
Unit-3 □ Philip Larkin: Church Going Seamus Heaney: Digging

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2.3.0 Introduction

There was no towering figure like W. B. Yeats or T. S. Eliot in the post-1950s English literary scene. The poetry of the fifties lacks the vivacity and patriotic fervour

of the First World War poets like Rupert Brooke or the critical bent of one like Wilfred Owen. It is devoid of the socialist preoccupations of the Left-Wing poets like W. H. Auden or Stephen Spender. The poetry of this period reflect on the post-Second World War void and depression. The remarkable poets of this period have sincerely tried to overcome this depression through the medium of their poetry.

In this unit we will deal with two famous poets of post-1950s English literature—Philip Larkin and Seamus Heaney.

Before introducing the poets, we will focus on the literary scene of England and Ireland in the 1950s to situate Larkin and Heaney, respectively, against their literary backgrounds. In the light of these, the given texts will be analysed.

2.3.1 Post 1950s British Poetry: Social Background

As you have learnt in Module 1, in the aftermath of the Second World War, the major setback from which Britain suffered was the disintegration of the British Empire. It not only affected the socio-political structure but also the entire British sensibility. A sense of void and frustration came to pervade the literary works of this period, irrespective of the genre of writing. The years after the Second World War saw the rise of the USA as the most dominant economic and cultural force of the world. Simultaneously there was a decline in the British power and Britain had to reconsider its position in the international scene. At the national level too there were significant political changes, which in turn came to affect economic and cultural aspects of life. There was an upsurge in the literary productions from the ‘Third World’ which began to broaden up the range of ‘English Literature’ and presently the term ‘Literatures in English’ is preferred to ‘English Literature’.

But when the arena of ‘Literatures in English’ was broadening up from the literary influx of erstwhile colonies, Britain was trying to maintain its ‘Britishness’ in literature and culture. When the British political authorities were busy in constructing the ‘cultural welfare state’ in the 1950s, one of their chief ambitions was to celebrate the native British Culture. Imperialism had been a major part of the British identity for over two centuries. In the aftermath of the disintegration of the empire, widespread provincialism was boosted up, which rejected the international and concentrated on the national and local.

2.3.2 ‘The Movement’ as a Literary Development

You have already been introduced to the term ‘Movement Poets’. Before our discussion on Philip Larkin we will consider the features of Movement Poetry, because Larkin was closely associated with this group. The term ‘The Movement’ designates a group of poets and novelists whose rational, anti-romantic and empirical writings marked a new tendency in post-Second World War English poetry. The manifesto of ‘The Movement’ was Robert Conquest’s ably edited anthology *New Lines* (1956), which included the poems of nine distinguished poets and novelists of the fifties- Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, John Wain, Donald Davie, Thom Gunn, D.J. Enright, Elizabeth Jennings, John Holloway and Robert Conquest. Blake Morrison in his seminal book *The Movement* (1980) refers to Larkin, Amis and Wain as “the nucleus of the Movement”. The chief features located in the works of the Movement poets are:

- art of restraint in articulation
- insistence on rationalism
- allegiance to traditional poetic forms
- maintaining regularity of metrical patterns
- rejection of incomprehensible language, and
- concentration on local flavour

The Movement was actually a counter movement against three poetic movements of the first half of the twentieth century: against the **Modernist** experimentations of the 1920s poets, against the **Socialist** preoccupations of the 1930s poets, and against the **neo-Romantic** exuberance of the 1940s poets.

Critics have divergent opinions regarding Larkin’s degree of allegiance to the Movement. Actually a poet of Larkin’s stature cannot have restricted himself to some typical characteristic features. Larkin’s poetry bears allegiance to the Movement but at times moves beyond it.

2.3.3 Literary Bio-brief of Philip Larkin

Philip Arthur Larkin was born on 9 August 1922 to Sydney Larkin and Eva Larkin in Coventry, England. He was educated at King Henry VIII School, Coventry,

and at St. John's College, Oxford. At the initial stage of his career, Larkin worked in several libraries and finally became the librarian of Brynmor Jones Library in Hull. Larkin's poetic anthologies include *The North Ship* (1945), *The Less Deceived* (1955), *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974). This famous poet also tried his hand in novel and the successful outcome was *Jill* (1946), a novel which describes the life of a working class boy of Lancashire. Larkin edited *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973). He had a keen interest in jazz and produced a volume of essays, *All What Jazz* (1970). Larkin died of cancer on 2 December, 1985.

