UNIT 23  PHILIP LARKIN

Structure

23.0  Objectives
23.1  Introduction
23.2  Philip Larkin
   23.2.1  The Movement
23.3  Church Going (1954) (p.1955)
   23.3.1  Introduction
   23.3.2  The Text
   23.3.3  Analysis of the Poem
23.4  The Whitsun Weddings (1964) (p.1967)
   23.4.1  Introduction
   23.4.2  The Text
   23.4.3  A Discussion
23.5  Let Us Sum Up
23.6  Answers to Self-Check Exercises

23.0  OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to:

•  Talk about Philip Larkin the poet, his life and work.
•  Situate Larkin, the poet, within the poetic group called Movement.
•  Appreciate Larkin’s poem ‘Church Going’
•  Analyze the thematic as well as technical aspects of ‘Whitsun Weddings’

23.1  INTRODUCTION

In this unit you will be introduced to Philip Larkin, one of the major British poets of the post war era. Larkin was one of the most prominent poets of a group called the Movement. In the previous units you were introduced to Modernism and the Modernist poets like T.S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats and W. H. Auden. You have also tasted the complex, obscure, ironic and highly allusive poetry that is intellectually stimulating, which is the hallmark of modernism.

In this unit we will see that the poets who emerged during the 1950s deliberately broke away from the experimental poetry of this tradition, and tried to resurrect a poetry that had traditional cadences and formal features of native British poetry. Instead of the cosmopolitan concerns and metaphysical philosophies which governed the writers of the early 20th century, the poets of the fifties and sixties brought in more parochial issues and themes and accessible meaning of everyday experience of middle class England into their poetry.

We will introduce you to the group called the Movement which determined the aesthetics as well as the bend of thematic content of British poetry in the 50s and
The High Modernist, Postmodernist and Recent Poets

60s decades. We will situate Larkin in this larger context and also point out his special characteristics and contributions. We have included two poems of Larkin, ‘Church Going’ and ‘Whitsun Weddings’ for detailed study and analysis. Both poems reveal Larkin at his best: ironic and sardonic, yet basically humane.

The first poem ‘Church Going’ is a monologue written in 1954 which refers to the erosion of the church as an institution. Written in an unsentimental, anti-romantic tone, the poem reveals the agnostic bend of Larkin’s mind. ‘Whitsun Weddings’, written in 1964, is the second poem chosen for intensive study. It describes a train journey undertaken by the poet, during which he comes across boisterous marriage parties whom he observes in a detached and somewhat disdainful manner, but becoming rather meditative towards the end.

It would help you to read through the unit section by section. Do the exercises as you finish reading. After finishing a major chunk, give yourself a break, before you tackle the next part.

23.2 PHILIP LARKIN

[b. 9 August 1922 Coventry, Warwickshire - d. 2 December 1985 Hull, Humberside, England]

Philip Larkin (1922-85) was the most eminent writer of post-war Britain, whose capabilities ranged into the spheres of poetry, novel and criticism. His influence was so strong that he was referred to as “England’s other Poet Laureate”, a position which he had turned down when it was offered to him at the demise of John Betjeman, who was then, the poet laureate. Critic Alan Brownjohn notes in his book Philip Larkin that he produced “the most technically brilliant and resonantly beautiful, profoundly disturbing yet appealing and approachable, body of verse” and was considered an “artist of the first rank” by reviewer John Press.

Philip Larkin was born in Coventry into a middle class family, as the younger of two children. His father, Sydney Larkin, was a lover of literature and a Nazi sympathizer, while his mother Eva Emily Day, to whom he was ‘claustrophobically attached’, was a nervous woman dominated by her husband. His sister Catherine, known as Kitty, was 10 years older than he was. His father, who was the Coventry City Treasurer, instilled a love for books and poems in him from an early age, by introducing poets like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence and W.B. Yeats to him. Poor eyesight and stuttering plagued Larkin as a youth; he retreated into solitude, read widely, and began to write poetry as a nightly routine. He was educated at home till the age of eight – these early days
are described as ‘unspent’ and ‘boring’ – and then joined King Henry VIII Junior School at Coventry, where he made long standing friendships. His love for jazz music was fostered by his parents and this grooming helped him at a later age to contribute extensively to *The Daily Telegraph* as its jazz critic, which were complied in the book *All That Jazz: A Record Diary 1961–71* (1985).

After his School Certificate Examination from King Henry VIII Senior School, he joined St. John’s College, Oxford to read English and at the completion of the course was awarded a First Class Honours Degree. During the colourful period at Oxford, a vital stage in his personal and literary development, Larkin commenced his lifelong friendship with Kingsley Amis and John Wain, other important members of the Movement, a relationship that proved intensely symbiotic to them.

