"stuff"; "books"/"brownish"/"brass," etc.) adds some smoothness and consistency to a complex, metrically choppy passage, making its rush of details more musical and vivid.

LINES 8-12

> *Hatless, I take ...*
> *... know: I don't.*

These lines further illustrate the speaker's conflicted relationship to the church—that is, both the building he's entered and the larger belief system it stands for.

Since the "Hatless" speaker can't take off a hat to show respect

for the church, he instead "take[s] off / [His] cycle-clips in awkward reverence." These lines refer to the metal clips that prevent cyclists' trouser cuffs from getting caught in their bicycle chain; clearly, this speaker was on a bike ride before deciding to stop at the church. His comic "awkward[ness]" in removing his gear reflects the larger awkwardness, or tension, of his stance toward religion: he's drawn to churches, but he doesn't hold any religious beliefs. And yet if he's in an empty church and doesn't think God is watching, who is he making this gesture *for*? He seems to recognize the irony ("reverence" is a playful word choice here), yet feels some residual obligation to show respect for the church environment—even if he isn't quite sure why or exactly how to do it.

Notice, too, how the stanza breaks directly after this action, as if the poem itself is awkwardly pausing for a moment:

> [...] Hatless, I take off
> My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,
> Move forward, run my hand around the font.

By contrast, the asyndeton in the following line—the lack of an "and" between "Move forward" and "run my hand around the font"—makes the action here seem smooth and continuous.

The speaker touches the *font* (vessel for holy water), perhaps with curiosity or fondness, then glances up at the church's roof. He notes that it "looks almost new" and wonders if it's been "Cleaned, or restored?" Though "someone" would know the answer to this question, he's unqualified to say. Yet his rhetorical question hints at his interest in the church, and perhaps at his unspoken desire to connect with the community that attends and maintains it. The new roof is also evidence that the church, while empty at the moment, isn't literally abandoned or decaying. Even its dying "flowers" (lines 4-5) are really a sign of its ongoing activity, since they were "cut" for recent "Sunday" services.

Already, then, these lines complicate the skeptical assessment of the church that the speaker delivers in the middle part of the poem. He may believe religion is dying—that the "Church" is "Going"—but he can see that it isn't dead yet. Moreover, he still feels some respect for, curiosity about, and emotional connection with houses of worship like this one.

LINES 13-16

Mounting the lectern, ...
... echoes snigger briefly.

In lines 13-16, the speaker amuses himself by stepping up to the church's "lectern" (pulpit) and playing the part of the priest or minister. He glances over "a few / Hectoring large-scale verses" in the volume at the lectern, then reads off the phrase "Here endeth" louder than he'd intended to—and is startled when the building's "echoes" seem to mock him.

"Hectoring" suggests that these verses are chiding and moralistic. "Large-scale" means that they're imposing in tone or subject (or perhaps that they're literally set in a large type size). Larkin himself noted that "Here endeth" alludes to "the prayer book of the Church of England" (a.k.a. the *Book of Common Prayer*), where the phrase "occurs several times in the order of prayer," as in, for example, "Here endeth the first lesson." The "verses" the speaker reads are presumably from the same book (or else from a Bible that's on the lectern as well). The reference to the Anglican prayerbook indicates that this is probably an Anglican church somewhere in suburban England—though the poem's setting has sparked some critical debate (as covered in the Setting section of this guide).

This moment in the poem is layered with subtle irony. The speaker steps up to the pulpit as a joke, thus raising the question: since the church is empty and he doesn't believe God is listening, who is he performing this joke for? If he's just amusing himself, there's something a little sad and lonely about the performance. His desire to play the priest may suggest some nostalgia for the authority the church once represented, even if he believes that authority is gone. The words he speaks, "Here endeth," ironically seem to reflect the end of that authority, even though they're supposed to embody it.

The speaker's "pronounce[ment]" is also unintentionally loud—as loud as real preaching—and the echoes seem to "snigger" or mock him. They may seem mocking because they remind him that he's all alone (has no congregation or community here), because they create the illusion that he's *not* alone (thus mocking his disbelief in the divine/supernatural), or both. Perhaps they also seem to undermine the authority he was playacting, throwing his own ordinary voice back at him. Finally, the words "Here endeth" might spook him with a ghostly reminder of his own mortality (like the church, his life will end someday). However readers interpret this complex moment, the joke is on the speaker.

LINES 16-18

Back at the ...
... worth stopping for.

In lines 16-18, the speaker exits the church. Perhaps he's "Bored," as he later suggests (line 46), or perhaps he's spooked by the eerie "echoes" of his performance at the pulpit (line 16). Either way, he signs the visitor's book at the church's entrance, drops an "Irish sixpence" in the donation box, and departs with the thought that "the place was not worth stopping for."

Once again, these lines are full of ambiguity and internal conflict, reflecting the speaker's ambivalent attitude toward the church, religion, and so on. Consider:

- Signing the visitor's book is a small gesture of respect and communal feeling. Though he doesn't want to be around members of the church while he's

there, he wants them to know he *was* there.
- Donating a coin also seems to be a respectful, communal gesture. However, an "Irish sixpence" is a very small coin, and if the church is in England rather than Ireland, it's a completely worthless coin. Thus, the donation might be seen as mocking or cynical.
    - Alternatively, it might suggest that the church (or religion) isn't worth anything to the speaker, but he feels as if it *ought* to be, so he goes through the motions of donating anyway. Larkin himself described this detail as "a comic compromise between GIVING NOTHING and giving REAL MONEY."
- The speaker claims "the place was not worth stopping for," but in the next line, he acknowledges that he "did" stop anyway, and "often do[es]." By the end of the poem, it seems as if the place actually feels quite significant to him. Thus, this claim isn't a final judgement so much as an expression of one of the speaker's mixed feelings.

In other words, while these lines seem to weigh in on what the church is worth or "not worth," they actually leave this question open for the rest of the poem to confront.

LINES 19-23

Yet stop I ...
... turn them into,

Lines 19-23 acknowledge that the speaker's church visits are a habit, not an occasional or one-time event. He "stop[s]" by churches "often," presumably for the kind of brief, solitary, touristy visit described in the poem. But lest anyone suspect that this habit stems from some kind of religious belief, he adds that his visits always leave him feeling "much at a loss":

> Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
> When churches fall completely out of use
> What we shall turn them into [...]

In other words, he's not sure what he's looking for in these churches—intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually—and he doesn't see much of a future for churches in general. He believes they'll "fall completely out of use" and be repurposed, and he frames this outcome as a "When," not an "if." Basically, he believes that the post-19th-century trend toward a secularized society (in Europe and elsewhere) will continue indefinitely, leaving the church a dead institution.

But the speaker clearly still finds *some* value in churches, so the question of their future provokes him to further speculation. Parallel clauses and the repeated word "Wondering" propel this speculation forward, while alliteration links a series of words related to questioning: "Wondering"/"wondering"/"When"/"What" (as well as "we [...] we" in line 23).

LINES 23-27

if we shall ...
... as unlucky places?

In lines 23-27, the speaker continues to ponder what will happen to churches in a faith-free future. (Again, he takes this future as a given; his rhetorical questions assume that organized religion will never regain its former dominance.)

He wonders whether the grandest churches ("cathedrals") will survive as tourist attractions—with their religious artifacts kept "in locked cases" like museum exhibits—while "the rest" will decay in the open as if turned over "rent-free to rain and sheep." He then wonders if churches, instead, will come to be seen as "unlucky places," "avoid[ed]" by the public rather than visited by tourists.

Notice that, in both these scenarios, churches retain *some* kind of emotional or psychological hold over people. Whether they're sought out as curiosities, fearfully avoided, or abandoned altogether, they're not treated as neutral sites. (Notice that the speaker doesn't imagine them being converted into housing or other secular spaces.)