2.3.4 Text of "Church Going"

*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 fall completely out of use
 What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
 A few cathedrals chronically on show,
 Their **parchment**, plate and pyx in locked cases,
 And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
 Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

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

 A shape less recognizable 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 accoutered 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.*

2.3.5 Glossary and Notes

Line 2: thud - a sound produced when a heavy object hits something

Line 6: organ - a musical instrument like piano

Line 7: unignorable silence –unusual silence as there was nobody inside the church when the speaker went there

Line 9: Cycle-clips - bands that people wear around their ankles while cycling to stop their trousers getting caught in the chain

Line 10: font – a large receptacle in a church that holds water for baptismal ceremonies

Line 13: lectern – podium/platform from which priests read out holy verses in the church

Line 25: parchment – material made from animal skin used in the past for writing

Line 44: myrrh – a sticky substance with a sweet smell that comes from trees and is used to make perfumes

2.3.6 Paraphrase and Critical Appreciation

Church Going reflects the spiritual vacuity of the frustrated, depressed post-Second World War Western man. The poem begins with the detached, almost cynical attitude of the speaker. The speaker casually enters an empty church. As he is not wearing any hat, he takes off his bicycle-clips to show formal reverence. Moving aimlessly in the church, he mounts the lectern and reads a few pages from the Bible. He feels as if the words are mocking him.

The speaker introspectively muses on the condition of the church in future when visitors would stop coming to the church. He envisions the ruination of the church building which would be exposed to the rains and would become the grazing place for sheep. Then he considers an alternative possibility. Some obscure women might visit the abandoned church to cure their sick children. But what would happen to the church when superstition would also come to an end?

The speaker tries to conjecture about the last person who would pay a visit to the church. He might be a person who is weary with life and would come to the church for solace. Or he might be a person who would want to gain some knowledge from the church ceremonies. Finally, the speaker realizes that the church is “a serious house on serious earth”. Some people, though a little few, would visit the church for its spiritual atmosphere which would instigate the inner compulsions of the visitors. If for no other reason, some people would visit the church to see the graves in the churchyard to gain the essential knowledge about mortality of human beings.

Church Going is a contemplative, thought-provoking poem. The poem captures the oscillating mind of the speaker. He does not personally believe in religion and ritualistic observances but thinks that churches would continue to exist to provide spiritual solace to suffering humanity. Deeply troubled with the spiritual vacuity of his age, the poet desperately tries to find a solution to the problem.

We can locate some of the Movement features in **Church Going** in its sceptical outlook towards religion and its ironical treatment of the church rituals. But the poem moves beyond the Movement territory in its broader concern for the suffering humanity.

2.3.7 Title and Theme

In **Church Going**, Larkin considers the relevance of religious belief and rituals from a modern speaker's perspective. The poet focuses on the significance of the church in our present day society, how it was like in the past and what it would become in the future. The speaker discusses the utility of going a church when religious belief is in question.

To consider the appropriateness of the title we have to discuss the theme of the poem. The poem is about the speaker's personal feeling in a particular situation. Going a church, the speaker minutely observes the floor, roof, font and lectern and muses on the relevance of religious belief and ritualistic observations in this secular age. He envisions the dilapidated condition of the church in future when belief as well as disbelief would come to an end. The poem is not about the ruination of a particular church but in its broader concern, it speaks about the decay of Christianity. Though the poem begins with the speaker's casual visit to a church, it raises many thought-provoking questions regarding the necessity of religion. Considering from this perspective, the title is apt and comprehensive.

2.3.8 Structure and Style

Larkin's **Church Going** is a well-structured poem. In this, Larkin follows the Movement agenda of composing poems in traditional stanza pattern. The poem comprises seven stanzas; each stanza breaks up into nine lines. The minute description of the church building draws attention. The description of the speaker at the beginning of the poem, 'hatless', taking off his 'cycle-clips in awkward reverence', creates a half-serious half-hilarious mood. Gradually the detached observer becomes involved in the 'serious' atmosphere of the church. Larkin has presented a highly philosophical poem in a simple language amenable to common readers.

