

# Nihilism in Selected Poems by Philip

## Larkin

### Abstract

Philip Larkin is one of the renowned poets who discussed nihilism and absurdism. In his poetry, he questions many life aspects. This article will analyze some of the poet's nihilist and absurdist stances in selected poems. Using the theories of Nietzsche, it examines Larkin's nihilism in religion, reflected in "Church Going" where he doubts the value of churches and the reliability of religious men. Moreover, in "Ambulances" and "Aubade", Larkin demonstrates his fear and despair at the thought of death. Death, for the poet, represents the unknown and the end of life. The last poem under study is "This Be The Verse". It reflects Larkin's absurdist view of life. The poet discusses the monotonicity of life, where nothing new is accomplished throughout the generations.

**Keywords:** Philip Larkin, Nietzsche, Absurdism, Nihilism, "Church Going", "Aubade", "Ambulances", "This Be The Verse".

## العدمية في قصائد مختار للشاعر فيليب لاركن

### الملخص:

يُعدّ الشاعر فيليب لاركن من الشعراء المشهورين الذين ناقشوا العبثية والعدمية. فهو يطرح العديد من الأسئلة في مختلف جوانب الحياة في شعره. يسعى هذا المقال إلى تحليل بعض هذه المواقف العبثية والعدمية في البعض من قصائده. باستخدام بعض النظريات لنييتشه، يدرس هذا البحث الآراء العدمية ل لاركن التي تعكسها قصيدته "الذهاب إلى الكنيسة" حيث يتساءل الشاعر عن أهمية الكنائس وموثوقية رجال الدين. يظهر لاركن في قصيدتيه "سيارات الإسعاف" و "أغنية الصباح" الخوف واليأس من الموت. فهو يعتبر أن الموت يمثل المجهول ونهاية الحياة. آخر قصيدة في هذه الورقة البحثية هي "لتكن هذه الآية". تعبّر هذه القصيدة عن موقف لاركن العبثي للحياة. يناقش الشاعر في هذه القصيدة رتابة الحياة حيث لا شيء جديد يتم إنجازه عبر الأجيال.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** فيليب لاركن، نييتشه، العبثية، العدمية، "الذهاب إلى

الكنيسة"، "أغنية الصباح"، "سيارات الإسعاف"، "لتكن هذه الآية".

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Nihilism and existentialism are central themes that have emerged in the twentieth century. Many writers and poets have explored existentialist ideas about God and the role of religion in determining and shaping one's life, one of whom is Philip Larkin. Larkin is a renowned poet for discussing controversial themes of death, nihilism, and pessimism (Ahmed, para.3). Therefore, this paper shall discuss nihilism in selected poems by Philip Larkin.

Friedrich Nietzsche argues in *Nietzsche's Lenzer Heide Notes on European Nihilism* that Christianity guaranteed "man an absolute value, as opposed to his smallness and accidental occurrence in the flux of becoming and passing away" (10). In other words, nihilism rejects the belief of the existence of an omnipresent God that Christianity revolves around. Furthermore, Nietzsche opines that Christianity makes people believe that they have an unshakable knowledge of "absolute values" that is "adequate . . . regarding what is important" (11). Hence, nihilism decries the absolute truths that religion sets for people as it considers religious teachings to be illusive since they prevent people from questioning the beyond.

In light of what has been discussed, it could be argued that Larkin's "Church Going" presents some nihilist perspectives (*Norton* 2711–12). The poem begins with the poet entering the church where the door "thud shut[s]" which indicates that religious teachings metaphorically enclose people within blind belief and forbid them from questioning metaphysical concepts (line 2). Moreover, the poet's mockery of religion that there are too many churches that are luxuriously decorated is demonstrated when he writes "Another church: matting, seats, and stone, / And little books; sprawling of flowers, cut / For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff" (3–5). That is, the poet is arguably ironic of religion that, although religious places are supposed to be modestly designed, they are lavishly decorated. In this respect, Abdul Ghaffar Ikram analyses Larkin's stance towards death in "Significance of Religion as a Social Institution for Common People: Structural Analysis of Philip Larkin's 'Church Going'".<sup>1</sup> Ikram maintains that the first stanza suggests that, for the poet, the importance of churches is decreasing. He further stresses that the poet's style of describing the decorations symbolizes "his agnostic or atheistic attitude". Hence, one can read a sense of irony towards religion. That is, this stanza reflects nihilism

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<sup>1</sup> This article will be referred to as "Significance of Religion" in the following pages.

represented in questioning the value of churches and religion as institutions.