Larkin took up the position of librarian in the small Shropshire town of Wellington after his graduation, where he wrote his two novels, *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947) and published his first volume of poetry, *The North Ship* (1945). As a qualified librarian, he worked in several libraries. This became his wage-earning career for the rest of his life, taking him to university libraries in Leicester, Belfast and finally Hull, where he stayed on for thirty years, creating settings for his poetic meditations. In the post-war years, the University of Hull underwent significant expansion and a new university library named *Brynmor Jones Library* was established, of which Larkin was the chief librarian. He was a significant figure in post-war British librarianship, making major structural emendations, computerizing the library stock and automating the circulation system.

Though Larkin had first written novels, he switched over to poetry as the muse of novel failed him later. Larkin’s first poetic influences were modernists like T. S. Eliot and W.H. Auden, but he shed these off as he evolved a more individual tone. Larkin’s first collection of poetry *The North Ship* shows remarkable influence of W.B. Yeats, but does not yet present the voice for which he later became famous.

His next collection, *The Less Deceived* (1955), containing poems like ‘Church Going’ and ‘Toads’, came a decade later, and bears the stamp of his mature genius: that of the detached, sometimes mournful, sometimes tender observer of “ordinary people doing ordinary things”. Coinciding with this development of a mature poetic identity was his increasing fascination for the poetry of Thomas Hardy. When Larkin was invited to edit the 1973 volume of *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*, he used to opportunity to reevaluate and reinstate Hardy as a major contributor to English Poetry. Hardy with his provincial and pessimistic outlook and traditional style suited Larkin better than his earlier contemporaries had. He disparaged poems that relied on shared classical and literary allusions. In a statement he made to D. J. Enright, Larkin stated that he had “no belief in ‘tradition’ or a common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets”.

Larkin’s poetry has been characterized as combining “an ordinary, colloquial style, clarity, a quiet, reflective tone, ironic understatement and a direct engagement with commonplace experiences”. His publisher and long time friend Jean Hartley summed his style up as a “piquant mixture of lyricism and
discontent”. According to the critic Terence Hawkes, Larkin’s poetry revolves around two losses: the Loss of Modernism and the Loss of England. The latter is best observed in the famous poem “Going Going”.

“And that will be England gone,
The shadows, the meadows, the lanes,
The guildhalls, the carved choirs.
There’ll be books; it will linger on
In galleries; but all that remains
For us will be concrete and tyres.”

The collection *The Whitsun Weddings*, published in 1964, contains his very popular poems like ‘An Arundel Tomb’, ‘Here’ and the titular poem, which cemented his reputation as one of Britain’s most eminent living poets. He was awarded a Fellowship of Royal Society of Literature, soon after. In the years that followed, he wrote some of his major poems like the ‘Aubade’, which were collected and published in the volume *High Windows* (1974). The poems had turned more stark, gloomy and fatalistic. The dwindling of the mighty empire of Britain into a third rate power, his preoccupation with death, are all mirrored in these.

Larkin remained a bachelor throughout his life, despite longstanding relationships with several women, most of them inspiring enough for him to write poetry. He also preferred to keep a low profile, turning down most of the titles and honours including that of OBE (Order of the British Empire) and the Poet Laureateship that came his way. Nevertheless he later accepted the titles of CBE (*Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire*) and CE (*Companion of Honour*) and FRSL (*Fellow of Royal Society of Literature*). The public persona of Philip Larkin is that of a dour, non-nonsense Englishman, reserved and private, turning down fame, and viewing the world with gloomy and critical spectacles.

In 1985, at the age of 63, Larkin was diagnosed with oesophageal cancer, and died after hospitalization. He was buried at the Cottingham Municipal Cemetery near Hull.

Let us now take a look at the movement poetry of which Larkin was the leading spirit.

*The Movement* was a term coined in 1954 by Jay D. Scott, literary editor of *The Spectator*, to describe a group of writers essentially English in character. They included Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, D.J. Enright, John Wain, Elizabeth Jennings, Ted Hughes, Thom Gunn, and Robert Conquest. They were a group of like-minded English poets, loosely associated together in the mid–1950s. Movement poetry was a journey back to the purity of English verse, which manifested a preference for provincial values and importance to ordinary objects and experiences. Two anthologies, *Poets of the 1950s* (1955) edited by D. J. Enright and *New Lines* (1956) by Robert Conquest, are considered to be the polemic volumes that established the reputation of the group. Of the poets, Philip Larkin emerged as the most popular. His poetry did a good deal to re-engage poetry with a more popular audience. The Movement poets were considered anti-romantic, but we find many romantic elements in Larkin and Hughes. We may
call *The Movement*, the revival of the importance of form. To these poets, good poetry means simple, sensuous content, traditional, conventional and dignified form. Once the Movement was accepted into the mainstream, the group became less exclusive. Many of the group were academics, and their critical writings helped shape the course of British literature for the next two decades.