2.3.9 Comprehension Exercises

● **Long Answer Type Questions-20 Marks**

- a. Write the chief features of Movement poetry. Do you consider Philip Larkin a Movement poet?
- b. Attempt a critical appreciation of Larkin's poem "Church Going".

● **Medium Length Answer Type Questions-12 Marks**

- a. Justify the title of Larkin's "Church Going".
- b. Make a critical analysis of the images in "Church Going".

● **Short Questions: 6 marks**

- a. Explain with reference to the context:
 - i. "But superstition, like belief, must die, / And what remains when disbelief has gone?"
 - ii. "A serious house on serious earth it is, / In whose blent air all our compulsions meet, / Are recognized, and robed as destinies."
- b. Write a short note on the symbolism of the 'church' in the poem.

2.3.10 Seamus Heaney and the Irish Literary Scene:

Robert Lowell considers Seamus Heaney "the greatest Irish poet since Yeats". Heaney's poems portray the rural landscape of Northern Ireland. He also deals with the troubles and turmoil which plagued his country during his young adulthood. Heaney has focused on Irish society, cult, and history. He has dealt with the life of the 'bog people'. He was so much assertive of his Irish identity that when his poems were included in the *Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (1982) he refuted in *An Open Letter* (1983) that 'My anxious Muse...Has to refuse/ The adjective',—concluding 'British, no, the name's not right'(qtd. in Carter and McRae 447).

2.3.11 Literary Bio-brief of Seamus Heaney

Seamus Heaney was born on April 13, 1939 on a family farm in Northern Ireland, about 30 miles northwest of Belfast. He was the first child of Margaret and Patrick Heaney. As a child, Heaney was impressed by the verse of Wordsworth and developed a profound love for nature. Later as an adolescent he was deeply moved by the intensity of G.M. Hopkins's poems. When he was studying in Queen's university, Belfast, (1957-1962), he was influenced by the works of Robert Frost and Ted Hughes. Heaney's professional career is very bright. During 1962-63 he taught at St. Thomas's Secondary School in Belfast, from 1963 to 1966 he was a Lecturer in English at St. Joseph's College and finally from 1985 to 2006 he taught at Harvard University. During 1985-2006 he served as the Oxford Professor of Poetry at

Harvard. He has authored over 20 volumes of poetry and criticism and edited some famous anthologies. Some important volumes of poetry by Heaney are: *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), *Door into the Dark* (1969), *Wintering Out* (1972), *North* (1975), *The Spirit Level* (1995). Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995. He is the second Irish poet after W.B. Yeats to win this prestigious prize. Being influenced by Yeats, Heaney dealt with Irish myths and legends. His translation of *Beowulf* (1999) brought him great appreciation and critical acclaim. The poet passed away in 2013.

2.3.12 Text of “Digging”

*Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.
Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into the gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down
Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.
The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.
By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.
My grandfather cut more turf in a day.
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up*

*To drink it, then fell to right away
 Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
 Over his shoulder, going down and down
 For the good turf. Digging.*

*The cold smell of potato mould, the **squelch** and slap
 Of **soggy** peat, the curt cuts of an edge
 Through loving roots awaken in my head.
 But I've no spade to follow men like them.*

*Between my finger and my thumb
 The squat pen rests.
 I'll dig with it.*

2.3.13 Glossary and Notes

line 2: squat- short and fat, unattractive

line 2: snug- warm, comfortable and protected

line 10: lug- a part of something that sticks out, used as a handle or support

line 18: bog- wet, soft land formed of decaying plants

line 25: squelch- to make a wet sucking sound

line 26: soggy- wet and soft

2.3.14 Paraphrase and Critical Appreciation of “Digging”

Digging is one of the most anthologised poems of Seamus Heaney. The poem is included in Heaney’s first volume of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966). The poem captures the rural landscape of Northern Ireland, portrays the family members of the poet and throws light on some larger issues relating to the nation. Analyzing this poem, Carter and McRae in *The Routledge History of Literature in English* observe:

He (Heaney) digs into his own memory, into the lives of his family, into the past of Irish history and into the deeper levels of legend and myth which shape the character of the people of his country. Heaney attempts to go beyond the terrible daily events of life in Northern Ireland to discover the

forces beneath the history of that country which might restore hope and comfort. But he does not hide the deep-rooted tribal passions of revenge and honour which endure in contemporary society (446).