The poet's mockery of religion is further manifested when the poet says "The echoes snigger briefly" when he reads some biblical verses, which arguably reflects that no one visits the church because people have discovered that religion is an illusion (16). Furthermore, the poet's disbelief in religion is further highlighted when he says "[t]he place was not worth stopping for" (18). That is, the poet degrades churches because he does not believe they guide people to a sublime place.

Moreover, the poet confesses that the church, for him, is not a place of providence; rather, it is a place of indeterminacy and doubts where he "always [ends] much at a loss" (20). The poet further expresses his sense of loss when he says "Wondering what to look for" which arguably demonstrates the poet's negation of the common belief that religion grants certainty and relief for people because the poet, in church, is not certain of anything (21). Furthermore, the poet arguably demonstrates his nihilistic stance towards religion when he says "What shall we turn them into, if we shall keep / A few cathedrals chronically on show" (23-24). In other words, the poet

does not find any practical benefit in religion so he begins to think of potential changes to be done in place of churches.

Larkin resumes his mockery of religion when he says “[W]ill dubious women come / to make their children touch a particular stone” (28–29). The poet is mocking the uselessness of religion that people do not adhere to religious teachings since women are having illegal children and are coming to churches to ask for forgiveness only at night in order not to be seen. Furthermore, the poet stresses that the general belief of a sublime power “must die” because belief only grants more illusions and “a purpose more obscure” (38; 34). Thus, not only does the poet decry religion, but he also finds it illusive as it only gives false beliefs that require more questioning. In “Significance of Religion,” Ikram highlights that Larkin speculates about the future of churches sarcastically and ironically. As such, one can argue that the poet doubts bluntly the role of churches and criticizes the spreading hypocrisy of religious people. Moreover, the poet continues wondering mockingly about the church that there is not any actual need for it when he says “[W]ho / Will be the last, the very last, to seek / This place for what it was” (38–39). Also, the poet writes that only people who are “randy for antique, / Or Christmas addict” may still come to visit the church

while no one would come to ask for guidance (42-43). One can see that the poet stresses the idea of the uselessness of churches.

The poet's disbelief is further reflected when he contemplates that a person like him who is "[b]ored, uninformed" might come to visit the church only to discover the reason why this church has "held unsplit" for such a long time (48; 46). In other words, the poet is so discontented with religious teachings that he is anxious to know why the church still exists. The poet ironically maintains that "marriage, and birth, / And death, and thoughts of these" are the only possible reasons why the church has existed for so long (50-51). That is, the poet arguably believes that while religion is supposed to help people perceive existential issues, it has only served them in ordinary ones. The poet's degrading vision of religion is further manifested when he describes the church as "a frowsty barn" which implies that the poet does not consider the church to be a respectable place (53). The poet further mocks the predominant belief that it is "wise" to die as a believer (62). Therefore, these lines demonstrate the doubtful stance that the poet holds towards religion.

Moreover, Nietzsche maintains in *The Joyful Wisdom* that when one contemplates death, one begins to see life as a series of chaotic, absurd incidents (215). In other words, the thought of death as an

annihilator makes people discover the fragility of life. Nietzsche further pinpoints that death makes people remorseful because they feel that they have not fully lived their lives so they feel they “have more than ever to say to one another” (216). That is, death is detestable because it declares termination of life; therefore, people view their lives as short ones. Nietzsche, furthermore, stresses that death “is the sole thing that is certain and common to all” (217). Hence, Nietzsche views death as something inevitable.

In light of what has been highlighted, it could be argued that Larkin’s “Aubade” is demonstrative of the poet’s nihilistic stance towards death (*Norton* 2716–17). The poem begins where the poet, having woken up at night, expresses his anxiety and fear of death when he says “Unresting death, a whole day nearer now, / Making all thought impossible but how / And where and when I shall myself die” (lines 5–7). Moreover, the poet expresses his regret at the thought of death that he has not been able to live as he wants since “[t]he good not done, the love not given, time / Torn off unused” (12–13). In other words, the meaninglessness of life is mostly reflected when the hour of death comes because life seems to be short and empty at the thought of death. The poet further stresses his sorrowful feeling towards life when he writes “An only life can take so long to climb / Clear of its wrong beginning, and may never” (14–15). That



is, life seems to be poorly lived because no sooner one repents for their past sins early in life than death hour comes.