Still, these speculations are likely to disturb religious believers, and the poet seems to handle them with a kind of irreverent gusto. Alliteration is very dense in this passage ("keep"/"cathedrals"/"chronically"; "parchment"/"plate"/"pyx"; "locked"/"let"; "rest"/"rent-free"/"rain"; "sheep"/"Shall"), as are assonance and internal rhyme ("keep"/"cathedrals"; "chronically"/"on"; "plate"/"cases"; "let"/"rest"/"rent-free"; "rent-free"/"sheep"). The lines are fun to say aloud, as if the poet is relishing his mockery of the church. The use of rhetorical questioning (which continues through the next three stanzas) might even be a subtle parody of the Christian catechism, which uses a question-and-answer format to teach church doctrine.

For all his irreverence, the speaker shows here that he knows a fair amount about churches. Specifically, he knows what kinds of religious artifacts they keep around, including "parchment" (the kind of antique paper used in old manuscripts), "plate" (meaning a collection plate, communion-plate, or ceremonial plateware in general), and a "pyx" (a small canister used to carry the Eucharist to the sick so they can receive Holy Communion). His familiarity with these terms reflects his clear interest in churches, tempering the harshness of his insistence that they're doomed.

LINES 28-31

Or, after dark, ...
... a dead one?

Lines 28-31 imagine yet another humbling future for churches.

Rather than "avoid[ing] them as unlucky places," the speaker suggests, "dubious women" might visit their ruins at nighttime in hopes of experiencing some kind of *good* luck. They might "make their children touch a particular stone" (as if the stone of the church contained supernatural power), "Pick simples for a cancer" (i.e, pluck herbs growing around the church in hopes that they'll magically cure cancer), or try to see "a dead one" on "some / Advised night" (i.e., watch for a ghost on some night when ghosts supposedly walk the church grounds).

The tone of these lines is bitingly skeptical, suggesting that the speaker finds random superstition even more "dubious" than organized religion. At the same time, he portrays superstition as a kind of disorganized folk version of religion, which may survive for a while after religious institutions (symbolized by the church) have crumbled.

Again, he isn't predicting a definite future for churches, religion, or belief, but he's using rhetorical questions to illustrate the *kind* of future he imagines for them. He imagines that churches will retain some form of power or appeal—but a much less prestigious form than the institutional power they once commanded throughout Europe.

LINES 32-35

Power of some ...
... disbelief has gone?

Building on his previous imagined scenarios—in which future churches draw tourists rather than believers, or attract or frighten the superstitious—the speaker now arrives at the central question of the poem. Not coincidentally, this question arrives near the exact center of the poem itself (in the fourth stanza out of seven).

According to the speaker, churches in the non-religious future will temporarily cling to "Power of some sort"—not through organized traditions but "seemingly at random," in folk "games," "riddles," and superstitions. But when even these die out, the speaker asks, what power will churches have left?

> But superstition, like belief, must die,
> And what remains when disbelief has gone?

Note that "when disbelief has gone" doesn't mean "when belief has returned." It means "when religious belief has died out so completely that even religious *disbelief*—the conscious rejection of religion—has faded from the collective memory. In other words, the speaker wonders what will happen to churches once society has all but forgotten what they stood for.

The next lines seem to provide a concrete answer to this rhetorical question: churches will crumble into ruins, their original "purpose" becoming more and more "obscure." However, the speaker will qualify this answer somewhat in the final stanza.

LINES 36-38

Grass, weedy pavement, ...
... purpose more obscure.

Lines 36-38 appear to provide an answer to the rhetorical question in the previous lines. This answer comes in the form of a sentence fragment (a sentence lacking a main subject or verb—in this case, a verb). Stacking up a number of parallel noun phrases, the sentence fragment describes an abandoned, crumbling church:

> Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,
> A shape less recognizable each week,
> A purpose more obscure.

What will remain of the church when belief, superstition, and even conscious disbelief have faded from human memory? According to the speaker, the answer is: a heap of ruins! Nature ("Grass," "weed[s]," "brambles," and open "sky") will overrun the human-built structure (including its architectural features, such as "buttress[es]," and the "pavement" surrounding it). The ruins will grow more and more incoherent to the humans who pass by, as they forget not only the church's specific teachings but its basic "purpose." Notice how the fragmentary sentence and the plosive /b/ alliteration of "**b**rambles" and "**b**uttress" makes the language itself seem jagged and rough, like the ruins it's describing.

For the moment, this answer seems final; the speaker seems to prophesy total doom for churches and religion. But the final stanza offers a different kind of answer, suggesting that even in decay, or in the most secular environment, churches will hold some lingering power over the human imagination.

LINES 38-41

I wonder who ...
... what rood-lofts were?

Having predicted the demise of churches, the speaker now "wonder[s] who / Will be the last, the very last" person to seek out this particular church "for what it was." In other words, who will be the last to seek it out *as* a church, with some sense of its history and former meaning, rather than poking through it as if it were a random junk heap?

Maybe, the speaker muses, this last person will be "one of the crew / That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were." This description might bring to mind a maintenance or grounds "crew," "tap[ping]" with hammers and "jot[ting]" notes as they work. However, the detail about "know[ing] what rood-lofts were" suggests a different possibility. "Rood-lofts" are features of medieval European church architecture: set atop elaborately decorated partitions, these lofts held up a *rood*, or sculpture of the Crucifixion. While a grounds crew *might* know this obscure, specific term, it seems more likely that the speaker is describing

history buffs, architecture lovers, or others with an amateur or professional interest in historic churches. These antiquarian types might poke around church sites, "tap[ping]" interesting features and "jot[ting]" notes for their own research or amusement. The speaker is jocularly suggesting that one of *that* "crew" (i.e., *that* type of person) might be the last to visit the church.

Of course, there's some irony in the fact that the speaker himself knows the obscure term "rood-lofts"! Perhaps he's more like these antiquarian geeks than he's willing to admit. He'll claim in line 46 to be a "Bored, uninformed" visitor, but people who are completely bored by and uninformed about churches don't usually learn vocabulary like "rood-lofts" and "pyx." Though the speaker doesn't tap walls, take notes, or hang around the church very long, his own interest in churches seems more than casual.

LINES 42-44

Some ruin-bibber, randy ...
... organ-pipes and myrrh?

Lines 42-44 suggest other possible candidates for the "very last" person to seek the church out "for what it was." The last churchgoer, the speaker suggests, might be a "ruin-bibber, randy for antique," or a "Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff / Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh."

Bibber is British slang for *heavy drinker*, so these two descriptions parallel each other: both refer to a metaphorical type of addict. The "ruin-bibber" is hooked on antiques—so much so that they seem "randy" (sexually excited) for antique artifacts and might be willing to comb through the ruins of old churches to find them. The "Christmas-addict" is hooked on the Christmas spirit and might visit a ruined church just to catch a "whiff" of the way the holiday was once celebrated. Specifically, they might be seeking traces of:

- "Gown-and-bands": highly formal clerical wear, still used in some Christian denominations (the *gown* is the preaching robe, the *bands* are long collar tabs).
- "Organ-pipes": pipes in the kind of metal or wooden organ used to produce music in churches. (The church in this poem has an organ; see line 6.)
- "Myrrh": a fragrant resin sometimes used in incense for church services; also, one of three gifts given to the infant Christ in the biblical Christmas (Nativity) story.

These lines' heavy alliteration ("ruin-bibber"/"randy"; "Christmas-addict"/"counting") and assonance ("randy"/"antique"; "Christmas-addict"/"whiff") add a little extra relish to the speaker's already mocking language. Again, however, the speaker himself seems fairly knowledgeable about church ceremonies and traditions, lending some irony to his claim (in the following lines) that he's "uninformed."

LINES 45-48

Or will he ...
... Through suburb scrub

After speculating about other types of people who might be the last to visit the church, the speaker wonders whether the last visitor might be "my representative"—someone just like himself.

And what is he like? By his own account, he's "Bored" by and "uninformed" about the church. He "know[s] the ghostly silt dispersed": in other words, he's aware that the church contains no supernatural or divine presence. ("Silt" is the powdery sediment found in bodies of water; here, the speaker imagines the ghostly presence of God as a powdery stuff that's scattered—"dispersed"—in the modern age, because there's no reason to believe in it anymore.) And "yet," he "tend[s] to this cross of ground / Through suburb scrub": that is, he gravitates to this church and its humble suburban setting anyway.