Now that you have been introduced to the life and times of Philip Larkin, try doing these exercises. After doing them, you may check the answers with the Answer Key given at the back of the unit.

**Self-check Exercise I**

1) Which are the four anthologies of poems written by Philip Larkin?
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2) Where did Larkin spend the greater part of his life as librarian?
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3) Which poet exerted the biggest singular influence on Larkin?
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4) Which book contains the articles written by Larkin on jazz music?
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5) Which anthology by Robert Conquest helped launch the Movement?
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23.3 CHURCH GOING (1954)

Outside of a Church

Interior of the church with pews

23.3.1 Introduction

‘Church Going’ is a poem from the anthology, *The Less Deceived*. The title of the anthology inversely mirrors the remark made by Ophelia in the play *Hamlet* by Shakespeare: “I was the more deceived”. Larkin chose this title to impress upon the reader that one should be less deceived by the reality of life. ‘Church Going’ is one of the most read and most anthologized poems by Larkin, in which he tries to make us less deceived regarding the present state of the church and its influence in the lives of the people.

In India, we may never envisage a religious institution going derelict. But in the western world, after the two World Wars, and after the spread of existentialist philosophies, there was a widespread prevalence of atheistic and agnostic attitudes and a rapid decline of belief in any religion. As a result, the attendance in churches dwindled sharply. Many of the churches remained empty shells of their former glory. ‘Church Going’ is a monologue which discusses the futility as well as utility of going to the church.

The great American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson has remarked in his essay, ‘Self Reliance’: “I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching.” The beginning of the poem makes us sharply recall these words as the poet enters the old church which is silent and vacant. The poet ponders about the future of churches and wonders about the reason for people still gravitating to the church. The poem refers both to the erosion of the Church as an institution and to the perpetuation of some kind of ritual observance.

Now let us read the poem. You will see that the nine-lined poem, containing seven stanzas, is rhythmic, as Larkin is giving due importance to form. The poet uses the traditional iambic pentameter lines, where unstressed and stressed syllables alternate: e.g.: “For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff” (the stressed syllables are highlighted). It also rhymes ababcadd. Read the poem once and then read it yet again with the help of the glossary given after the poem. It will be also good to read the poem aloud and feel the cadence of the lines.
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.

Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always end much at a loss like this,
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
When churches will fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show,
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

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

A shape less recognisable each week,
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who
Will be the last, the very last, to seek
This place for what it was; one of the crew
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
Or will he be my representative,
Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt
So long and equably what since is found
Only in separation - marriage, and birth,
And death, and thoughts of these - for which was built
This special shell? For, though I’ve no idea
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

Glossary

“Another church” : A statement emanating from boredom little books: books of verses or scriptural readings kept in the pews brass: may be church artifacts like the chalice, pyx, candelabra and so on; can also be monumental brass found in English churches, used for sepulchral memorial

Organ : Also called pipe organ is a musical instrument used in churches (see picture)
musty : stale and dank smell
cycle-clips : These are worn around pants to keep them from catching in a bicycle chain. (see picture)
font : stone basin containing holy water to baptize people. (see picture)
lectern : decorated podium or stand used by the priest to place the bible and deliver the sermon (see picture)
peruse : read carefully
hectoring : talk in a bullying way
large-scale : verses printed in large sizes
here endeth : the last lines which usually signify the ending of the sermon or the mass. Here it may ironically refer to the ending of the church.

snigger : laugh in a half-suppressed, scornful way
Irish six pence : a small coin of Ireland; here it is a useless donation because it is foreign currency as well as small change (see picture)
parchment : writing material made of animal skin (see picture)
plate : metal plate made of precious metal, which is used to pass to collect donation in the church. Also called Collection Plate (see picture)

pyx : a small round container used in the Catholic and Anglican Churches to carry the consecrated host. (see picture)

Let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep: Church falling to disuse and ruin that it leaks when it rains and becomes a shelter to wandering sheep. Irony lies in the fact that believers are considered to be the sheep and the priest, the shepherd.

dubious women : an ambiguous expression. 1. May refer to women who are doubtful of church and its benefits and yet are lured by a possibility of cure. 2. May refer to women of questionable character

simples : medicinal herbs collected to cure an ailment

walking a dead one: seeing a ghost haunting the place

brambles : weeds; prickly scrambling shrub of the rose family, especially a blackberry (see picture)

IRISH SIX PENCE LECTERN BUTTRESS BRAMBLES

Buttress : a structure of stone or brick built against a wall to strengthen or support it (see picture)

Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky: Notice the manner in which Larkin starts from the ground and moves skywards.

