In “Church Going,” Philip Larkin probes the purpose of religion and questions rituals associated with attending church. By setting up several contrasting images and ideas, Larkin enables readers to consider how the church functions in society from a variety of lenses. In the first section of the poem, he highlights a contrast between the plethora of material items that adorn the church’s interior and the sense of lifelessness and desertion that stems from the utter silence and lack of people. As the poem evolves, Larkin’s speaker envisions two different futures for the church, which dramatically diverge; in the first the church diminishes to ruins, and in the other it morphs into a showroom or museum. Finally, as he nears the end of the poem, Larkin juxtaposes the two different types of churchgoers: those who fetishize the church and revel in its decadence and antiquity versus those who view the church as a meditative space and find pleasure in private contemplation.

In the first stanza, Larkin reduces the church to its physical, material, and present state. He ultimately creates a lexical group out of words related to the church’s interior and possessions, including “mattings,” “seats,” “stone,” “little books,” “sprawlings of flowers,” “brass and stuff,” and “neat organ.” As a result of devoting half of the lines in this stanza to listing and describing the material items present, Larkin paints a picture of abundance and plenty. This proliferation of goods starkly contrasts with the image of abandonment and lifelessness he also creates within the same stanza and throughout the poem. His depiction of the “brownish” “flowers” suggests death and decay are “now” lurking within the church, since it is no longer a “Sunday” and “nothing is going on” (1). The deteriorating flowers, “cut” and intended for a large crowd, are paired with the “tense, musty, unignorable silence,” suggesting that while the church contains many physical artifacts, it is lifeless without the presence of people (4-5,7). Larkin builds upon this idea in the second stanza when he again emphasizes the church’s physicality,
particularly the newness of the “cleaned or restored” “font” (10,12). Additionally, he notices that his voice “echoes” “more loudly than [he’d] meant,” again drawing attention to the lack of people and noise, conveying the church’s emptiness (16-15). Ultimately, the church is defined by its lack (lack of noise, lack of people, lack of usefulness, lack of worth), a concept Larkin expands upon in the third stanzas when he “wonders what” other people “look for” when attending church and fails to figure it out, “end[ing] up much at a loss” as per usual (21-20). Larkin plays on the multiple meanings of the word “worth” in its literal and figurative senses, calling attention to how one cannot equate plenty of material items with plenty of worth or purpose. Larkin employs irony here, since the speaker “reflect[s]” that it “was not worth stopping for” only after chronicling many of the church’s possessions (18).

Whereas in the first stanza he focuses on the church’s past and its accumulation of goods, Larkin transitions into the future in the middle of the poem, imagining two very different possibilities and their consequences. At the juncture of these two sections, Larkin addresses how he repeatedly relives the same experience when visiting the church — always “end[ing] much at a loss like this” and “reflect[ing]” that “it was not worth stopping for”— and thus likens the past to the present. He then transitions to the future and its emphasis on the accrual of goods, “wondering” if churches will be “chronically on show,” displaying artifacts like “parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases” (24-25). In this sense, the “p” alliteration is strategically employed to stress the church’s artifice, particularly the triviality of focusing on material worth. Larkin’s speaker also provides a contrasting view of the future, one in which the place of worship becomes ruins, leaving only behind physical traces of its existence, such as “grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, [and] sky” (36). This imagery calls to mind neglect, since people allow the “weeds” to grow and thus are not taking care of the area, and suggests that
while the church remains a physical presence, the objects slowly erode over time. These transitions from different time periods (present, past, and future) and across different stanzas are aided by Larkin’s usage of enjambment, a device Wordsworth also employs. By not breaking at the end of the line or stanza, but rather allowing sentences to come to their natural end, both poets more closely mimic everyday language and prose.

In the fourth stanza, Larkin’s diction—“dubious,” “seemingly random,” “superstition,” “belief,” and “disbelief”—forms another lexical grouping, one centered around the concepts of doubt and trust as they apply to faith and religion. Both of the main lexical groups—one grounded in material, concrete items and one connecting abstract, subjective concepts—relate to the speaker’s prodding question about how to measure “worth,” in both the immaterial and material senses. Larkin notes that when abstractions like “superstition,” “belief,” and “disbelief” “die,” the physical church itself will also end up in ruins, leaving behind “buttress” and “sky” (34-35). With the collapse of both the physical and the abstract, the speaker predicts the church will “become less recognizable” and the “purpose more obscure” (37-38). In a way, this echoes the Romantics’ nostalgic poetry, in which many poets lament that nothing will ever be as good it once was. Larkin expands upon this when he ponders the relationship of time, wondering “who will be the last, the very last, to seek / This place for what it was” (38-40). Here he invokes Wordsworthian views of looking back on past memories or experiences in the future.

