

English

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Higher Level

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Gerard Manley Hopkins – Study Pack



Hopkins A Short Study Pack

During Gerard Manley Hopkins's lifetime, only a handful of very close friends even knew that he was a poet. Even amongst this select group, much of his work was met with derision. When Robert Bridges asked the well-known Victorian poet Coventry Patmore to review his magnificently transcribed album of Hopkins's poems, Patmore's response stressed the arduous character, the distracting novelty and the obscurity of the poetry. Of course, Patmore was missing the point entirely. The linguistic invention, the liberal use of compounded words and the verbal shocks that make Hopkins's poetry so challenging are the very things that have assured him a permanent place in anthologies over the past 50 years. Since the 1930s, Hopkins has been recognised for the genius that he was. His unusual style offers a complete break with the poetry of the Victorian age in that it combines a uniquely perceptive quality with the inflections of the Welsh language. In fact, nearly every poem by Hopkins in this anthology depends on what he called the 'sprung rhythms' of Welsh poetry. Similar to English-language nursery rhymes, Hopkins's sprung rhythm broke with the dependence of Victorians on the strict syllabic feet of classical poetry. The result was a free-flowing association of words, ideas and imaginative suggestion that is utterly unique.

Inscap, Instress and Sprung Rhythm

In a letter to his friend Robert Bridges, Hopkins described sprung rhythm in the following terms:

Sprung Rhythm is the most natural of things. For (1) it is the rhythm of common speech and of written prose, when rhythm is perceived in them. (2) It is the rhythm of all but the most monotonously regular music, so that in the words of choruses and refrains and in songs written closely to music it arises. (3) It is found in nursery rhymes, weather saws, and so on; because, however these may have been once made in running rhythm, the terminations having dropped off by the change of language, the stresses come together and so the rhythm is sprung. (4) It arises in common verse when reversed or counterpointed, for the same reason.

In a letter to his brother, he claimed that sprung rhythm:

gives back to poetry its true soul and self. As poetry is emphatically speech purged of dross like gold in the furnace, so it must have emphatically the essential elements of speech. Now emphasis itself, stress, is one of these: sprung rhythm makes verse stressy.

Drawing from the traditions of Anglo-Saxon and Welsh literature, Hopkins made significant innovations in poetic rhythm. The poet coined the term 'sprung rhythm' to describe his departure from the conventional rhythm of the day. As he suggests in the above extract, sprung rhythm is a flexible metre that resembles closely the patterns of natural speech. In particular, Hopkins observed this pattern of stressed and unstressed metres in the poetry and plays of William Shakespeare. He never claimed to have invented it, only to have breathed new life into the concept. According to the author's own rather technical preface to the collected Poems which appeared in 1918, sprung rhythm can best be described as a logaoedic rhythm. In order to convey how his poems should be read, in many of the original versions of his poems Hopkins indicates stronger stresses with accents and weaker syllables with a loop over them. Sprung rhythm is opposed specifically to what is known as 'running' or 'common' rhythm, and allows the poet to employ feet of lengths varying from one syllable to four, with either 'rising' or 'falling' rhythm.

Another unusual practice favoured by Hopkins is what he termed 'consonant chiming', a technique that he borrowed from his study of Welsh literature while at St Beuno's in North Wales. This technique involves elaborate use of alliteration and internal rhyme that creates a memorable resonance that can be seen and heard in many of the poems on your course. This close linking of words through sound and rhythm is also complimented by a stretching of the conventions of grammar and syntax that can prove very challenging even to the more experienced reader of poetry. To help maintain the rhythm of a phrase, Hopkins often invented new words. A relatively simple task such as deciding which word is the verb in a phrase can prove very difficult.

It must be pointed out that Hopkins's reliance on sprung rhythm was certainly not original. Fellow Victorian poets such as Alfred Tennyson, Algernon Charles Swinburne and William Morris had, to varying degrees, experimented with the metres of Anglo-Saxon poetry. However, unlike his contemporaries, Hopkins used sprung rhythm as a means to demonstrate his belief in the unifying presence of God in the universe. For Hopkins, the repetition of key sounds and metrical patterns in words that hold different meanings was a means of

demonstrating an underlying unity than runs through all things, including language itself.