taps and jots : reference to the crew who opens the cask of wine and writes down the mount of wine sold

rood-lofts : a gallery on top of the rood screen of a church. Rood is a crucifix, especially over the entrance. (see picture)

ruin-bibber : one who loves or is addicted to ruins [a bibber is a one who is addicted to drinks]

randy : excited, [often sexually]; here, excited to possess antiques

Christmas addict : one who loves Christmas celebrations
counting on a whiff . . . : counting on a small amount of joy obtainable through Christmas celebrations with gowns, bands, organ pipes and myrrh

myrrh : aromatic resin used as incense in church (see picture)
silt : fine sand or clay deposited as sediment
scrub : a growth of stunted vegetation
accoutred : adorned, decorated
frowsty : warm, stuffy, close
blent : blended (archaic)

23.3.3 Analysis of the Poem

‘Church Going’ is a poem in which the speaker analyses the raison d’être (the reason for the existence) of the church. He wants to examine the futility and the utility of churches. The discussion is half-mocking and half-serious. The speaker scoffs at the church and its equipment; and he scoffs at church-going, though at the end of the poem he finds that the churches, or at least some of them, would continue to render some service to the people even after they have ceased to be places of worship. According to the speaker, a time is coming when people would stop going to churches altogether, because they would have lost their faith in God and in divine worship. Then a time is also coming when people’s disbelief in God and their superstitions would come to an end too. Eventually, however, some people might still visit the decayed and disused church buildings on account of some inner compulsion or to derive some wisdom from the sight of the many graves in the churchyard.

At the outset, the speaker, the persona of the poet, enters the vacant church after first ensuring that it is unoccupied. He is a casual wayfarer, who is drawn to the silent building on one of his various cycling trips. He closes the door with a thud, which gesture speaks of his brashness and irreverence. The words which are
uttered next, “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 . . .” sound like an inventory of church artifacts and are dipped in impiety and callous disregard. The holy scriptures become ‘little books’ and the glorious candelabra, chalice and other articles used in the tabernacle during the holy mass become ‘brass and stuff’. The atmosphere is permeated with mustiness which is a result of its dereliction. The flippant observation about silence “brewed God knows how long” continues in the same vein of irreverence. Unfamiliar with the ways of the church, he makes an allowance to the hallowed ground by removing the bicycle clips in ‘awkward reverence’.

Then comes the gingery fiddling with things. He runs his hand around the font, inspects the roof and pronounces that it looks new or restored; he mounts the pulpit and peruses a few overawing verses printed in large-scale font, and then mimicking a priest, pronounces ‘here endeth’ with greater vehemence than he intended. The sounds echo his sniggering. On the way back he signs the register and donates a useless Irish sixpence, and thinks that the place was not worth stopping for.

Then comes the admission that inspite of this disregard for churches, he often stops to look at one. He wonders what would be done, when churches fall into disuse. Whether they would be turned into museums, with all their precious articles like parchment, plate and pyx displayed in locked cases, or would they fall into ruin, letting the place vacant for rain and sheep. He asks whether we would avoid them as unlucky places.

He wonders whether women, not sure about the sanctity of the church, would come with their children to pray at the grave of a dear departed soul or pick herbs to cure cancer from the churchyard. Would they see the church being haunted by ghosts on special nights? Power of this sort would go on in games and riddles, creating stories about the church. But ultimately, like belief, superstition must also die. And when both belief and superstition die, nothing will remain but a tottering edifice, with grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress and sky.

In this stanza the narrator is isolated and meditative, and appears to be less deceived by religion. The church becomes more and more unrecognizable each week as the trees and plants overtake the structure. The building’s original purpose and the purpose for visiting it has become more and more obscure as well. Larkin wonders how many will come seeking the church for the purpose it was erected. Some will come to tap and jot and find out the condition of the rood-loft under which the sacred space in the church rests. Or they may be visited by a person with a love for antiques and ruins; or a person addicted to Christmas festivities, who loves the song, spectacle and smell. Or will he be a representative of the poet, who despite being bored and uninformed, comes back again and yet again through the suburban woods to this cross of ground – the church, because it had held unspilt and sanctified, for so long and equably, those relationships – marriage, birth and death – which are now found only in separation. Church which is now an empty shell was originally built for the rites which sanctified these life processes. He does not know what this barn is worth, but it nevertheless pleases him to stand in silence there.

He considers the church a serious house on this serious earth. All human compulsions meet in the blended air of the church, which are recognised and
robbed as destinies. And as long as this purpose would never become outdated, persons wishing to be serious would keep on coming there to grow wise, especially with so many dead people lying around, for only those who are dead know the truth about whether there is a heaven or not.

