Water

SUMMARY

The speaker considers the possibility of being summoned to create a religion. If this were to happen, the speaker would make water an important part of that religion.

In this new religion, attending church services would involve wading through a shallow body of water and then changing into a new set of dry clothes.

The speaker's program of worship would include images of getting soaking wet and an intense, devoted downpour.

The speaker would hold up a glass filled with water in the east, and, in that glass, beams of light coming from any direction would join together, seemingly without end.

THEMES

THE MYSTERY AND POWER OF RITUAL

The speaker of "Water" proposes a new religion centered on water: people would have to wade through water to get to church, for example, and the "liturgy" would feature "images of sousing" (that is, getting soaking wet). In imagining this hypothetical religion, the speaker reflects on the allure of ritual itself (as opposed to actual religious *belief*). It's possible that the speaker sincerely finds rituals powerful and transformative, even in the absence of religious faith. At the same time, the poem's focus on "construct[ing]"—or making up—"a religion" and its subversion of *actual* traditions (like baptism and communion) suggest that the speaker finds religious rituals a bit silly and artificial. Regardless, the speaker does seem to acknowledge the deeply human longing for rituals and their power to bring people together. In this way, "Water" suggests that rituals can grant life a sense of meaning and purpose—even if some people might also find them hollow.

When "called in" to make up a religion, the speaker jumps right to the various rituals that religion would "entail" rather than what this religion would actually preach. Church would include "a furious devout drench," for example, and a glass of water raised "in the east."

These practices are intense and a little strange. They might nod toward real religious practices and stories (baptism and communion, for example, or to the Biblical flood), but the speaker never connects them to any set of beliefs about God. For this speaker, it seems, the ritual aspects of religion seem more alluring and potentially transformative than religion itself.

The speaker's description of these rituals thus seems both serious and tongue-in-cheek—at once an earnest testament to ritual's transformative power and a sarcastic critique of rituals like the ones the speaker describes. By basing these constructed rituals on water (instead of wine, oil, incense, or other precious substances), the speaker may be mocking actual religious rituals as shallow (in the sense that they hold no more weight than water). The final image of raising a "glass of water" could seem purposefully anti-climactic, for instance, especially when compared to the elegant formality and complicated symbolism of Christian communion.

On the other hand, the speaker could actually be attempting to *purify* the rituals by stripping away their religious associations and basing them on water—one of the purest and most abundant substances on earth, and something that all people both need and are made of. In turning to water, then, the speaker could also be expressing sincere belief in the universal, transformative power of ritual.

This is especially true in the final stanza, where anyone (regardless of belief) could find meaning in the clear water, and "any-angled light" congregating "endlessly" might reflect ritual's universal appeal and redeeming power. Perhaps, then, the speaker is drawn to ritual itself but repelled by the doctrine and complicated backstories that often go along with such rituals. By emphasizing simplicity and reducing ritual to its basic, almost primitive components, the speaker might indicate respect for ritual's capacity to give life order, meaning, and purpose.

Even though the rituals in "Water" are made up by the speaker—who seems to knowingly revise or even subvert actual religious traditions—the poem seems open to the widespread human longing for ritual as a way to make sense of life. After all, the speaker constructs a new religion, rather than doing away with the concept entirely. While the speaker may well believe, at least partially, that many religious rituals are hollow things made up by normal people that can never truly hold meaning, "Water" also leaves room for ritual's alluring and potentially transformative power.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-13

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

If I were ...
... use of water.

"Water" begins with a hypothetical situation: "If I were called

in," the speaker says, indicating that the poem takes place in the world of the imagination. "Water" is a poem about (you guessed it!) water and religious ritual, but it's also about possibility and, perhaps, hope.

The speaker specifically imagines being summoned to "construct," or create, a religion. Right away, readers might wonder: who or what would call on this speaker to make up a new religion, and why? Who is the speaker, and what makes them qualified to invent a religion (no small task!)?

The poem never answers these questions, but in raising them it does imply that religion isn't exactly natural; instead, it's something *constructed*, something made up by people. Whether this makes religion less valid or not is something that the poem ultimately leaves open to interpretation.