The phrase "cross of ground" contains a double meaning, playing on both the idea of X marking a spot (as on a map) and the symbol of the Christian cross. Once again, there's a kind of mocking relish in phrases like "suburb scrub," with its vivid alliteration, consonance, and internal rhyme. However, delicate irony also runs through these lines:

- The speaker isn't as "Bored" and "uninformed" as he makes himself out to be. In fact, he seems to know and care more about churches than most non-believers. He might just be undermining himself for comic effect, or he might care more than he realizes—an example of dramatic irony.
- The speaker doesn't belong to the church, has treated the church irreverently, and has suggested that the church isn't worth much even as a tourist site (see lines 17-18). Yet he suggests, here, that someone like him might actually be the church's last visitor. This is an irony not only for the speaker but for the church, which solicits reverence, obedience, participation in community rituals, etc., yet in the end (according to the speaker) might appeal most to solitary skeptics.

The next lines will suggest *why* such a person might visit the church—in other words, why the speaker himself has visited.

LINES 48-52

because it held ...
... This special shell?

Why might a person like the speaker—"Bored, uninformed," non-religious—continue to visit churches long after organized religion has faded? In fact, why has the speaker visited *this* church? Lines 48-52 offer a tentative answer:

> [...] 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 whom was built
> This special shell? [...]

Even this "answer" is phrased as a rhetorical question. The speaker doesn't directly state that he thinks/feels this way, but he strongly implies that he does. He imagines the church as a "special shell" that "held" major rituals and experiences "unspilt" (i.e., contained them without spilling). In other words, it was a special, self-contained site where communities gathered to honor "marriage," "birth," "death," and "thoughts of these." It unified these things under one roof, "long and equably" (for a long time, very stably).

According to the speaker, however, these things are now "found / Only in separation." The institution of the church no longer holds society together. Births, marriages, and deaths are celebrated in a more scattered way, without a larger community involved. Even people's "thoughts" about these things no longer share a common tradition or context. In that sense, what the church once "held" has now spilled.

Clearly, the speaker feels some nostalgia for that older sense of community. He feels the "separation" as a loss. Apparently, he seeks out churches to recover some sense of the way things used to be—though, ironically, he does this when no one else is around. (His mixed feelings about solitude and community create a tension that the poem doesn't necessarily resolve.)

LINES 52-54

> *For, though I've ...*
> *... in silence here;*

Remember how the speaker decided, back in line 18, that the church "was not worth stopping for"? In lines 52-54, he seems to revisit that issue and come to a different conclusion:

> For, though I've no idea
> What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
> It pleases me to stand in silence here;

Notice the repetition of the word "worth," which relates to the poem's key question: what value, if any, will churches hold once religion is gone? Earlier, the speaker seemed to decide that this church was effectively worthless (and donated a mere "Irish sixpence" accordingly). Here, he suggests that the question of what the building is "worth"—in a monetary or objective sense—is unanswerable and maybe unimportant. As a building, it's just an "accoutred frowsty barn": a tricked-out, stale-smelling, barn-like structure. As an institution, it's "frowsty" in a metaphorical sense: that is, stale, old-fashioned, and past its time. But as a place, it's still meaningful to him.

"It pleases me to stand in silence here," he declares, seeming to embrace the silence he criticized earlier as "tense" and "musty" (line 7). Although part of what draws him to the church is its communal atmosphere, he prefers to visit alone and meditate in solitude. (It's not clear exactly where he's "stand[ing]" in this line, since he seemed to exit the building back in line 18; but perhaps he's still on the church grounds, or else revisiting the place in his imagination.) For all the speaker's skepticism, the church appeals to him as a space for quiet contemplation, and in the final stanza, he suggests that this will be its most *lasting* appeal.

LINES 55-58

> *A serious house ...*
> *... can be obsolete,*

Lines 55-58 praise what the speaker believes is most valuable and durable about the church.

He describes it as "a serious house on serious earth"; in other words, the building and the grounds strike him as solemn and meaningful. He doesn't go so far as to say they're *sacred*, but they do have a gravitas that he respects (despite his earlier irreverence). In the church's "blent" (blended, communal) "air," according to the speaker, "all our compulsions meet, / Are recognised, and robed as destinies." That is, the church's community atmosphere brings together all the instincts, impulses, and tendencies we share as human beings; acknowledges them (rather than treating them as purely private); and dresses them up (metaphorically, "robe[s]" them) as the workings of some higher destiny. The "robed" metaphor evokes the robes of a preacher, choir, etc., and also suggests that the church *dignifies* human experiences through its rituals. To the speaker, this serious and ceremonious aspect of the church "never can be obsolete," because it serves a basic human need.

The repetition of "serious" in quick (but not immediate) succession is an example of diacope; the word is also repeated once more, in line 60. This emphasis highlights a thematically important word, much as earlier repeated words, including "worth," hinted at the poem's main concerns. (The church may be dying out, but its fundamental *seriousness*, in the speaker's view, is still *worth* something.)

LINES 59-63

> *Since someone will ...*
> *... dead lie round.*

In the final five lines, the speaker expands on the idea that the "serious" quality of the church "never can be obsolete."

It will always retain some appeal, the speaker explains, because some people will always discover—to their own surprise—that they'd like to be more serious, mature, wise, etc.: "someone will forever be surprising / A hunger in himself to be more serious." When they discover that desire in themselves, they will

"gravitat[e] with it to this ground," meaning the church. They will do so because they heard this ground "was proper to grow wise in"—was an appropriate place to seek wisdom—"If only" because "so many dead lie round."

This last line refers to the graveyards often found on the grounds of old churches (so often that "churchyard" can be a synonym for "graveyard"). The speaker suggests that, if nothing else, these graveyards will continue to offer some of the wisdom people seek in churches. The suggestion is semi-ironic, since churches, of course, are supposed to offer other kinds of wisdom and consolation, not just the kind that comes from contemplating death. (But it's not *completely* ironic, since contemplating death is part of religion, too!)

This final stanza, then, attempts to present a measured view of what value churches might still hold in a future, post-religious age. Contrary to the poem's earlier suggestions that churches will simply crumble into deserted ruins, the ending suggests that they *will* continue to hold meaning for some people, even if it's not the kind of meaning their congregations once believed in. In fact, churches hold meaning for the speaker himself, who doesn't believe in God or the supernatural but finds plenty of *human* interest in these buildings. He also sees them as reminders of his own mortality—of the fact that he, like churches, must someday "go."

As the speaker meditates on why the church "pleases" him, the language gains a kind of pleasing, sweeping musicality. Unlike previous stanzas, which tended to feature many caesuras (mid-line grammatical pauses), this closing stanza has only three: one after the comma in line 57 and two after the commas in line 62. Accordingly, the rhythm of the language becomes steadier and stronger. Alliteration also features heavily in this stanza, as most of the lines contain at least one alliterative pair:

> Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
> [...]
> 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,

(There's also the double "serious" in line 55, which isn't alliteration but pure repetition.) The combination of rolling rhythms and musical language brings the poem to a crescendo—diminished only slightly by the final line, with its blunt acknowledgement of death.

SYMBOLS

THE SPEAKER AND THE CHURCH

The speaker's treatment of the church symbolizes his attitude toward religion itself. His actions in the first two stanzas, especially, suggest that this attitude hovers between irreverence and respect.

He enters the church only once he's "sure there's nothing going on"; that is, he doesn't seem to want to be part of any official religious service or community. He removes his cycle-clips "in awkward reverence," feeling he ought to show respect but not sure how to do it. (And to whom is he trying to show respect? The people who aren't there, or the divine presence he doesn't believe in?) With playful irreverence, he reads aloud from the Bible at the pulpit, but seems embarrassed by the resulting echoes. He signs the church's guestbook in a small gesture of community and respect. He also donates a coin, albeit a small one, which (depending on whether the church is located in or outside of Ireland) may or may not have any value at all.