The poem starts as an agnostic’s or even an atheist’s take on church. But the end shows some sort of change which leaves him ambivalent regarding the spiritual significance of the church. The title itself retains the ambiguity and can be interpreted in several ways: the act of going to church, the customs that keep the church alive, visiting the church as one would a theatre, and the disappearance of the church. The pronouncing of “here endeth” in the poem underscores the irony. It may be that in the narrator’s opinion, religion is on a decline; so when he says “here endeth” he is not only talking about his sermon ending, he is also talking about religion ending; he may be also hinting that he will be the last person to recite those words in that church. Certain critics have seen Church Going presenting the binaries of inside-outside. Church and what it represents within with all the trappings of the church are manmade, which is slowly being claimed by Nature. Larkin often makes a sharp distinction between Nature outside and man’s enclosure inside a building, a scene which dramatizes man’s separation from Nature. The poet begins his encounter with the church building by describing the contents of the building; but the distinctions between what is outside in Nature, and what is inside in man’s architectural dominion, begin to blur. The building is seen by the poet as surrounded by the forces of Nature and perhaps soon to be merged with them. He imagines the decaying edifice being eventually let “rent-free to rain and sheep”; thus Nature itself will enter the church and become part of it, or will simply take over the church completely. The destructive forces of Nature are even now merging with the elements of the building: “grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky”—all these coalesce.

The language of the poem is conversational, and the narrator poses many interrogatives (questions). Larkin uses a lot of religious imagery and words, some are used as they are intended, but others are used in a blasphemous way. The subtle movement from the first person singular (I) to the first person plural (we or our) is a characteristic device in Larkin’s poetry, and one which is predicated upon the assent of its readers. Larkin uses this strategy in ‘Whitsun Weddings’ too.

The poem is not a veiled message in support of Christianity, but it shrewdly and accurately defines the multiple sides of the dilemma of redundant churches and what they represent, namely a religious tradition in decline. There is seriousness, wisdom, and comfort to be derived or not from an empty church building. The church’s main function as a place for worship is long gone, though it still has its value as a historical relic.

**Self-check Exercise II**

1) What does the poet do on his entry into the church?

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2) How would you describe the narrator’s attitude towards the church?

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3) What future does the poet envisage for the church?

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4) What is the ambiguity in the title ‘Church Going’?

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**23.4 WHITSUN WEDDINGS (1964)**

**23.4.1 Introduction**

‘The Whitsun Weddings’ appeared in the anthology of the same name, in 1964. It is a poem inspired by a train journey from the Paragon station at Kinston-upon-Hull in the North of England to Petersborough, London in the South, on a Whitsun Saturday, in 1955. A quarter of a century later, Larkin recalled the genesis of the poem:

“I caught a very slow train that stopped at every station and I hadn’t realised that, of course, this was the train that all the wedding couples would get on and go to London for their honeymoon: it was an eye-opener to me. Every part was different but the same somehow. They all looked different but they were all doing the same things and sort of feeling the same things. I suppose the train stopped at about four, five, six stations between Hull and London and there was a sense of gathering emotional momentum. Every time you stopped fresh emotion climbed aboard. And finally between Peterborough and London when you hurtle on, you felt the whole thing was being aimed like a bullet - at the heart of things, you know. All this fresh, open life. Incredible experience. I’ve never forgotten it.”
Whitsun being the marriage season, the train and the railway stations were thronged by gay, boisterous wedding parties. Larkin, the bachelor, leans back as the placid observer, viewing the newlyweds board the train for their honeymoon, making droll comments which are at times witty and humorous, at times acrid and pungent. The poem is considered the finest example of Larkin’s temper, tone and technique.

‘The Whitsun Weddings’ consists of eight verses, each ten lines long making it one of his longest poems and rhyming a b a b c d e c d e a rhyme scheme used in various of Keats’ odes. This rhyme pattern captures the rhythmic sound of a steam-engine as it gathers momentum every time it leaves a station. The truncated second line in each stanza adds to the special rhythm of poem. The use of *enjambement* or run-on lines and run-on verses creates a sense of relentless, onward movement as the train with several linked carriages makes its way southward by a ‘slow and stopping curve’. ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ is Larkin’s longest poem, narrated in a slow, unhurried, leisurely fashion which re-enacts a sense of the long, leisurely train journey from Hull to London. In literature a journey frequently functions as a metaphor for life itself. Larkin uses the unifying frame of a train-journey to observe the young couples who, as a result of a ‘frail Travelling coincidence’ briefly share one hour at a similar point in their lives before they alight from the train at its destination and continue separately on the longer journey which will take up the remainder of their lives.

### 23.4.2 The Text

That Whitsun, I was late getting away:  
Not till about  
One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday  
Did my three-quarters-empty train pull out,  
All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense  
Of being in a hurry gone. We ran  
Behind the backs of houses, crossed a street  
Of blinding windscreens, smelt the fish-dock; thence  
The river’s level drifting breadth began,  
Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet.