The first three lines also establish a few key stylistic aspects of the poem. "Water" is written in free verse, meaning it doesn't follow any set pattern of meter or rhyme. The first two lines in this stanza are also enjambed, flowing smoothly down the page. Along with the use of free verse, these enjambments grant the poem a casual, conversational, and flexible feel. Readers might get the sense that the speaker is simply musing, delivering thoughts off the cuff.

At the same time, the use of tercets—three-line stanzas—lends the poem some structure, and might subtly nod to the deep importance of the number three in various religions and mythologies (think of the Holy Trinity, the Three Fates, etc.).

The poem's seemingly matter-of-fact tone makes the speaker's true feelings a little hard to read. Is the speaker being sincere about "construct[ing] a religion" and basing it on water? Or is the speaker is being tongue-in-cheek, disingenuous, and sarcastic? The whole scenario does seem a little odd, and maybe even silly. And Larkin is famous for masking irony and emotion under a plain, even reserved linguistic surface. That skill is definitely on display in "Water," which asks readers to decide just how earnest or sly—or some combination of the two—the speaker's words about religion really are.

LINES 4-6

Going to church ...
... dry, different clothes;

In the second stanza, the speaker describes one of the rituals that this new religion would involve. Church-goers would have to ford, or wade, across a shallow body of water. It's unclear whether they would do this to enter the church or as part of the church service itself (i.e., once they're already there). Either way, once they'd finished "fording," getting good and wet in the process, they'd change into "dry, different clothes." Notice how the alliteration ("dry, different") in line 6 draws attention to the transformative power of the speaker's ritual, adding a certain weightiness to the poem's language itself.

This ritual is a clear allusion to the Christian practice of baptism. This sometimes involves a simple dribble of water, but often requires full immersion. It represents one's cleansing, purification, and regeneration upon joining the church.

It's possible that the speaker's ritual is meant to represent these things as well. Indeed, the changing into "dry, different clothes" might imply a kind of shedding of one's old self and/or the outside world. The speaker's ritual is stripped down to its most basic elements, however (a person, water, and dry clothes). More importantly, there's no mention of belief in God or another divine power. And while there is a *physical* transformation (since the church-goers emerge from the water clean and change into new clothes), the speaker doesn't explicitly link this to a deep *spiritual* transformation.

It's possible that the speaker is somewhat sarcastically pointing out the hollowness of religion by poking fun at the oddness, and even silliness, of its rituals. That is, the speaker might be trying to talk about baptism in a way that makes it sound unfamiliar and thus highlights its strangeness. It's also possible that the speaker is being sincere—that the speaker wants to purify those rituals by divorcing them from actual religious belief. In the speaker's mind, perhaps, religion has become too complicated, weighed down by traditions that have become outdated or obsolete. By simplifying the baptism ritual down to its essence—and by focusing on the role of water, one of the purest, most abundant substances on earth—the speaker seems to embrace the power of ritual to transform and uplift, even while rejecting its real-world religious associations.

LINES 7-9

My liturgy would ...
... furious devout drench,

Following the baptism-like ritual of the second stanza, the speaker introduces another element of this new religion. This one has to do with this religion's "liturgy," or worship service, and it involves "[i]mages of sousing" and a "furious devout drench."

"Sousing" is just a fancy way of saying "getting soaking wet." In the first ritual, the church-goers literally get wet during their "fording"; now, it seems they're probably just going to *hear about* getting absolutely "drench[ed]," perhaps in a kind of sermon. First getting wet, then hearing about getting even wetter—the speaker sure wasn't kidding about "mak[ing] use of water"!

The speaker's second ritual builds on the idea of cleansing, purification, and transformation. Indeed, the "sousing" and "furious devout drench" both seem to allude once again to baptism—though this is definitely a more extreme and forceful baptism than the gentler "fording" into dry clothes of the second stanza!

This stanza may also be a nod to the biblical flood from the Book of Genesis, in which God cleansed the earth through a

violent, heavy, prolonged downpour. The "sousing" water might even be the speaker's alternative to the "fire and brimstone" that appears in many Christian liturgies. Instead of harsh, complicated, intimidating dogma, the speaker seems to say, a more simple, pure, cleansing "liturgy" based on water would do.

The speaker's language contributes to the intensity and drama of this stanza. Whereas most of the poem's lines so far have been enjambed, line 8 has a pause (in the form of a comma) at the end:

> Images of sousing,

This brief pause slows readers down, adding extra drama to the "furious devout drench" of line 9. The thudding /d/ alliteration of "**d**evout **d**rench" evokes the foreboding power of this downpour, while the sibilance of "sou**s**ing" and "fu**r**ious" suggests the hiss and splash of rushing water.