In other words, the speaker's behavior is a bit all over the map, reflecting his mixed feelings toward religion. He doesn't subscribe to any fundamental religious beliefs, but he's drawn to—and "please[d]" by—the communal, ceremonious atmosphere that religious worship offers. He feels some respect for religion, but he isn't sure where or how to direct that respect, and he doesn't feel *deference* or *obedience* to it (he's willing to make fun of it).

The donated coin seems to symbolize what religion is worth to the speaker, though the symbolism here is ambiguous. Clearly, religion doesn't hold much (if any) definable value for him, but it may hold a *little*. Even if the coin is worthless, his donation suggests some lingering *desire* for religion to hold value (i.e., he feels he ought to donate even if he doesn't really believe).

If nothing else, the speaker likes to "stand in silence" in the church. This detail may symbolize the silence (i.e., absence) of God, but it's also a contemplative silence: a thought-provoking atmosphere that the speaker likes to absorb. Symbolically, then, religion doesn't speak to him in any traditional way, but he still finds it meaningful and rewarding to contemplate.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-18:** "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."
- **Lines 52-54:** "For, though I've no idea / What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth, / It pleases me to stand in silence here;"

RELIGIOUS ARTIFACTS

The poem describes items in the church (and religious artifacts in general) in blunt, flippant terms. These artifacts come to symbolize the meaninglessness of religious structures and trappings in the absence of religious belief.

To the non-religious speaker, the church is just "Another church," not a unique and sacred place to which he feels personal or communal ties. The Bibles and hymnals in the pews are just "little books"—not sacred texts—while the grand decorations at the altar are just "some brass and stuff / Up at the holy end." The silence strikes him as "tense" and "musty" rather than hallowed, awe-inspiring, etc. (although he later admits he finds it "pleas[ing]").

The speaker also imagines cathedrals being repurposed as tourist attractions, with artifacts such as "parchment, plate, and pyx" kept "in locked cases" like museum pieces. This image implies that religion is becoming obsolete, draining its once-venerated objects of prestige and relevance. Even in praising the church toward the end, the speaker describes it as an "accoutred frowsty barn": that is, a stale, barn-like building filled with *accoutrements*, or mere decorative *stuff*. In the absence of any broader belief to infuse the place with meaning, the church might as well be a giant, tricked-out shed.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-8:** "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."
- **Lines 10-16:** "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."
- **Lines 22-25:** "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,"
- **Lines 52-53:** "For, though I've no idea / What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,"

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

"Church Going" uses a number of metaphors as it describes the church and imagines the future of churches. These metaphors help to make the poem all the more vivid for the readers. For example, the speaker says that the "silence" of the church (line 7) has been "Brewed God knows how long" (line 8), as if it's a liquid that's been sitting, stagnant, in the vessel of the church. Later, the echoes in line 16 are said to "snigger briefly," as if they're snickering at or mocking the speaker rather than just rebounding off the walls.

There are lots of other metaphors as well, which tend to cast the church (as well as churchgoers) in an irreverent light:

- Line 42 imagines a "ruin-bibber, randy for antique": someone who loves ruins and antiques so much that it's as if they're addicted to them (like a *bibber*, a.k.a. drunkard) or lustful (*randy*) for them. Similarly, lines 43-44 describe a "Christmas-addict": someone who loves the holiday so much that, figuratively speaking, they're jonesing for even a "whiff" of Christmas spirit.
- Lines 46-47 compare the supernatural aura of the church to "ghostly silt" (*silt* meaning sediment or another sort of residue) that's "Dispersed" as the world has grown more secular. Line 47 also compares the site of the church to a "cross of ground" (think of the phrase *X marks the spot*), which, of course, puns on the Christian cross.
- Line 53 ("this accoutred frowsty barn") irreverently compares the church to a musty, but decorated, barn. This comparison suggests that the building is large, stale-smelling, full of open space, etc., and frames it as humble rather than grand.
- Lines 56-57 describe the "blent air" of the church, in which "all our compulsions meet, / Are recognised, and robed as destinies." Again, the speaker compares the air to a liquid that's been brewed (*blent*), this time imagining its ingredients as all our human *compulsions* (instincts, tendencies). According to the speaker, the church once "robed" these compulsions as "destines"—metaphorically dressed them up or glamorized them as the workings of fate.

But certain metaphors in the final two stanzas grant the place some dignity as well. For example, Lines 48-53 compare the church to a "special shell" that "held unspilt" various social forces and experiences until they began to scatter in a secular age. In other words, the church was a kind of container for religious ceremonies like marriage, birth, and death (and the emotions that accompany such ceremonies), keeping these

things from metaphorically spilling out into the secular world.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "And a tense, musty, unignorable silence, / Brewed God knows how long."
- **Line 16:** "The echoes snigger briefly."
- **Line 42:** "Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,"
- **Lines 43-44:** "Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff / Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?"
- **Lines 46-47:** "knowing the ghostly silt / Dispersed"
- **Line 47:** "this cross of ground"
- **Lines 48-52:** "it held unspilt / So long and equably what since is found / Only in separation—marriage, and birth, / And death, and thoughts of these—for whom was built / This special shell?"
- **Line 53:** "this accoutred frowsty barn"
- **Line 56:** "In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,"
- **Line 57:** "robed as destinies."

IMAGERY

The poem uses plenty of vivid imagery when describing the church that the speaker visits, as well as when envisioning the decayed or ruined churches of the future.

Though mostly visual, this imagery appeals to four of the five senses (all but taste!). The speaker sketches the church in sharp visual detail, from its "matting, seats, and stone" to its "small neat organ," "lectern," and visitor's "book." But he also draws attention to the church's sounds (or *lack* of sounds) as well: the "thud" of the door closing, the "echoes" after he reads "loudly" from the pulpit, and the "silence" that prevails at all other times (mentioned twice, in lines 7 and 54).

A brief moment of tactile (that is, touch-related) imagery occurs as he "run[s his] hand around the font" (line 10). He also draws repeated attention to the *smell* of the church: the "musty" or "frowsty" quality of its air (lines 7, 53), and the "whiff / Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh" that future people might still search for (line 44). Notice how the phrase "musty [...] silence" combines smell and sound into one image!

The poem's imagery can also be deliberately vague—either for comic effect, as in the mention of "little books" (presumably Bibles and/or hymnals) and "the holy end" (clearly the altar), or for thematic purposes, as when the speaker describes the church as a "shell," "barn," and "house" in lines 52, 53, and 55. Metaphorically, at least, the church has qualities of all those things—and, of course, the speaker is trying to pin down exactly how *he* views the church.

The speaker conjures a stark visual of the church's future in lines 36-37: abandoned for worship purposes, it will become "Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky, / A shape less recognizable each week." But even in that secular future, the speaker believes churches will still draw thoughtful people to their graveyards, which offer a kind of wisdom because "so many dead lie round" (line 63). After all the details designed to highlight the church's age, emptiness, and growing irrelevance, this closing image ends the poem on a solemn note.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-11:** "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—"
- **Lines 13-17:** "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,"
- **Lines 23-26:** "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."
- **Lines 28-31:** "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?"
- **Lines 36-37:** "Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky, / A shape less recognizable each week,"
- **Lines 40-41:** "one of the crew / That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?"
- **Lines 43-44:** "a whiff / Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?"
- **Line 52:** "This special shell"
- **Line 53:** "this accoutred frowsty barn"
- **Line 54:** "It pleases me to stand in silence here;"
- **Line 55:** "A serious house on serious earth it is,"
- **Line 63:** "If only that so many dead lie round."

REPETITION

The poem includes a few different kinds of repetition, which helps to organize its language and ideas and also to emphasize thematically important words.

One of the most obvious kinds of repetition in the poem is anaphora. Notice the repeated words at the beginnings of lines 37-45:

> A shape less recognizable each week,
> A purpose more obscure.
> [...]

Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
Or will he be my representative [...]

This anaphora gives the stanza a list-like structure, as the speaker imagines the qualities of future (decayed) churches and the kinds of people who might visit them. In fact, most of lines 21-52 is structured as a series of rhetorical questions on this topic. Repeated words like "Wondering" (line 21) and "shall" (lines 23, 27) help set up these questions and propel the speaker's musings forward.

