



Agnostic or Anglican? Philip Larkin Through his Poems

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Abstract

The Movement group of poets was of the stand that poems ought to be simple, sensible and dignified. Philip Larkin, who was one of the pioneers of the group, was again a no-nonsense poet in that sense. His poems were ordinary, direct and straight from ordinary experiences. Yet, they were pregnant with colloquialism, irony and understatements. One of the most prominent aspects in his poetry is religion and that is what is discussed here. He himself has said that he is an agnostic yet with a touch of Anglicanism. This paper aims to study Larkin's sensibility regarding his spirituality through his selected poems.

Keywords: Christianity, Religion, The Movement

Introduction

Larkin's initial style of poetry is characterized by a steep influence from earlier poets like Yeats and Eliot. It was through *The Less Deceived*, that a more dignified and mature style of Larkin started to take shape. He stood for ordinary people and their ordinary life experiences. He did not care for mythical or spiritual allusions. This particular sensibility of Larkin that disparaged theological ideas and encouraged mundane humane aspects of life is what made the literary road of the time clear and unique for him. As a result, it was evident from his poems that he really lacked what was called a 'Victorian' sensibility. Larkin belonged to the 'Modernist' period, drawing influence from poets like Yeats and Eliot in structuring poems with a style that takes them away from Modernism towards a new 'Movement.'

Anglican or Agnostic?

Larkin's celebrated themes were those that were always discussed in poetry, ranging from religion and sex to fate and death. They were characterized by a formal control with synchronized structural patterns. Although having had several relationships with women, Larkin never married. His attitude towards marriages is evident in one of his crowning achievements, "The Whitsun Weddings." Likewise, his sentiments towards religion as well are purely visible through his poems and the devices he uses to craft them. Irony, understatements, sarcasm etcetera are his go-to tools in making one.

"Church Going" would be a key specimen in analyzing Larkin's views on religion. It delivers a quiet complex idea of Christianity. In the poem, the speaker manages to be seated inside the church and explores the hall with "awkward reverence" (Larkin 9) as he/she remarks. After sensing that the church "was not worth stopping for" (Larkin 18), the speaker begins to think about the future of that kind of an institution. Finally, he accepts a halfhearted belief that church serves for bigger purposes like answering complex questions related to life, regarding death and afterlife.

A similar thought about classifying the Church as an institution can be seen in "A Stone Church Damaged by a Bomb." In it, Larkin describes an event from the Second World War when the Nazis carried out a blitzkrieg on England and one of the Churches in Larkin's hometown Coventry was turned into a pile of dust. He begins by the inevitable contradiction between what the church stood for and what happened to it. "Planted deeper than roots/This chiseled, flung-up faith/Runs and leaps against the sky, /A prayer killed into stone" (Larkin lines 1-4). Larkin points his finger to the ideological protection and spirituality the church possesses and offers to its followers but it's met with an extremely contradictory fate. Here, Larkin does give in to the belief for what the church really stood for. "I have looked on that proud front/And the calm locked into walls, /I have worshipped that whispering shell." (Larkin lines 17-18) Larkin puts these two contrasting ideas and images against each other with sticking metaphors.

"Aubade" is his last major poem and he discusses the same issue here as well. In one sense, it is a kind of a love song or a poem concerning dawn or daybreak. He reflects on the thought on what comes after death. He questions when, where and how he is going to die and what comes later. He then refers to religion in a sarcastic way. "Religion used to try/That vast moth-eaten musical brocade/Created to pretend we never die," (Larkin lines 22-24). Reference to afterlife mentioned in religion is a "moth-eaten musical brocade" according to Larkin. His declaration that it's just a fancy fabric tattered and covered in holes made to look nice is metaphorical for religion. Religion is the fancy fabric that sounds pleasant but in reality, is full of holes and cracks. He claims religion is manmade to make others believe that they never actually die because there is an afterlife.

Conclusion

Larkin's father was an atheist and more importantly a Nazi sympathizer. He advised Larkin during his younger days about the follies of theism and religion. Larkin too was interested in a modernization of English culture. According to him, the Bible is a beautiful book but it's still bollocks. Due to his interest in a modern England, he took Anglicanism for granted although his poetry revealed a sarcastic and carefree attitude of himself on religion and Christianity. He thus kept his sensibilities at par with the Movement group of poets by crafting his poems with a nostalgic tone about England and an emphasis on simple and common language and experiences.

Works Cited

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