It's possible that these lines express the speaker's genuine belief in the power of ritual when separated from actual religious faith. Of course, it's also possible that the speaker isn't entirely serious about this "furious devout drench." Perhaps the speaker is swapping out fire and brimstone for a "devout drench" to imply that it doesn't *matter* what element the "liturgy" of any religion focuses on; fire and water both are equally "construct[ed]" images.

And while the speaker's tone seems matter-of-fact and earnest, it might just as easily be ironic and tongue-in-cheek. The speaker might be trying to present religious traditions (baptism, stories of a great flood) using strange, defamiliarizing language in order to make them seem silly and melodramatic. To that end, "souse" is also old-fashioned British slang for an alcoholic; Larkin might be undermining the seriousness of ritual by using a word that suggests debauchery.

LINES 10-13

> *And I should ...*
> *... Would congregate endlessly.*

After the "fording" and "sousing" of stanzas 2 and 3, the speaker introduces the final ritual in which a "glass of water" is raised "in the east." And while the first three stanzas of "Water" are tercets, meaning they have three lines apiece, now the speaker uses a quatrain—a stanza with *four* lines. The switch from tercet to quatrain signals the poem's conclusion, adding weightiness to its final moments.

The "fording" and "sousing" earlier in the poem both alluded to baptism (and perhaps also to the biblical flood); this final ritual seems to be a version of holy communion. This is a Christian sacrament in which followers drink from a consecrated cup of wine. Some traditions argue that this wine *represents* the blood of Christ, while others believe that the wine actually *becomes* the blood of Christ (a process known as transubstantiation).

Notably, the speaker's ritual is a lot simpler than actual communion: it involves water, not wine, and there's definitely no mention of transubstantiation or even belief in God at all. And whereas in communion church-goers consume the wine, in "Water," the glass is simply held up, allowing "any-angled light" to gather (readers might picture the way light refracts through a crystal prism).

The speaker personifies this light, granting it the ability to "congregate," or meet, in this glass of water. Light is a traditional symbol of truth and knowledge, so the speaker might be suggesting that religious ritual is a *vessel* for truth. That is, ritual *attracts* truth, enlightenment, insight, etc., but it doesn't *create* these things.

To that end, the speaker may specify the direction of this ritual because the sun rises in the east; it's the direction of new beginnings. Raising the glass in the east places it in line with the sunrise; it puts the glass in position to embrace this new light. Symbolically, the poem might be suggesting that people can use rituals to *embrace* purpose and meaning, to position themselves to receive the "light." Not coincidentally, the word "congregate" might make readers think of a congregation—that is, the members of a church. Perhaps the speaker is suggesting that people create meaning simply by coming together through ritual.

The visual imagery of "any-angled light" refracting in this glass of water conjures an atmosphere of mysterious beauty, power, and wonder. The fluid enjambment of these lines adds to that atmosphere, as does the gentle sibilance of "rai**s**e," "ea**s**t," "gla**ss**," and "endle**ss**ly." Whereas the sibilance of the third stanza reflected the almost violent force of the "sou**s**ing" and "fu**r**ious devout drench," this stanza's /s/ and /z/ sounds communicate the tranquility and majesty of the poem's final image.

Again, it's possible that the speaker intends this moment to be anti-climactic. After all, compared with a fancy gold or silver chalice of wine, intricate prayers, and the complicated dogma of transubstantiation, raising a seemingly unremarkable "glass of water" (and one that church-goers don't even drink from!) might seem underwhelming. If readers find that line of thinking compelling, then they might reasonably think of "Water" as an ironic, even cynical, take-down of religion and its high-minded rituals.

But perhaps the stark contrast between this ritual and actual communion is the speaker's point. Just like the "fording" and "sousing," the "glass of water" is being stripped, or purified, of its actual religious associations. The speaker focuses on the ritual itself and the mysterious power of ritual to bring people together.

SYMBOLS

WATER

It's no surprise that water plays an important role in a poem called "Water"! While the speaker definitely seems to be talking about actual, good old H2O, water also takes on symbolic meaning in the poem: it suggests purification, cleansing, simplification, and renewal.