Other repeated words/phrases in the poem include "silence," which is mentioned in both lines 7 ("And a tense, musty, unignorable silence") and 54 ("It pleases me to stand in silence here"). This repetition simply emphasizes just how quiet the church is. The word "worth" pops up twice in reference to the church (lines 18 and 53), as part of the poem's broader reflection on the value of churches in a secular society.

Also note how diacope creates added emphasis in lines 38-40:

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

And again in line 55:

A serious house on serious earth it is,

The word "serious" is repeated once more, too, in line 60 ("A hunger in himself to be more serious"). It's no accident that "the last" and "serious" both tie in with the poem's themes. "Church Going" is about endings—specifically, the end of religion's dominance in society—but also about the solemn, ceremonious atmosphere religion provides, which the speaker believes will live on.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 7:** "silence"
- **Line 18:** "worth"
- **Line 21:** "Wondering," "wondering"
- **Line 23:** "shall," "shall"
- **Line 27:** "Shall"
- **Line 37:** "A"
- **Line 38:** "A"
- **Line 39:** "the last," "the," "last"
- **Line 43:** "Or"
- **Line 45:** "Or"
- **Line 53:** "worth"
- **Line 54:** "silence"
- **Line 55:** "serious," "serious"
- **Line 60:** "serious"

ALLITERATION

"Church Going" is full of alliteration that heightens the poem's musicality, especially toward the end. In subtle ways, it also guides the reader and contributes to the poem's meaning.

For example, the /s/ and /br/ sounds in lines 3-5 help smooth out a complex passage packed with visual detail, caesuras, and rhythmic variations. In other words, these shared sounds help guide the reader as the speaker gives a sort of tour of the church:

Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff

At other moments, the poem's alliteration seems more pointed. Take line 16, where the echo of /b/ consonants in "briefly" and "Back" mirrors the "echoes" that the speaker hears of his own voice in the church. And in line 25, alliteration links the three religious artifacts mentioned ("parchment, plate, and pyx"), drawing them together into a unified image.

Later, the guttural /r/ and sharp /k/ alliteration (and consonance) in lines 42-43 make these mocking descriptions sound more emphatically derisive:

Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff."

The heavy alliteration in the last stanza gives the poem's final moments an air of heft, balance, and gravitas:

Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
[...]
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,

All these repeated sounds create an even, stately rhythm that suits the heightened "serious[ness]" of this closing stanza.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "seats," "stone"
- **Line 4:** "sprawlings"
- **Line 5:** "Sunday," "brownish," "some," "brass," "stuff"
- **Line 15:** "much more," "meant"
- **Line 16:** "briefly. Back"
- **Line 21:** "Wondering what," "wondering"
- **Line 22:** "When"
- **Line 23:** "What we," "we," "keep"
- **Line 24:** "cathedrals chronically"
- **Line 25:** "parchment, plate,," "pyx," "locked"

- **Line 26:** "let," "rest rent-free," "rain," "sheep"
- **Line 27:** "Shall"
- **Line 28:** "dark," "dubious"
- **Line 30:** "simples," "some"
- **Line 32:** "some sort"
- **Line 33:** "riddles," "random"
- **Line 36:** "brambles, buttress"
- **Line 40:** "what," "was," "one"
- **Line 42:** "ruin-bibber, randy"
- **Line 43:** "Christmas-addict, counting"
- **Line 48:** "suburb scrub," "unspilt"
- **Line 49:** "So," "since"
- **Line 50:** "separation"
- **Line 54:** "stand," "silence"
- **Line 55:** "serious," "serious"
- **Line 57:** "recognised," "robed"
- **Line 59:** "Since someone," "surprising"
- **Line 60:** "hunger," "himself," "serious"
- **Line 61:** "gravitating," "ground"
- **Line 62:** "Which," "he," "heard"

ASSONANCE

The poem contains a great deal of assonance (and the related device internal rhyme). All these repeated vowel sounds add to the poem's lush musicality, which builds toward an especially harmonious final two stanzas. Take lines 46-54, for example:

> Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
> Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
> Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt
> [...]
> This special shell? For, though I've no idea
> [...]
> It pleases me to stand in silence here;

Here, the speaker starts to reconcile his conflicting attitudes toward the church. The intense assonance of these lines elevates the poem's language and builds up the poem's intensity. That is, the poem's sounds crescendo as the speaker begins to reach a conclusion of sorts about the enduring appeal of churches.

Assonance can also reinforce the poem's meaning. In line 2, for example, assonance adds emphasis to the phrase "thud shut" (which is also a spondee, or metrical foot of two stressed syllables), making the words themselves seem to land with a thud.

Finally, the poem often uses assonance or internal rhyme to strengthen the link between a noun and its adjective, creating a more unified or harmonious-sounding phrase. Examples include "Advised night" (line 31), "A purpose more obscure" (line 38), "suburb scrub" (line 48), and "special shell" (line 52).

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "step," "letting," "thud shut"
- **Line 4:** "cut"
- **Line 5:** "Sunday"
- **Lines 5-6:** "stuff / Up"
- **Line 7:** "musty, unignorable"
- **Line 14:** "pronounce"
- **Line 15:** "loudly"
- **Line 23:** "we," "keep"
- **Line 24:** "cathedrals," "chronically on"
- **Line 25:** "plate," "cases"
- **Line 26:** "let," "rest rent-free," "sheep"
- **Line 30:** "Pick simples"
- **Line 31:** "Advised night"
- **Line 38:** "purpose," "obscure"
- **Line 40:** "what," "was; one"
- **Line 42:** "randy," "antique"
- **Line 43:** "Christmas-addict," "whiff"
- **Line 45:** "he be"
- **Line 46:** "Bored, uninformed," "knowing," "ghostly"
- **Line 47:** "yet tending"
- **Line 48:** "suburb scrub"
- **Line 52:** "special shell," "though," "no"
- **Line 54:** "pleases me"
- **Line 58:** "never"
- **Line 59:** "forever"
- **Line 61:** "with it," "this"
- **Line 62:** "Which," "grow"
- **Line 63:** "only," "so"

PARALLELISM

The poem includes a fair amount of parallelism, often piling up a number of parallel phrases one after the other. Sometimes this device propels the poem forward or simply adds emphasis, as line 21:

> Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,

Other times, parallelism helps the poem present a multi-layered description or idea, as when the speaker describes the church interior in the first stanza (note that this is also an example of polysyndeton):

> [...] and stone,
> And little books [...]

Those repeated "and"s create the sense of a list piling up, conveying just how much *stuff* there is in this church.

At other moments, parallelism helps the poem present a smooth sequence of actions, as in these lines:

> [...] I take off

My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,
Move forward, run my hand around the font.
[...]
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for.

In each case, parallel verb phrases suggest that the action is more or less continuous; for instance, the speaker seems to "sign," "donate," and "Reflect" very briskly, without pausing.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "and stone, / And little books"
- **Lines 8-10:** "I take off / My cycle-clips in awkward reverence, / Move forward, run my hand around the font."
- **Lines 17-18:** "I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence, / Reflect the place was not worth stopping for."
- **Lines 21-23:** "Wondering what to look for; wondering, too, / When churches fall completely out of use / What we shall turn them into"
- **Line 33:** "In games, in riddles"
- **Line 36:** "Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky,"
- **Lines 37-38:** "A shape less recognizable each week, / A purpose more obscure."
- **Lines 42-44:** "Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique, / Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff / Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?"
- **Lines 46-47:** "Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt / Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground"
- **Lines 50-51:** "and birth, / And death, and thoughts of these"

ASYNDETON

The poem uses the device called asyndeton several times, omitting coordinating conjunctions (such as "and") from lists of parallel phrases or clauses. This is generally done for the sake of rhythm and concision. For example, take line 10:

Move forward, run my hand around the font.

An "and" would normally appear after the comma (i.e., "Move forward, and run my hand around the font"). By omitting that conjunction, the poet does two things:

- He preserves the iambic (da-DUM) rhythm of the line ("Move for- | ward, run | my hand | around | the font").
- He also makes the action in this passage feel seamless. It's as if the speaker is stepping forward and touching the font in one smooth motion.