Furthermore, the poet affirms that death is an annihilator of life where people are forever gone in “[t]he sure extinction” which denotes that the poet considers death to be an eternal terminator of life (17). Also, the poet views death as something tragic because it is the only fear that “[n]o trick dispels” (22). Death, for the poet, is inevitable because nothing prevents it. Moreover, the poet criticizes religion because it deceives people into believing delusions. In this respect, the poet writes:

And specious stuff that says *No rational being  
Can fear a thing it will not feel<sup>2</sup>*, not seeing  
That this is what we fear— no sight, no sound,  
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with, (25–28).

Hence, the poet believes that the abstractness of death is what makes it fearful. Therefore, he viciously criticizes religious teachings, because they delude people. Religious teachings try to bluff people into believing that death should not be feared since it is not tangible.

Moreover, the poet arguably views death as a vague, frightening state that causes a gradual end to life. Larkin writes “And so it stays

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<sup>2</sup> This line is italicized in the original source.

just on the edge of vision, / A small unfocused blur, a standing chill  
/ That slows each impulse down to indecision" (31–33). Also, the poet stresses that death is inescapable because "[c]ourage is no good / . . . Being brave / Lets no one off the grave" (37–39). Thus, for the poet, neither courage nor bravery is beneficial since none of which can negate the tragic approach to death.

Furthermore, the meaningless, monotonous movement of life is arguably demonstrated when the poet writes "Slowly light strengthens, and the room takes shape / It stands plain as a wardrobe" (41–42). That is, while thinking anxiously about death, life goes on insignificantly. The poet further stresses that life can never prevent death and "what we know, / Have always known, know that we can't escape, / Yet can't accept" (42–44). In other words, although people dislike death and wish to escape it, they know that it is omnipresent. The poem ends with the poet affirming the triviality of life that "all the uncaring / Intricate rented world begins to rouse" while death is approaching (46–47). One can argue that the poet arguably envisions life actions as insignificant incidents since they continue to happen regardless of the tragical, terrifying approach of death.

The themes of nihilism and fear of death are also arguably

demonstrated in “Ambulances” (*Norton* 2714–2715). In this poem, Larkin is anxious about and afraid of death. When he sees the ambulance, his apprehension is clear, especially since he views death as a life terminator. This poem presents metaphorically a sudden moment of recognition that sickness and death are near despite the joyous, busy action of life.

Although the ambulance is supposed to symbolize safety and salvation, Larkin perceives it as a harsh, cold place that does not show neither sympathy nor care toward patients. This can be read in the first lines: “Closed like confessionals, they thread/ Loud noons of cities, giving back/ None of the glances they absorb” (lines 1–2). The reader can see in these lines that the ambulance is so frightening that Larkin views it as a “confessional” as if the patient inside it has to admit some guilt they have made. Larkin’s pessimism is further explicated in the following line: “All streets in time are visited” (6). That is, death is inescapable and inevitable.

The sudden recognition of death can be read when Larkin describes other people in the streets. While women are shopping and children are running and playing around, the ambulance comes shortly and everyone is violently interrupted. Larkin writes:

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Then children strewn on steps or road,  
Or women coming from the shops  
Past smells of different dinners, see  
A wild white face that overtops  
Red stretcher-blankets momentarily  
As it is carried in and stowed.  
(7-12)

This quote shows how people fear death. They look at the patient's "white face" and remember that death is lifeless and bleak as it takes forcefully the bright, colourful joy of life and imposes an end to it. Also, it demonstrates how ill people are treated. Without any consideration of their feelings, sick people are viewed as stashed goods and objects.

Larkin's nihilism is further stressed when he opines that the ambulance does not only remind people of death, but also makes them aware that no matter what one does in life, there will be time for death. This is presented when Larkin writes, "And sense the solving emptiness / That lies just under all we do, / And for a second get it whole, / So permanent and blank and true (13-16)". One can argue that the aforementioned lines suggest a sense of nihilism in life. When one understands that death lies at the end of

everyone's life, one views it as meaningless since the only constant thing is death. Therefore, one should consider life as ephemeral. Moreover, the emphasis on death as a heart-breaking disturbance can be read in the following lines:

The fastened doors recede. *Poor Soul*,<sup>3</sup>  
They whisper at their own distress,  
For borne away in deadened air  
May go the sudden shift of loss  
Round something nearly at an end,  
And what cohered it in across  
The years, the unique random blend  
Of families and fashions, there  
At last begins to loosen. (17-25)

The most important thing in these stanzas is how sickness causes feelings of loss and grief in other people. In other words, more often than not, when people see the ambulance, they are saddened since they are reminded of their own upcoming death. They are apprehended about whose turn is next. Life, in these lines, is viewed as weak glue that connects people together but can be cut easily by death. Thus, one can argue that Larkin discusses the fragility of life where all sweet memories and moments of love and friendship

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<sup>3</sup> This is italicized in the original source.