This is, in fact, the role that water plays in Christianity: the water used in baptism is meant to symbolize a person's spiritual purification and regeneration upon entering the church. Perhaps the speaker means for water to work similarly in the poem: to represent people's purification and cleansing on their way to his new church.

Instead of a gentle sprinkling of water or quick plunge, however, the speaker says that church-goers would have to actually wade through water and that the liturgy would involve a "furious devout drench." Perhaps the speaker's vigorous rituals reflect a desire to cleanse religion of its dogmatic teachings and beliefs, things that the poem implies distract from ritual's fundamental power.

Water's symbolic power takes on another nuance in the third stanza, where the "furious devout drench" seems implicitly opposed to the "fire and brimstone" that has traditionally played a key role in some Christian liturgies. Again, water's power to cleanse, heal, and purify religious practice takes center stage here.

Finally, the last stanza's glass of water has a complicated symbolism. On the one hand, it may reflect the hollowness of all religious rites—compared to the traditional wine of communion, water is colorless, tasteless, and perhaps laughably impotent as a symbol of humankind's hope for spiritual and emotional renewal. On the other hand, the crystal-clear water and the "any-angled light" that refracts through it may symbolize the openness, possibility, and hope the speaker thinks could result from freeing religion from distractions and needlessly complicated traditions.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-13
- Lines 4-6

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

There's a handful of alliteration in "Water," which lends this short poem some lyricism and intensity. In the first two lines, for example, the crisp alliteration of "called" and "construct" (bolstered by the consonance of "construct") draws readers' attention to the fact that the speaker here is acting as a creator (another alliterative word!): he's being "called in"—by whom, readers will likely wonder—to make up a religion, presumably out of thin air.

The next two stanzas feature alliteration as well, both using the heavy /d/ sound. In line 6, the speaker declares that the church-goers will cross through water and then change into "dry, different clothes." The alliteration here sounds firm and emphatic, highlighting the (literally) transformative power of this ritual: people will come to church wearing street clothes that will get wet during the "fording" and then change into something new (now being cleaner and symbolically purified). The thudding /d/ alliteration adds a subtle sense of gravity to the poem's description of this ritual.

Similarly, in line 9, the repeated /d/ sounds of "devout drench" seem to evoke the almost violent intensity of the "[i]mages of sousing" the speaker's liturgy would employ. And in the poem's final stanza, the quick alliteration of "water / Where" and "any-angled" close the poem on a musical note.

This alliteration might be a way of heightening the poem's language to reflect the speaker's earnest belief in the power of ritual. On the other hand, the exaggerated sounds may also subtly communicate the speaker's ironic attitude toward these rituals. That is, the speaker might be being purposefully *dramatic*, heightening the poem's language to reflect the idea that these practices are merely "construct[ed]," silly, and unmoving.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "called"
- **Line 2:** "construct"
- **Line 6:** "dry, different"
- **Line 9:** "devout drench"
- **Line 11:** "water"
- **Line 12:** "Where," "any-angled"

SIBILANCE

The intense imagery of an almost violent, soaking downpour gets a boost from the sibilance of lines 8 and 9. The /s/ and /z/ sounds in "Images," "sousing," and "furious" subtly evoke the hiss and rush of running water. The alliteration of "devout drench," meanwhile, adds a heaviness to the line that perhaps subtly evokes the weight of sopping wet clothes.

Altogether, then, the poem's language at this moment adds vivid intensity to the ritual being described. It's possible, too, that the attention these lines call to themselves is meant somewhat ironically—that the speaker is being tongue-in-cheek and using excessively dramatic sounds to indicate that these rituals aren't meant to be taken all that seriously!

There's also some subtle sibilance in the fourth and final stanza,

where soft /s/ sounds seem to mark a shift from the foreboding intensity of the speaker's "liturgy" to the openness, possibility, and light of the final ritual. The /s/ sounds of "east" and "glass" gently carry into "endlessly," the final word of the poem. Whether the speaker means this stanza to be taken totally seriously as a new and improved version of religious ritual or not, the sibilance adds to the final ritual's impression of peace, harmony, and hope.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "Images," "sousing"
- **Line 9:** "furious"
- **Line 10:** "east"
- **Line 11:** "glass"
- **Line 13:** "endlessly"

ENJAMBMENT

Most of the lines in "Water" are enjambed. Along with the poem's use of free verse, these enjambments give "Water" a casual, conversational, and plainspoken tone.