All afternoon, through the tall heat that slept  
For miles inland,  
A slow and stopping curve southwards we kept.  
Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and  
Canals with floatings of industrial froth;  
A hothouse flashed uniquely: hedges dipped  
And rose: and now and then a smell of grass  
Displaced the reek of buttoned carriage-cloth  
Until the next town, new and nondescript,  
Approached with acres of dismantled cars.

At first, I didn’t notice what a noise  
The weddings made  
Each station that we stopped at: sun destroys
The interest of what’s happening in the shade,
And down the long cool platforms whoops and skirls
I took for porters larking with the mails,
And went on reading. Once we started, though,
We passed them, grinning and pomaded, girls
In parodies of fashion, heels and veils,
All posed irresolutely, watching us go,

As if out on the end of an event
Waving goodbye
To something that survived it. Struck, I leant
More promptly out next time, more curiously,
And saw it all again in different terms:
The fathers with broad belts under their suits
And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;
An uncle shouting smut; and then the perms,
The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes,
The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres that

Marked off the girls unreal from the rest.
Yes, from cafés
And banquet-halls up yards, and bunting-dressed
Coach-party annexes, the wedding-days
Were coming to an end. All down the line
Fresh couples climbed aboard: the rest stood round;
The last confetti and advice were thrown,
And, as we moved, each face seemed to define
Just what it saw departing: children frowned
At something dull; fathers had never known
Success so huge and wholly farcical;
The women shared
The secret like a happy funeral;
While girls, gripping their handbags tighter, stared
At a religious wounding. Free at last,
And loaded with the sum of all they saw,
We hurried towards London, shuffling gouts of steam.
Now fields were building-plots, and poplars cast
Long shadows over major roads, and for
Some fifty minutes, that in time would seem

Just long enough to settle hats and say
_I nearly died_,
A dozen marriages got under way.
They watched the landscape, sitting side by side
—An Odeon went past, a cooling tower,
And someone running up to bowl—and none
Thought of the others they would never meet
Or how their lives would all contain this hour.
I thought of London spread out in the sun,
Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat:
There we were aimed. And as we raced across
Bright knots of rail
Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss
Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail
Travelling coincidence; and what it held
Stood ready to be loosed with all the power
That being changed can give. We slowed again,
And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.

Glossary

**Whitsun**: (White Sunday). Also called Whitsunday or Whitsuntide is the feast of the Pentecost, which falls on the 7th day after Easter, commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles of Christ. In England it was mixed up with pagan festivities celebrating the summer’s day. Considered to be very auspicious for weddings. During the 50s it was a favoured time for marriage and honeymoon due to the long weekend. Whit Saturday is the Saturday before it. The following day is also a holiday, called Whit Monday.

**blinding**: refers to the cars waiting at the level crossing in the scorching heat
**windscreen**: refers to the cars waiting at the level crossing in the scorching heat
**fish-dock**: harbours or piers for fishing (see picture)
**Lincolnshire**: historic county in the east of England

**A slow and stopping curve southwards we kept**: the consistent curve of the railway as the train moves southwards and stops at stations.

**short shadowed**: the cattle cast short shadows due to the time of the day, probably early afternoon.

**cattle**: the cattle cast short shadows due to the time of the day, probably early afternoon.

**industrial froth**: layer of dirt or scum spread on top of the canal, due to the industrial effluents cast from the factories nearby.

**Canals of industrial froth**: Larkin points out at the deleterious effect of technological advancement on the urban areas. Demonstrative of his powers of observation. In the poem *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot had made a similar remark: “River sweats/Oil and tar.”

**Hothouse**: a heated building used for growing plants. (see picture)

**reek**: (n) smell

**nondescript**: lacking distinctive characteristics

**dismantle**: take to pieces, pull down

**skirl**: a shrill cry or shriek (Scots dialect)

**whoops and skirls**: shouts and shrieks

**larking**: cavorting; enjoy oneself by behaving in a playful and mischievous way.
pomaded: wearing scented hair-dressing

irresolutely: hesitantly

Confetti Fish Dock Perm

Hothouse

seamy: sordid, disreputable, sleazy

smut: obscenity; here the uncle is cracking indecent jokes at the expense of the newlyweds.

perms: a term in hair dressing; permanent wave (see picture)

lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres: different colours or shades; mostly pastels. Lemon is yellow, mauve is light violet or purple and olives are green and ochres are brick red.

Bunting dressed: dressed with cloth flags, drapery or streamers for festive decoration (see picture)

confetti: small pieces of coloured paper traditionally thrown over a bride and bridegroom by their wedding guests after the marriage ceremony has taken place (see picture)

confetti and advice were thrown: a figure of speech named ‘zeugma’ or ‘syllepsis’ is used here, in which one single phrase or word joins different parts of a sentence, which may actually befit only one part. Zeugma means ‘yoking’.

farcical: extremely ludicrous

happy funeral: is an oxymoron, where contraries are yoked together to describe the indescribable. Ironic comment about marriage which may begin in joy and happiness but may end in tears and sorrow.

religious wounding: the tense girls cannot make out their mothers laughing at a shared secret. The ritual of marriage seems to be
sanctioning a ‘deflowering’ of the virgins, ratified by the society.