The same is true of lines 17-18, where an "and" would normally follow "donate an Irish sixpence":

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

Again, omitting the conjunction keeps the meter smooth (rather than adding a clunky extra syllable to the iambic pentameter line "Reflect the place was not worth stopping for") while making the action seem smooth, too. The speaker is donating a coin and reflecting on the church at more or less the same time.

The speaker also omits an "and" between lines 37 and 38:

A shape less recognizable each week,
A purpose more obscure [...]

As the speaker lists features of a ruined church, the lack of an "and" makes the description punchier. The sentence also lacks a verb (it's a sentence fragment), so the grammar itself seems to be missing parts, like the crumbling church.

Interestingly, the speaker also uses the opposite of asyndeton—polysyndeton—at a few moments in the poem. The list in lines 50-51, for example, contains *extra* conjunctions: it could simply read "marriage, birth, / Death, and thoughts of these" rather than "marriage, and birth, / And death, and thoughts of these." The extra "and"s slow the list down, as if the speaker is lingering over each item—and this makes emotional sense, because the speaker is nostalgic for the way churches once unified these experiences.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "Move forward, run my hand around the font."
- **Lines 17-18:** "donate an Irish sixpence, / Reflect the place was not worth stopping for."
- **Lines 37-38:** "A shape less recognizable each week, / A purpose more obscure."

IRONY

The poem is laced throughout with irony, which helps evoke the speaker's conflicted, semi-irreverent attitude toward the church. For example, the speaker enters the church only "Once [he's] sure there's nothing going on." Churches are built for people to *congregate* in, but this speaker, ironically, seeks them out as sites of *solitude*. Adding to the irony, he later suggests that he values them as (former) community spaces. He seems a bit conflicted as to whether he wants to connect with others here or not!

The speaker's flip remark that "God knows how long" the silence has been brewing in the church is also ironic, in a few ways:

- First, it's casual blasphemy (taking the Lord's name in vain) with reference to a church, so there's some mild situational irony.
- Second, because the speaker isn't religious, he seems to invoke the literal meaning of the phrase while undermining it at the same time. (If God existed, he *would* know how long the church has been silent, but the speaker doesn't believe in God.)
- If the silence in the church is a metaphor for God's absence, the phrase gains yet another later of irony. (A nonexistent God can't know how long he's been absent.)

The speaker's reading from the pulpit (lines 13-16) also has ironic overtones:

- He takes the priest's place as an irreverent prank, but he speaks "much more loudly than I'd meant," as if actually preaching. The sound of his echoing voice startles him and seems to mock him ("snigger"); it's as if he meant to play a joke on the church, but the church played one on him instead.
- The echoes are startling because it's as if he's suddenly not alone, yet they're also a reminder that he *is* alone in this empty space. (Then again, if he believes no one's listening, including God, who is he making this joke *for*?)

Shortly after this moment, the donation of an "Irish sixpence" is, ironically, not much of a donation at all: it's a very small coin that may be worthless in this setting. (Whether this church is set in Ireland or England is a matter of debate; if it's in England, Irish currency holds no value there.)

Finally, there's irony in the closing suggestion that the church might be a "proper [place] to grow wise in" if only because "so many dead lie round":

- Traditionally, churches are supposed to offer wisdom through their holy books, clergy, etc. The non-believing speaker suggests that, in the end, the main wisdom they have to offer may come from the graveyards surrounding them.
- In other words, contemplation of the dead (and our own mortality) might be more educational than any sermon.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Once I am sure there's nothing going on / I step inside"
- **Lines 7-9:** "And a tense, musty, unignorable silence, / Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off / My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,"
- **Lines 13-16:** "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."
- **Line 17:** "donate an Irish sixpence,"
- **Lines 62-63:** "Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in, / If only that so many dead lie round."

ALLUSION

While "Church Going" is set in a church, it's notable for its lack of direct allusions to the Bible or other Christian literature. This helps indicate that the poem is written from a secular, agnostic perspective. The speaker even refers to the church's Bibles and hymnals as "little books" and its altar as "the holy end." Of course, he knows the actual terms for these things; he's just being playfully irreverent, and maybe pretending to be more "uninformed" (line 46) than he really is.

The poem mentions God only once, in the flippant colloquialism "God knows how long" (line 8). It never mentions Christ directly, though line 41 mentions "rood-lofts" (church lofts that held a *rood*, or crucifix) in a context that acknowledges how obscure this term has become. Again, these casual references underscore the speaker's irreverent stance toward religion, which he believes is becoming as obsolete as a museum piece (like the church artifacts he imagines displayed "in locked cases" in line 25).

A rare direct allusion occurs in line 15. After browsing some "large-scale verses" of the Bible, the speaker reads aloud the phrase "Here endeth." Larkin himself once explained the source of these words in a letter:

> 'Here endeth' occurs several times in the order of prayer in the prayer book of the Church of England, as 'Here endeth the first lesson.'

(Most likely, then, the speaker is visiting an Anglican church, though "Here endeth" can be found in other religious texts as well.) This allusion has an ironic ring to it, since the speaker believes the church itself—in fact, the whole religious/cultural tradition the prayer book is part of—is slowly *ending*. (But the echo, like the "dead" in the poem's final line, might be a subtle reminder of the speaker's own mortality: his life will *end*, too, someday!)

Lines 43-44 also allude to the biblical story of Christ's birth, suggesting that "Christmas-addict[s]" might visit obsolete churches for "a whiff / Of [...] myrrh." Myrrh is a fragrant resin sometimes used as incense in church rituals; it's also one of the three gifts given to the infant Christ in the biblical narrative.

Finally, the poem's unusual form might be a callback to Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590-96), which also uses nine-

line stanzas with interlocking rhymes (though in a different rhyme scheme). *The Faerie Queene* is a religious allegory and an epic about the glory of England, so if Larkin had it in mind while writing "Church Going," the allusion is basically ironic—or at least invokes the deep cultural past the speaker is wrestling with.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "And little books"
- **Lines 13-15:** "I peruse a few / Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce / "Here endeth" much more loudly than I'd meant."
- **Line 25:** "Their parchment, plate, and pyx in locked cases,"
- **Lines 43-44:** "Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff / Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

Rhetorical questions are central to the structure of "Church Going," propelling the poem's middle section in particular.

An early, partial example comes in line 12, when the speaker asks whether the church's roof is "Cleaned, or restored?" It's a question he's actually curious about—he's not asking it just to provoke thought or make a point—but it's still semi-rhetorical because there's no one around to answer it! "Someone would know [the answer]," he muses, but "I don't."

In the third stanza, rhetorical questions begin to shape the poem's direction. Although they're punctuated with a period, the long series of clauses in lines 21-26 contain several embedded questions. The speaker wonders "what to look for" (in churches), "When churches fall completely out of use / What we shall turn them into," and "if [in the future] we shall keep / A few cathedrals chronically on show," etc. Here, the poem begins to define itself as an inquiry about the future of churches, religion, and human belief in general. The stanza ends with a final speculation, this time punctuated with a question mark: "Shall we avoid [churches] as unlucky places?"

From there, the speaker speculates about who might continue visiting obsolete churches and why. He wonders, for example, whether "dubious women" might seek them out for superstitious reasons; historian types might come to "tap" their relics and "jot" notes about them; "antique"-lovers might dig through their ruins for treasures; or "Christmas-addict[s]" might visit them to catch a "whiff" of the old Christmas spirit. In the middle of all this, he asks a question that sums up the poem's central theme (lines 34-35):

> But superstition, like belief, must die,
> And what remains when disbelief has gone?

Finally, he wonders whether the "last" person to seek out the church *as* a church might be someone like him: "my representative." In the long rhetorical question spanning lines 45-52, he defines this person (and thus himself) as someone who's "Bored" by and "uninformed" about the church, yet feels drawn to it by a kind of nostalgia for the community spirit it once held like a "special shell."