In the first two stanzas, for example, the first two lines are both enjambed. As a result, each stanza's thought continues uninterrupted until the very end of the stanza. This makes each stanza feel fluent and thoughtful, the speaker's vision unfurling down the page in a way that might even evoke the smooth flow of water itself.

The third stanza slightly diverges from the pattern of the first two. There's a pause (an end-stop) at the end of line 8, which slows readers down for a beat and pushes them to them really focus on the "furious devout drench" of line 9:

> Images of sousing,
> A furious devout drench,

This moment is a good example of how *deviating* from an established pattern of enjambment, even for just a line or two, can heighten a certain moment's intensity, tension, and drama.

After the end-stops in lines 8 and 9, the fourth stanza is entirely enjambed until the final moment of the poem. The steady enjambment creates momentum as it pushes readers down the page, heightening the anticipation, movement, and drama of the poem's mysterious ending.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "in / To"
- **Lines 2-3:** "religion / I"
- **Lines 4-5:** " church / Would"
- **Lines 5-6:** "fording / To"
- **Lines 7-8:** "employ / Images"
- **Lines 10-11:** "east / A"
- **Lines 11-12:** "water / Where"
- **Lines 12-13:** "light / Would"

IMAGERY

The imagery in "Water" brings the speaker's imagined rituals to vivid life on the page. In line 8, for example, the speaker says that this new religion's "liturgy" would involve "[i]mages of sousing," a fancy way of saying that religious literature would include images of people or things getting soaking wet. "Souse" is also British slang for an alcoholic (or for going on a drinking binge), and, as such, the speaker might be subtly poking fun at the seriousness of church ritual here.

The speaker continues to describe a "furious devout drench," which might be another way of describing this sousing or a separate instance of getting soaked. Perhaps readers envision people standing under a mighty waterfall, or simply getting buckets of water vigorously sloshed over their hands.

It's not clear that the church-goers *themselves* will be subject to this "drench" (after all, they will have just undergone a "fording," or water crossing, and changed into fresh, dry clothes). Instead, it seems like the speaker's version of church involves getting wet and then having to listen to intense, almost violent descriptions of getting even wetter!

The sounds of these lines add to the intensity of this imagery, with sibilance ("sousing"/"furious") and heavy /d/ alliteration ("devout drench") evoking the splash of water and the weight of soaking clothes. Thanks to this imagery, readers can perhaps almost feel themselves getting soaked by the deluge the speaker conjures in the third stanza.

By contrast, the fourth stanza uses a different kind of imagery to suggest a sense of possibility and perhaps even tranquility. The "glass of water" and the "any-angled light" that gathers there are calm, crystalline images. Readers might envision light refracting as though through a prism, different colors radiating out from this clear glass held up to the light of the sun (which, like the speaker's glass, rises in "the east"). It's easy to imagine the mysterious beauty of such a scene and the powerful emotions that this ritual might evoke in participants. Of course, the image could be purposefully exaggerated and a little anti-climactic—whether the glass of water is a sincere, even sublime image or a final bit of sarcasm is up to readers to decide.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-9:** "Images of sousing, / A furious devout drench,"
- **Line 10:** "And I should raise in the east"
- **Lines 11-13:** "A glass of water / Where any-angled light / Would congregate endlessly."

ALLUSION

"Water" alludes to several real-world religious rituals. Take lines 5-6:

> Would entail a fording
> To dry, different clothes;

This "fording" through water to "dry, different clothes" nods to baptism, which, in some Christian traditions, involves being entirely immersed in water or actually crossing a small body of water. The "sousing" and "furious devout drench" of the third stanza may again refer to baptism, and perhaps also to the Biblical flood: the story from the Book of Genesis in which God decides to flood the entire world and instructs Noah to build an ark. Note that the word "souse" is also British slang for a drunkard, so the speaker is likely poking fun at these rituals and undermining their supposed holiness.

Finally, the "glass of water" raised "in the east" is a clear revision of communion, a ritual that traditionally involves a glass of *wine*, not water. Depending on one's branch of Christianity, this wine either *represents* or is meant to be taken *literally* as the blood of Jesus Christ.