**hurried towards** : notice the shift in the scenery as they near urban habitation.

**London**

**shuffling gouts of steam** : the steam pouring from the spout of the engine (see picture)

**Poplar** : A tall tree found in the North Temperate Zone. It is called Chinar in North India (see picture)

**Odeon** : a movie theatre chain, popular in Britain (see picture)

**Cooling Tower** : heat removal devices used to transfer process waste heat to the atmosphere (see picture)

**Pullman** : a railway carriage with special amenities, designed by George M. Pullman of America. During Larkin’s times, these had gone out of fashion. The image adds to the poem’s sense of an idyllic, static Old England (see picture)

**This frail travelling:** being co-travellers in a journey. ‘Coincidenza’ in Italian, is a transfer station in railroad travel. Larkin’s “coincidence” may be an interlingual pun. Like both “frail” and “traveling,” it may just be a way of naming the brief encounter that the poem stages, between the speaker and those he observes.

**There swelled / A sense of falling, like an arrow** : Larkin passes on from the particular to the universal; loaded with meanings and significations. Falling is a sensation that accompanies when the brake is applied to a moving train. Sense of falling may be ‘Felix Culpa’, a happy fall – a reference to the married couples’ future life. Larkin creates a complex symbolic image into which we might read overtones of fertility, aggression, joy, sadness, and delayed consequences—all things often associated with marriage. Highly sexualized image.
The poem begins in a conversational mode by the poem’s narrator, by commenting about his late start. He describes the scenery and smells of the countryside and towns through which the largely empty train passes. The first stanza is rich in alliteration used in phrases like sunlit Saturday, behind the backs of houses etc. Images of excessive heat and smell also can be seen throughout. The heat of the sultry afternoon is personified

“All afternoon, through the tall heat that slept
For miles inland,
A slow and stopping curve southwards we kept.”

In the second verse the train keeps a slow rhythmical movement towards the South and inland; and the rural landscape of Lincolnshire is vividly described: “Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle.” The adjective ‘short-shadowed’ subtly reminds us that it is still early afternoon and the sun is high in the sky. By contrast the man-made polluted waterways are described in terms of disgust: “Canals with floatings of industrial froth”. There is a further contrast between the euphony of the ‘smell of grass’ and the cacophony of the ‘reek of buttoned carriage cloth’. The train now reaches the outskirts of the town where it will make its first stop. It is one of the ‘new’ towns built in post-war England. Larkin dismisses it contemptuously as ‘nondescript’. Man’s pollution of the rural environment is again harshly described in the phrase: “acres of dismantled cars”.

The train’s windows are open because of the heat, and he gradually becomes aware of bustle on the platforms at each station, eventually realising that this is the noise and actions of wedding parties that are seeing off couples who are boarding the train.

The narrator seems almost irritated the wedding parties have interrupted his quiet train journey through provincial England. “Wide farms went by, short shadowed cattle and canals with floatings of industrial froth; a hothouse flashed uniquely”. The wedding participants are described crudely whereas the passing urban landscape is admired much more. At different stations different newly-weds board the train dressed in wedding attire. They are waved off by well wishers.

Larkin is the detached observer who is at times sneering and mocking, especially at the lurid and garish display of the wedding parties. He is initially scornful of the wedding guests in their loud costumes; “girls in parodies of fashion”; he lampoons the typical family; “mothers loud and fat and uncles shouting smut”. He seems to itemize these sights to make them seem ridiculous and pitiable. The cynical attitude of the poet is visible in the almost unkind description of the young women. As a bachelor, he does not show any enthusiasm in the costume and the colour scheme; he finds it rather offensive.

Telling phrases hint at his attitude to marriage calling it; “success so huge and wholly farcical”; where ‘wholly’ could be substituted phonetically for “holy” and this is perhaps deliberate. Oxymoronic phrases like “happy funeral” and “religious wounding” support this idea.

Larkin offsets this view of landscape with the couples, fresh from their dramatic day. They too contemplate the lives and the places they are soon to inhabit. It is
as if Larkin can’t decide whether he loves the landscape or fears its crushing blandness, and this must be what the couples are thinking too. This *leit motif* manipulates the reader’s view of the marriages.

At the end of the poem he sums up his thoughts on the newly married couples, the “frail travelling coincidence and what it held stood ready to be loosed with all the power being changed can give.” He gives a sense of impending destiny. He seems to think that this day is the sum total of the glory of marriage, by imposing his own world view on what has been missed out. This is backed by the regrets he invokes against marriage: “the others they never meet”, or “how their lives would all contain this hour.”