These questions are all rhetorical because the speaker isn't *literally* seeking answers to them; in fact, the questions about the distant future are unanswerable. Rather, he's indirectly illustrating how *he* imagines the church's future—and providing key information about why churches appeal to him in the present.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "Cleaned, or restored?"
- **Lines 21-26:** "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."
- **Line 27:** "Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?"
- **Lines 28-31:** "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?"
- **Line 35:** "And what remains when disbelief has gone?"
- **Lines 38-41:** "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?"
- **Lines 42-44:** "Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique, / Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff / Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?"
- **Lines 45-52:** "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 whom was built / This special shell?"

VOCABULARY

Matting (Line 3) - Material used for floor mats, such as straw, rope, etc.

Sprawlings (Lines 4-5) - Items (here, flowers) that are laid out or sprawled out.

Cycle-clips (Lines 8-9) - Metal clips cyclists wear on their ankles to prevent their pant legs from catching in the bicycle parts. Also known as *trouser clips*.

Font (Line 10) - A vessel for holy water, usually located near the

entrance of a church.

Lectern (Lines 13-14) - A podium for public speaking; specifically, in a church, the podium (or *pulpit*) from which the preacher delivers sermons.

Mounting (Line 13) - Climbing or stepping up to.

Peruse (Lines 13-14) - Read or examine (something).

Hectoring (Lines 13-14) - Addressing (an audience) in an intimidating, browbeating, or moralistic way.

Snigger (Line 16) - Snicker; make mocking sounds.

Irish sixpence (Line 17) - An Irish coin of small value, also known as the Eire sixpence.

Plate (Line 25) - Could refer to a collection plate for donations, or, collectively, to the precious metal objects owned by the church.

Parchment (Line 25) - A writing surface (animal skin or thick paper) used in old-fashioned manuscripts, including religious manuscripts.

Pyx (Line 25) - A small round container used in the religious ceremony of the Eucharist, specifically to carry the Eucharist to the sick.

Let (Line 26) - Rent out or offer as a residence.

Dubious (Line 28) - Questionable (here implying "of questionable character").

Simples (Line 30) - Plants that have (or are believed to have) medicinal properties.

Advised (Line 31) - Recommended. (Here referring to nights when superstitious people have been *advised* that they'll see ghosts out and about.)

Buttress (Line 36) - A supporting structure often found in church architecture.

Brambles (Line 36) - Prickly, tangled vines or undergrowth.

Tap (Lines 40-41) - Strike lightly and repeatedly. (This might refer to the tapping hammers of a maintenance crew, or to curious tapping, touching, etc. by enthusiasts who are interested in the church as a historic building.)

Rood-lofts (Lines 40-41) - Lofts designed to display the *rood*, or crucifix, and often featured in medieval church architecture.

Jot (Lines 40-41) - To write by hand; take notes.

Ruin-bibber (Line 42) - Someone who loves old ruins the way a heavy drinker (*bibber*) loves alcohol.

Randy (Line 42) - Lustful or horny (here used mockingly to describe people who get *really* excited about antiques).

Antique (Line 42) - A collective term for antique items, relics, etc.

Myrrh (Line 44) - A fragrant resin. Myrrh was one of the three gifts presented to the infant Christ, according to the Bible, and is still used as an incense in some religious ceremonies.

Gown-and-bands (Line 44) - A reference to clerical wear, particularly the preaching robe (gown) and formal neckwear (bands) worn by ministers.

Silt (Lines 46-47) - Fine sediment or powder. (Here used metaphorically to describe the elusive stuff ghosts are made of.)

Tending (Line 47) - Gravitating.

Scrub (Lines 47-48) - Humble or stunted vegetation (small trees, shrubbery, etc.).

Equably (Lines 48-50) - Calmly; without disruption or significant change.

Unspilt (Lines 48-50) - Securely; without spilling. (A variant of "unspilled.")

Accoutred (Lines 52-53) - Full of *accoutrements* (accessories, ornaments, decorations).

Frowsty (Lines 52-53) - Musty.

Blent (Line 56) - Composed of many ingredients. (A variant of "blended.")

Compulsions (Line 56) - Instincts, impulses; things one feels *compelled* to do as opposed to doing them by choice.

Robed (Line 57) - Dressed up or characterized (as something). Here, the word is a metaphor meant to evoke a priest's or minister's robes.

Surprising (Lines 59-60) - Discovering something unexpectedly, as if catching it by surprise.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem consists of seven stanzas of nine lines each.

Nine-line stanzas are relatively rare in English poetry. One precedent is the Spenserian stanza, which the English Renaissance poet Edmund Spenser developed for his 1590-'96 epic *The Faerie Queene*. The Spenserian stanza rhymes a bit differently than Larkin's poem, however. And while the meter of Larkin's poem is iambic pentameter (meaning that its lines generally contain ten syllables arranged in an unstressed-stressed (da-DUM, da-DUM) pattern, the final line of a Spenserian stanza is written in iambic hexameter (meaning there's a sixth iamb, for a total of 12 syllables).

Otherwise, Spenserian stanzas do pretty closely resemble the form of "Church Going." *The Faerie Queene* is a religious allegory as well as a national epic about England, so if Larkin's form is an allusion to this older, traditionally religious poem, it carries a lot of irony!

The poem's combination of consistent form and occasionally

rough meter (as well as surprising rhymes such as "surprising"/"wise in") allows for a mix of stability and disruption—or "traditional" formality and "modern" playfulness. In other words, it suits the tone and subject of this poem, which both confronts the crumbling of old traditions and wonders what can be salvaged from them.

METER

The poem is written in iambic pentameter. This means that each line generally contains five *iambs*, or metrical feet consisting of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable (da-DUM), for a total of 10 syllables per line. Line 11, for example, follows this pattern perfectly:

> From where | I stand, | the roof | looks al- | most new—

The poem includes many small variations on this basic rhythm, however. Readers can hear a few in the first two lines:

> Once I | am sure | there's no- | thing go- | ing on
> I step | inside, | letting | the door | thud shut.

There's a trochee (stressed-unstressed) rather than an iamb in the first foot of line 1 (a very common variation). Line 2 contains a trochee in the third foot ("letting") and a spondee (stressed-stressed; "thud shut") in the fifth foot, which makes the line about the "thudding" door seem to thud to a close.

Such variations occur frequently in the poem. The meter isn't dramatically inconsistent, but it's a mix of stately rhythms (especially in the final stanza) and casual roughness. This middle ground seems to suit the tone and themes of the poem, whose speaker doesn't adhere *strictly* to old traditions but retains a certain respect for and curiosity about them. You could say that the poem's attitude toward meter is formal, but not too formal!

RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme of each nine-line stanza is as follows:

ABABCADCD

This scheme is like two quatrains (rhyming ABAB and CDCD) combined, with an extra (A-rhymed) line inserted as the sixth line of each stanza. Many of the poem's rhymes are full rhymes (e.g., "new"/"few"), but others are slant or imperfect (e.g., "font"/"don't"/"meant" or "surprising"/"wise in"), introducing some flexibility and playfulness (or irreverence!) into an otherwise strict pattern.

This unusual structure makes each stanza a bit weightier than the (much more common) octave, or eight-line stanza. The extra A-rhyme also marks a "throwback" to the first half of the stanza, perhaps paralleling the "throwback" themes of the poem itself. (In other words, there's an element of the rhyme scheme that looks *backward* even as the rest moves *forward*, much as the speaker is a modern, forward-looking skeptic who nevertheless pauses to reflect on what past traditions offered.)

The nine-line stanza form also loosely recalls the *Spenserian stanza* (found in Edmund Spenser's 1590-'96 epic *The Faerie Queene*), which rhymes a bit differently: ABABBCBCC. Overall, then, Larkin's rhyme scheme contains both antique and novel elements and evokes some of the "serious[ness]" the speaker admires in the church—while sometimes subverting that seriousness as well.