The poem is autobiographical in nature. The first person speaker of the poem can be easily identified with Seamus Heaney. Heaney begins the poem with a familiar image of himself, pen in hand:

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

The poet's linking the pen to the gun reminds us of the political turmoil Ireland had to face at the first half of the twentieth century.

The poet's father and grandfather were potato farmers. In his imagination the poet could hear the echo of his predecessors digging the ground with a spade. The middle stanzas of the poem are full of Heaney's family reminiscences. He could visualize his father "Stooping in rhythm through potato drills / Where he was digging." When as a child he used to carry the milk-bottle to his grandfather he would see him "Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods / Over his shoulder, going down and down / For the good turf."

But the poet has "no spade to follow men like them." So he decides to 'dig' with his pen:

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

The pen that replaces the spade becomes the poet's tool. This metaphor is highly significant. On the one hand, it connects the poet's trade with his predecessor's trade with two different instruments (pen and spade) and thus maintains the tradition. On the other hand, it suggests a shift from agriculture to culture. In this context, Helen Vendler observes that an Irish child had to grow up between the offers of two instruments: the spade and the gun, in extension, between 'agricultural tradition' and 'Republican militarism'. Heaney has successfully woven the experiences of his childhood, the reminiscences of his family members and the grave issues relating to the nation in this poem.

2.3.15 Title and Theme

The title of Seamus Heaney's poem **Digging** is suggestive. Heaney digs into his own memory, into the depths of his own Irishness. The poet's decision to 'dig' with his 'squat pen' suggests the act of writing through which he wants to unearth his past and explore the historical roots of his nation.

The poem **Digging** deals with the poet's relationship with his family, the profession of his father and grandfather and the vocation of the poet. It initially relates the poet's vocation to the inherited tradition of his family and finally connects it to the tradition of his nation.

2.3.16 Structure and Style

The poem **Digging** deals with the poet's reminiscences of his childhood days, his family and country. This is a relatively short poem in free verse. It breaks up into stanzas of two to five lines. The images in this poem deserve appreciation. They appeal to the sensory perception of the readers. The images of the poet's father and grandfather digging with spade focus on the rhythm of the agricultural life in Ireland. The act of 'digging' is the fulcrum of the poem. This image is deeply suggestive since it not only throws light on the poet's family history but also explores the historical roots of his nation. At the same time the poem captures the scenic beauty of rural Ireland in a simple, sensuous language.

2.3.17 Comprehension Exercises

● **Long Answer Type Questions-20 Marks**

- a. Attempt a critical analysis of Seamus Heaney's "Digging".
- b. How does Heaney's poem "Digging" reflect on the poet's family history and explore the historical roots of his nation?

● **Medium Length Answer Type Questions-12 Marks**

- a. Attempt a critical note on the title of Seamus Heaney's "Digging".
- b. Write a critical analysis on the imagery of "Digging".

● **Short Questions: 6 marks**

- a. Explain with reference to the context:
 - i. “By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.”
 - ii. “Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests
I’ll dig with it.”
- b. Write a short note on the use of the two instruments pen and spade as metaphors.

2.3.18 Summing Up

- i. This unit discusses the socio-political background of Post-1950 British poetry
- ii. It introduces Philip Larkin and situates him in the tradition of Movement poetry
- iii. This unit analyses Larkin’s poem “Church Going” in detail including the title, theme and structure
- iv. This unit introduces Seamus Heaney to the students
- v. It situates Heaney to his Irish background
- vi. This unit analyzes Heaney’s poem “Digging” in details, concentrating on the title, theme and structure
- vii. Finally it provides comprehension exercises on both the poems

2.3.19 Activity for the Learner

For a comprehensive view on Larkin’s poetry we would suggest you to read Larkin’s poems “The Whitsun Weddings”, “An Arundel Tomb”, “Ambulances”, “Next, Please”, “At Grass”, “Going”, etc.

For a comprehensive view on Heaney’s poetry you can read Heaney’s poems “Personal Helicon”, “Tinder”, “Bone Dreams”, “Punishment”, “The Harvest Bow”, etc.

2.3.20 Comprehensive Reading

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