What's the purpose of these allusions? The speaker may be subtly subverting actual Christian rituals to suggest the need to simplify and purify them. In this sense, the poem advocates for stripping away the complicated baggage of religious teachings in order to embrace the universal, elemental, mysterious power of ritual *itself*. Alternatively, the speaker might be undermining these rituals—replacing the blood of Christ with water to suggest that the ritual is ultimately meaningless.

It's important to note that though the poem does seem to refer to Christianity, it could certainly be referring to religion in a broader sense. Many religions, including Judaism and Islam, have important rituals centered on water. Likewise, the east, which is associated with the sunrise, new life, and the Holy Land, plays an important role in many world religions.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "a fording / To dry, different clothes;"
- **Lines 8-9:** "Images of sousing, / A furious devout drench,"
- **Lines 10-11:** "And I should raise in the east / A glass of water"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem uses some subtle personification in its final stanza. The speaker's imagined church service would include raising up

> A glass of water
> Where any-angled light
> Would congregate endlessly.

Light is a common symbol of truth and understanding (think of the phrase, "I see the light!"). In describing light here as though it has a will and agency of its own, the speaker suggests that religious ritual can be a kind of *vessel* for insight/truth/meaning/etc. even if that insight is *independent* of the religious belief. That is, this "light" isn't tied to any specific religious beliefs in the poem, but it chooses to make itself known during this ritual.

Also note how the speaker grants this light attracts the ability to "congregate," or gather, within the "glass of water." The would "congregate" calls to mind "congregation," the term used to refer to the group of people assembled for worship (i.e., the members of a certain church). The metaphor, then, might suggest that it's people themselves who imbue ritual with meaning.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "Where any-angled light / Would congregate endlessly."

VOCABULARY

Entail (Lines 4-5) - Involve or require.

Fording (Lines 5-6) - Crossing or wading through a shallow body of water.

Liturgy (Line 7) - The customs, procedures, and rituals followed during a religious worship service.

Employ (Line 7) - Make us of.

Sousing (Line 8) - Getting soaking wet, or drenched. "Souse" is also old British slang for an alcoholic.

Devout (Line 9) - Dedicated, deeply committed.

Any-angled (Line 12) - Coming from any direction, or having any orientation in space. The term may indicate the new religion's sense of openness and possibility.

Congregate (Line 13) - To come together as a group. Religious groups are often referred to as "congregations."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Water" is divided into four stanzas: three tercets and a final quatrain. The number three is important in many religious traditions (think of the Holy Trinity of Christianity) and has mythological significance as well (the Three Fates of ancient Greece, for example, who were in charge of people's fates). Having three stanzas of three lines apiece might subtly nod to the "ritual" power of this number.

The poems tercet/quatrain form also helps give the poem a

sense of shape, movement, and closure:

- The first tercet sets the scene and establishes the hypothetical scenario that prompts the poem: the speaker being "called in" to create a new religion, which would be based on water.
- The second tercet describes the first ritual of this new religion, in which church-goers would wade through water and then put on "dry, different clothes."
- The third tercet amps up this new religion's use of water to a "furious devout drench."
- Finally, the fourth stanza, a quatrain, closes the poem with a climactic (or, perhaps, anti-climactic) image of the speaker raising a glass of water "in the east," and the "any-angled light" that would refract in the water.

The three tercets prime readers to experience this lone, final quatrain as particularly important and weighty, as if the whole poem up to this point has been a preparation for these last lines.

METER

"Water" is written in free verse, meaning it doesn't use any specific meter. This allows the speaker's words to feel a little more flexible and casual than they would in a strictly metered poem. It could also be considered a more "modern" poetic choice (especially for a poet like Larkin, who often *did* write using meter).

The speaker's emphasis on water and simple rituals seems to reflect a desire to purify and simplify religion, breaking it down to its most elemental, basic parts. It makes sense, then, that the speaker's poetic language itself is simplified! The speaker's revision of traditional religious practices, such as baptism and communion, also seems particularly modern; it feels like part of a desire to reshape long-standing, ancient traditions (that, in the speaker's mind, have perhaps become hollow and even silly) for the contemporary world. Considering this, the speaker's modern and fresh rhythmic approach makes perfect sense.

RHYME SCHEME

"Water" is written in free verse, meaning it doesn't have a rhyme scheme. The poem's lack of rhyme might be a little surprising at first, given that lines 1 and 2 *seem* like they might establish some kind of pattern (in / religion).