SPEAKER

The speaker is a non-religious person (an atheist, agnostic, or skeptic) who nevertheless visits churches "often." He seems to have visited this one impulsively while cycling; he still has his "cycle-clips" on when he enters, and he's just "stopping" by, not visiting the church as his main destination. (The poem never states the speaker's gender, but it refers to "my representative"—an imagined person just like the speaker—as "he," so this guide uses masculine pronouns to refer to the speaker as well.)

The poem doesn't explicitly equate the speaker with the poet, but many readers and critics have done so, and Larkin himself indicated in interviews that the poem drew on his actual experience. ("Church Going" became part of his popular image as a writer; in this documentary footage filmed after the poem's publication, you can see Larkin cycling and visiting a church.)

The speaker visits this church, and others, more or less as a tourist, not as a spiritual seeker or member of a congregation. In fact, he tries to avoid others on site; he steps inside only "Once I am sure there's nothing going on" in the building. His preference for *empty* churches has several possible meanings. On the one hand, it reflects a certain discomfort with religious rituals and ceremonies, as well as a skeptical sense that religion itself is empty of meaning. On the other hand, it suggests that meaning, purpose, and even belief (however he defines it) are private matters for the speaker. Rather than a site of communal worship, he prefers to use the church as a place of quiet, solitary contemplation: to "stand in silence here."

The speaker has an irreverent, self-deprecating sense of humor, and not everything he says should be taken as gospel truth (so to speak). For example, he describes himself—or someone just like him—as "Bored" by and "uninformed" about churches. This is true to some extent; he doesn't stay long when he visits, and he can't evaluate things like the roof in lines 11-12 ("Someone would know: I don't"). But in other ways, it's clearly *untrue*: churches interest him enough that he visits them "often"—and he's written this whole meditation about them! He also seems much more informed than he lets on; for example, he knows some obscure church-related terms, such as "pyx" and "rood-

lofts."

Overall, the speaker seems to have mixed feelings about the church (and, by extension, religion and belief in general). He predicts that churches will die out—at least in their current form—but maintains that their "serious" atmosphere appeals to him. Beyond that, his attitude is hard to pin down. This ambiguity is deliberate: the poem springs from the speaker's (or poet's) uncertainty as to what the church means to him, and what it might mean (or not mean) to people ages from now.

SETTING

The setting is an empty church, apparently located amid the "suburb scrub" (humble suburban landscape) through which the speaker has been cycling. The speaker has no personal connection to this church; he's just visiting out of curiosity and/or to take a break from the road. Since "there's nothing going on" in the church, the speaker is visiting either in the hours after Sunday services or on a day other than Sunday. In fact, the flowers "cut / For Sunday" services have already turned "brownish."

Larkin once claimed that the poem was originally inspired by a defunct, ruined church in the Irish countryside, but he also reported that he visited churches often on his bike rides and has suggested that the poem was informed by this general habit. The church in "Church Going" is clearly still active ("[I]t wasn't [ruined] in the poem," Larkin acknowledged). Its roof looks "Cleaned, or restored," and it's still hosting Sunday services. However, its "musty" smell suggests decline, informing the speaker's portrayal of religion as archaic and losing relevance.

The details in the poem don't tie the church to a particular location or denomination. The "Irish sixpence" the speaker donates suggests that the church stands somewhere in the British isles, but whether it's in Ireland or Great Britain (both places Larkin lived) has been a matter of critical debate:

- One critic, John Osborne, called *an Irish sixpence* "the three most hotly contested words" in Larkin's entire body of work!
- Depending on whether the church is Irish or English, the coin might have small value or no value at all and thus could signal either slight *respect* for or dismissive *cynicism* toward religion.
- Depending on whether the church is Protestant or Catholic, and whether the speaker himself is English or Irish, the donation might also have political significance. (For example, as Osborne suggests, if the speaker is a person of Irish heritage donating an Irish coin in an English Protestant church, the gesture "combines religious unbelief with a hint of political disaffiliation from the UK.") But Larkin's own comment in a letter—"The Irish [sixpence] was meant as a comic compromise between GIVING NOTHING and giving REAL MONEY"—suggests that the church is probably in England, where the coin was valueless.

Regardless of its exact location, the setting is one of the many country or parish churches that dot the landscape of Great Britain and Ireland. The references to "brass," "organ," and "myrrh" (used in incense) suggest a fairly "high church" setting, but one that could be either Catholic or Protestant.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Church Going" (1955) grew out of Philip Larkin's personal experience, as he once told the poet John Betjeman in an interview:

> I had rather fallen into the habit of going out cycling on Sundays [...] And whenever I saw a church, I used to stop and look inside. It was a nice excuse for stopping. But I liked going into them. I know very little about them, but I always welcomed the feeling I had going into a church. And in the end, I began to try to write about it.

Larkin was a lifelong religious skeptic, as his poetry often indicates. His poem "Faith Healing," for example, is a largely (though not entirely) scathing portrayal of evangelical Christianity, while "Aubade" calls religion a "vast moth-eaten musical brocade / Created to pretend we never die." His skepticism is gentler in "Church Going," but it's still very present: he once suggested that the poem was popular "because it is about religion, and has a serious air that conceals the fact that its tone and argument are entirely secular."

The poem doesn't make any explicit literary allusions, except to the general faith tradition of Christianity (and perhaps the prayer book of the Church of England, which Larkin named as the source for "Here endeth" in line 15). However, critics have speculated that a few of its details might echo passages in previous poetry and literature:

- For example, the speaker of the poem "In the Cathedral," by Louis MacNeice (a well-known Irish poet of Larkin's period), donates "sixpence" to a cathedral much as Larkin's speaker donates to the church.
- The term "serious earth" (line 55) seems to parallel a similar phrase, "significant soil," from T. S. Eliot's landmark poem *Four Quartets* (1943).

Larkin himself was one of the most influential and popular British poets of the post-WWII years. *The Less Deceived*, in which "Church Going" initially appeared, was the first poetry collection of his mature period (and his second after *The North Ship*, which he published in his early 20s). Along with "Church Going," it contains several other still-popular poems, including "Toads," "Deceptions," and "I Remember, I Remember."

Critics have often grouped Larkin with the school of postwar British poets known as "The Movement," which emphasized its cultural Englishness and resistance to the experimental tendencies of modern poetry. Other writers in The Movement included Thom Gunn, Donald Davie, and Larkin's close friend Kingsley Amis.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Larkin wrote "Church Going" in the mid-1950s, during a period when organized religion and religious belief were on the decline in the UK. This was the period following the second of the two world wars, events that caused massive social upheaval and tested or shattered the faith of many who witnessed them. Generally, in the UK (as throughout much of Europe), the cultural predominance of the church had weakened since the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As the poet put it in a 1943 letter: "[N]obody gives a darn for [religion] any longer, not in England, anyway. Methodism caught on fine in the 18th century, but it's worn thin now."

"Church Going" isn't the only Larkin poem that registers this change. For example, "High Windows" (1974) suggests that Larkin was among the first modern English generation freed from:

> [...] *sweating in the dark*
> *About hell and that, or having to hide*
> *What you think of the priest.*

Here, the change is portrayed as liberating. As a lifelong religious skeptic, Larkin participated in and generally welcomed the trend away from organized religion. However, he also felt occasional ambivalence on the subject, including some nostalgia for the social cohesion that (in his view) religion used to offer. This attitude tinges the final two stanzas of "Church Going," with their references to what the church "held unspilt" (see lines 48-52) and to its "blent air [in which] all our compulsions meet."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Biography of the Poet — Learn more about Larkin's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/philip-larkin)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a recording of Philip Larkin reading "Church Going." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mN_vWfSgWe4)
- The Poet's "Agnostic Legacy" — More on Larkin's beliefs (or non-beliefs) via The Guardian. (https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2002/jan/12/books.booksnews)
- A Documentary of the Poet — A 2003 Larkin documentary that begins with footage of the poet cycling up to a church. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqa6L22m0rY)
- Interview with the Poet — Watch poet John Betjeman interview Philip Larkin in 1964. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Coe11pgoj8E)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PHILIP LARKIN POEMS

- An Arundel Tomb
- Coming
- Mr Bleaney
- The Trees
- The Whitsun Weddings
- This Be The Verse

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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