The poem climaxes with a powerful enigmatic image: “a sense of falling, like an arrow shower; sent out of sight somewhere becoming rain”. There is a twin motif about love at work here, with the image of Cupid’s arrows contrasted against the battleground of arrows being fired against Love itself. The rain belongs to London and the hints at the bland reality of day to day life; it may also be a symbol of fertility too.

The poem is bound to the here and now while longing for transcendent release. There is a real paradox between the reality presented by the landscape and the ideals represented by the couples and the final image. Larkin longs for the abstraction of romance and perfect love, but he sees around him the oncoming city splurge which counters the romanticism of the train environment he is experiencing. The climax at the end seems to work against the surface cynicism of Larkin’s tone as he experiences a tug for something more due to the mesmerising occasion he witnesses.

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<th><strong>Self-check Exercise III</strong></th>
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<td>1) Do you think that Larkin is critical about the appearance of the wedding parties? Substantiate your answer.</td>
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<td>2) Describe the English landscape as Larkin describes it.</td>
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<td>3) Technical brilliance of Philip Larkin in ‘Whitsun Weddings’.</td>
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Let Us Sum Up

So in this unit we have discussed Philip Larkin and two of his poems, ‘Church Going’ and ‘Whitsun Weddings’. We have situated Philip Larkin as a representative of postwar British society and also as an exponent of Movement Poetry. We have seen how his poetry eschews the vagueness and complexities of earlier Modernist writings and espouses rhythmic cadence and clarity of traditional provincial poetry. We have seen his attitudes towards Church and marriage as institutions. Larkin’s poems teach us the necessity of looking at things not through rosy glasses of romanticism, but with wide open eyes of realism. It tells us to be ‘less deceived’. It will be good for you to look around and identify dead conventions which need to be eradicated from the society. After all, the ultimate purpose of reading literature it to observe and be aware of our surroundings. It will be good to read other poems of Larkin, which are easily available as they are anthologized extensively in several volumes of poetry; they are also available on the web. Recordings of Larkin’s readings of his poems are available on the You Tube, and are a pleasure to listen to.

Answers to Self-Check Exercises

Self-check Exercise I

1) *The North Ship; The Less Deceived; Whitsun Weddings; High Windows.*
2) At the *Brynmor Jones Library* in the University of Hull.
3) Thomas Hardy
4) *All That Jazz: A Record Diary 1961–71*
5) *New Lines* Anthology (1956)

Self-check Exercise II

1) He lets the door thud shut, looks around, takes off the cycle-clips in awkward reverence, runs the hand around the font, mounts the lectern and reads from the scriptures and pronounces ‘here endeth’ louder than he intended; signs the book and donates an Irish sixpence and reflects that the place is not worth stopping for.

2) Narrator’s attitude is one of irreverence and scepticism. He does not understand the allure of the church. He is bored and disinterested at times. He is questioning, blasphemous, and mocks at certain practices. He is unimpressed and ignorant.

3) He sees a rather bleak future for church. “A shape less recognisable each week. A purpose more obscure.” The people who seek church in future might be those who come for maintenance, or people who love ruins and antiques, or Christmas addicts who love a season of gaiety and mirth. Or they will be like the poet himself, bored or uninformed, coming there because of their curiosity and because the silence of the place renders them solace.

4) The title is ambiguous and can be interpreted in several ways: the act of going to church, the customs that keep the church alive, visiting the church as one would a theatre, and the disappearance of the church.
Self-check Exercise III

1) Yes, Larkin is critical about the appearance of the wedding parties. The references to the grinning pomaded girls in parodies of fashion, heels and veils; fathers with seamy foreheads wearing broad belts under their suits; mothers loud and fat, uncle shouting smut, perms, nylon gloves and jewellery substitutes which indicate the tawdry cheapness of the affair, the lemons, mauves and olive-ochres, presenting jarring colour schemes, all substantiate this.

2) Larkin describes both urban and rural landscapes and contrasts the sordid with the idyllic. The backs of houses, blinding windscreens, smelly fish-docks, canals floating with industrial froth, new and nondescript next town, acres of dismantled cars, fields with building plots and Odeons are contrasted with the river’s level drifting, wide farms, short-shadowed cattle, uniquely flashing hothouse, hedges dipped with rose, smell of grass, and poplars.

3) ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ is an ode consisting of eight verses, each ten lines long making it one of his longest poems and rhyming a b a b c d e c d e. This rhyme pattern captures the rhythmic sound of a steam-engine as it gathers momentum every time it leaves a station. The truncated second line in each stanza adds to the special rhythm of poem. The use of *enjambement* or run-on lines and run-on verses creates a sense of relentless, onward movement as the train with several linked carriages makes its way southward by a ‘slow and stopping curve’.