As with its lack of meter, the poem's lack of rhyme adds to its matter-of-fact tone. That tone, in turn, subtly contrasts with the complexity, uncertainty, and richness of the speaker's attitude toward religion. There's thus an ironic tension between the speaker's words (which are pretty straightforward) and the speaker's feelings about those words (which are anything but!).

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Water" isn't clearly identified in the poem; readers never learn this person's gender, age, etc. That being said, it's clear that this speaker has thought a lot about religion! While the speaker doesn't express actual *belief* in the divine, they do seem to recognize the allure of religious *ritual*.

In the end, of course, the speaker's stance on ritual is open to interpretation: it's not clear whether the speaker is sarcastically critiquing both religion and ritual as things that are always "construct[ed]" (i.e., made up) and therefore hollow, or if the speaker sincerely believes in the power of ritual when stripped of its religious baggage.

It's very possible that the speaker here is Philip Larkin himself. Larkin was famously an atheist who wrote often about religion and seemed to admire some of the linguistic richness and ritual elements of Christianity.

SETTING

"Water" doesn't take place in any specific setting. The speaker talks about a hypothetical church, but it's unclear where that church would be located or what it would look like beyond the fact that going there would somehow involve wading through water. Religion, in theory, transcends all boundaries, and it thus makes sense that the poem doesn't ground itself in a specific time or place.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"Water" was written in 1954 and first published in the magazine *Listen* in 1957. Philip Larkin later included the poem in his third volume of poetry, *The Whitsun Weddings*. Published in 1964, this collection helped solidify Larkin as one of the most influential and popular British poets of the post-WWII years.

Larkin was a lifelong religious skeptic, as his poetry often indicates. His poem "Faith Healing," for example, is a largely (though not entirely) scathing portrayal of evangelical Christianity, while "Aubade" calls religion a "vast moth-eaten musical brocade / Created to pretend we never die." He once suggested that his famous poem "Church Going" was so popular "because it is about religion, and has a serious air that conceals the fact that its tone and argument are entirely secular." Larkin seems to take a somewhat more optimistic view of religion—or at least of religious ritual— in "Water," though the poem conspicuously says nothing about actual religious belief.

Larkin was the most prominent member of what came to be known in the 1950s and '60s as "The Movement," a group of

writers who pushed back on the experimental tendencies of modern poetry. Movement writers favored a restrained, ironic, unsentimental style and emphasized their cultural Englishness. Other writers associated with The Movement include Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, and Thom Gunn.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Water" was written in 1954, a year before Larkin began working as a librarian at the University of Hull (where he would remain until his death in 1985). Though the poem doesn't seem to be influenced by any particular historical event, organized religion and religious belief were on the decline in the UK at the time—and understandably so: this was the period following the second of the two world wars, events that caused massive social upheaval and tested or shattered the faith of many who witnessed them.

Generally, in the UK (as throughout much of Europe), the cultural predominance of the church had weakened since the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As Larkin himself put it in a 1943 letter: "[N]obody gives a darn for [religion] any longer, not in England, anyway. Methodism caught on fine in the 18th century, but it's worn thin now."

Larkin participated in and generally welcomed the trend away from organized religion. However, he also felt occasional ambivalence on the subject, including some nostalgia for the social cohesion that (in his view) religion used to offer. Given the poem's allusions to baptism and communion and Larkin's biography, it's possible to read "Water" as a critique of the Anglican church specifically—after all, it's the church Larkin would have known, and it remains the dominant religious force in England to this day.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to Philip Larkin reading "Water." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=korU-laW-gQ)
- Who was Philip Larkin? — A short biography of the poet. (https://poets.org/poet/philip-larkin)
- All About "The Movement" — A primer on English literature's angry decade from the British Library. (https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/the-1950s-english-literatures-angry-decade)
- More About Larkin — Resources, events, and more from the Philip Larkin Society. (http://philiplarkin.com)
- Philip Larkin: Life, Love, and Jazz — A film about Larkin from the BBC. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tK921e0s0wM)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER PHILIP LARKIN POEMS

- An Arundel Tomb
- Church Going
- Coming
- Mr Bleaney
- The Trees
- The Whitsun Weddings
- This Be The Verse

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