Whereas Larkin focuses on the future in this middle section, he then proceeds to explore the duality of churchgoers in the fifth and sixth stanzas, grounding his argument in present and past observations. He playfully pokes fun of the middle class’s lack of taste, such as the “ruin-bibber[‘s]” love of “antiques” and the “Christmas-addict[‘s]” fetish for physical representations of the holiday, such as ornaments, “myrrh,” and “organ-pipe” music (42-44). His skillful usage
of common language, like “randy,” “gown-and-bands,” and “cycle-clips,” demonstrates how Larkin invokes Wordsworthian ideals of describing ordinary events in everyday diction. While Larkin keeps his tone gentle and respectful, he still critiques the middlebrow churchgoers’ preoccupation with things that he classifies as insignificant, such as Christmas festivities and old relics. The “bibber” and “Christmas-addict” are contrasted with the speaker, who is searching for his “representative,” a type of person who values the church’s persistence and appreciates the church’s ability to offer a space for private contemplation. For Larkin, the church’s utility is also related to how it marks monumental events like “birth, marriage, / And death” (50-51).

Larkin continues to ponder the church’s function in the final two stanzas. He employs “s” alliteration—“silence,” “slit,” “separation,” “special shell,” and “suburb scrub”—as a tool to focus readers’ attention on the relationship between the church and the suburb, as well as the role of place. Calling the church a “special shell” highlights how the church has endured throughout time and history, since the word “shell” denotes a durable exterior that offers security or refuge. In order to reach the “special shell,” the speaker must first travel “through the suburb scrub,” defined as land covered by bushes and trees (48,52). This is a direct reference to modernity and the changing times, including how peoples’ sense of entitlement to own more land creates the need to travel in and out of town. The speaker wants to escape the “suburb scrub,” seeking the church out because it functions as a meditative place. The church essentially provides a space that allows him to have his thoughts in “silence.” At the end of this stanza, he approaches the concept of “worth” from a different angle, stating that he does not know what the “accoutred” “barn” is “worth,” yet is “please[d]” to “stand in silence there” (53-54). By referring to the building as a “barn,” Larkin stresses that church is not about the decorations; rather, church is what we make of it. In his case, the speaker makes going to church an act of private
contemplation, which he takes pleasure in. This also brings the poem full circle and reveals how the speaker’s perspective of church changes throughout the poem; the speaker no longer perceives the silence as “tense,” like it was in the beginning, but rather finds it “pleasing” now. In this sense, “worth” is not about accumulation of goods and is instead associated with pleasure and reflection, which parallels Wordsworth’s experience in “Tintern Abbey” and Preface to Lyrical Ballads.

However, unlike Wordsworth, who evolves from a radical young boy to a mellow man in “Tintern Abbey,” the speaker believes that peoples’ “compulsions” and desires will essentially stay the same: humans will always “gravitate” toward the church because of their “hunger” for the “wisdom” they have “heard” it provides. Despite earlier pondering the church’s future demise, the speaker finally recognizes in the final stanza that it “can never be obsolete” (58). People will “forever be” “gravitating” “to this ground,” and the diction (“ground,” “earth,” and “house”) stresses place’s importance. Indeed, the “serious house on serious earth” is the place where “all our compulsions meet” (55-56). In this sense, Larkin sees the church as a place that connects people from the past, present, and future together, especially since it has persevered and endured through time.

Ultimately, Philip Larkin examines a number of intriguing dualities in “Church Going,” allowing readers to contemplate the church’s function from different perspectives, mimicking the speaker’s own meditative process. He first contrasts the abundance of goods with the church’s lifelessness, forcing the reader to reflect on the various meanings of worth. Larkin then imagines two alternate futures for the church. Finally, he examines two different types of churchgoers, contrasting himself and his desire for meditation from the middleclass and their fixation with antiquity and festivities.