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vanish in front of the inevitability of death. Lastly, in the final stanza, Larkin repeats the same idea with which he begins the poem. The harshness of death is highlighted strongly throughout the whole poem. Emphasis on death arguably reflects Larkin's mourning tone. He writes:

At last begin to loosen. Far  
From the exchange of love to lie  
Unreachable inside a room  
The traffic parts to let go by  
Brings closed what is left to come,  
And dulls to distance all we are. (25–30)

In these lines, Larkin demonstrates how he views death. Death, for him, lacks the feelings of love and warmth. Dying people are left alone with what is left of time for them in life. Meanwhile, living people are perplexed remembering that, despite all the merriment and enjoyment of life, their death will come. Therefore, the reader can see that Larkin highlights starkly the disturbing reality of death, how suddenly it appears, and how it suffocates living people mentally and psychologically, leaving them anxious and frightened. Pintu Karak studies the nihilism of Larkin's poetry in "The Last Lines in Selected Poems of Philip Larkin". Karak pinpoints that "Ambulances" exemplifies perfectly Larkin's pessimism and shows vividly the

poets' "preoccupation with death and suffering that the very sight of an ambulance is frightening and frightful". Karak further stresses that Larkin demonstrates "the randomness and inevitability of death in this poem" (4-5). The idea of death as the final end of one's life that declares annihilation of life is Larkin's motif in "Ambulances". To perceive death as inescapable truth makes the poet realize that life is meaningless and shallow. All that one has achieved in life evaporates simply when death comes. Therefore, the poet develops such a pessimistic, nihilistic view of life. Absurdism and nihilism in life are common ideas in Larkin's poems. In his poetry, he discusses some aspects of nihilism regarding several modern themes, such as religion and death. Another theme that he writes about is the absurd movement of life. It could be argued that his "This Be The Verse" provides an example of it (*Norton* 2716). This poem arguably provides a theoretical diagram of the cyclical movement of life where the first stanza represents the present time while the second one represents the past. In this diagram, generational faults and misbeliefs do not seem to be solved; rather, they are inherited by children and grandchildren. Larkin begins the poem by describing how parents unintentionally mistreat their children. He ironically writes, "They may not mean to, but they do. /

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They fill you with the faults they had / And add some extra, just for you  
(lines 1-4).

These lines arguably reflect an aspect of the absurdity of life. That is, life should be about improving oneself, empowering points of strength, and adjusting others of weakness. In this poem, however, no one seems to be focusing on these issues; instead, parents simply pass all the inherited traits they have to their children. More sarcastically, Larkin believes that parents may not give their offspring any good characteristics, yet they surely shower them with bad ones.

The second stanza presents an eye on the past. Larkin illustrates the recurrence of upbringing patterns through present and past parental generations. In this respect, he writes that parents have been raised "By fools in old-style hats and coats, / Who half the time were soppy-stern / And half at one another's throat (5-8).

One can see in these lines how the poet doubts the alleged wisdom of elderly people. According to him, upbringing patterns have been the same. Old people have committed the same mistakes with their offspring, and these mistakes are simply being repeated.

The last stanza that is supposedly about the future can be seen as a piece of advice. In the previous stanzas, the poet is mainly describing his view of the relationship between parents and children; how it has been throughout time. In the third stanza, however, one



can argue that Larkin tries to make an end to this absurdist, cyclical movement of life. He writes, "Man hands on misery to man. / It deepens like a coastal shelf. / Get out as early as you can, / And don't have any kids yourself (9-12).

One can see that the poet perceives humanity as miserable since no one bothers to better themselves. Generation after generation, nothing new or innovative is accomplished. On the contrary, humans accumulate their faults only. Therefore, the poet ends his poem telling the reader not to involve in this circle.

In conclusion, the poems studied above represent some of the nihilist and absurdist ideas that have been prevalent for many decades. Larkin, throughout his poetry, demonstrates his doubtful, pessimistic views towards religion, death, and family. One can perceive how Larkin questions higher values and beliefs and doubts their reliability in guiding humanity to a righteous, meaningful life. Larkin also demonstrates the horror he feels regarding death because it is an omnipresent, eternal terminator that renders life into a fragile, meaningless experience. In addition, the poet reflects his absurd view of life and humanity in some poems. He considers the cycle of

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life to be merely repeating and recurring with the same faults from older generations to younger ones.

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