Inscape

It is difficult to find critical agreement on what exactly Hopkins meant by 'inscape'. In developing this idea, it appears that Hopkins was influenced by the thoughts and writings of the medieval philosopher Duns Scotus. Scotus developed a theory of haecceity, the property supposed to be in each individual thing that makes it an individual. In this respect, Hopkins's inscape is not too dissimilar. It seems that Hopkins intended the term to mean the unique, distinctive and inherent quality of any given thing, be it a tree, a windhover or indeed a poem itself. He believed that everything in creation could be inscaped. As early as 1868, Hopkins was using the word in his journals. On 12 March 1870, he used 'inscape' as a verb when attempting to describe a sunset accurately:

A fine sunset: the higher sky dead clear blue bridged by a broad slant causeway rising from right to left of wisped or grass cloud, the wisps lying across; the sundown yellow, moist with light but ending at the top in a foam of delicate white pearly and spotted with big tufts of cloud in colour russet between brown and purple but edged with brassy light. [...] if you look at the rest of the sunset you must cover the sun, but today I inscaped them together and made the sun the true eye and ace of the whole, as it is. It was all active and tossing out light and started as strongly forward from the field as a long stone or a boss in the knop of the chalice-stem: it is indeed by stalling it so that it falls into scape with the sky.

For Hopkins, the concept of inscape was an entirely theological one and is firmly rooted in his belief that God the Creator is responsible for the endless diversity that is to be found in the world. As a poet, Hopkins felt the need to record as perfectly as possible the unique beauty to be found in creation.

Instress

The term 'instress' is yet more difficult to describe accurately. According to Hopkins, 'instress' is the energy force that permeates an object and determines its inscape, or uniqueness. This energy is perceptible to human beings because we are made in the image of God and more highly evolved. As a result of being able to perceive the instress of an object or being, we are able to glimpse the inscape of that object. In May 1870, Hopkins noted in his diary:

I do not think I have ever seen anything more beautiful than the bluebell. I know the beauty of our Lord by it. Its inscape is mixed of strength and grace, like an ashtree. The head is strongly drawn over backwards and arched down like a cutwater drawing itself back from the line of the keel.

If one were to apply the terms 'inscape' and 'instress' to this passage, then the instress is the energy given off by the bluebell that allows the poet to perceive its unique beauty, or inscape. 344 | Poems

Critical Commentary: God's Grandeur

1. Content

Hopkins wrote 'God's Grandeur' in 1877, the year of his ordination to the priesthood. Unsurprisingly, the poet's sacramental impulses to praise the natural world and to affirm its intrinsic beauty. Mankind may have defaced and defiled the earth, Hopkins argues, but an eternal freshness, an electric majesty, enlivens nature. In the opening four lines of the octave of this sonnet, Hopkins describes a natural world that is energised by God's presence. Much like an electrical current, this presence becomes momentarily visible in flashes of light 'like shining from shook foil'. In the third line, the poet likens the immanence of God in the world to the 'ooze of oil | Crushed'. These visible and tangible manifestations of God's presence in the world lead the poet to ask a profound question:

Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

In other words, why does mankind refuse to recognise God's authority in the world? In the subsequent quatrain, the poet outlines the spiritual alienation and moral vacuum that have resulted from man's refusal to yield to God's power. As a result of man's obsession with 'toil', 'trade' and acquisitiveness, the physical landscape has been transformed into something unrecognisable and 'bare'. Furthermore, mankind itself has been desensitised or numbed by its failure to look beyond its selfish needs. In the final line of the first stanza, the shoes that cover our feet are seen as a physical symbol of the barrier that now exists between mankind and the natural world:

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil is bare now, nor
can foot feel, being shod.

In the sestet, the poet affirms his belief in nature.

In the sestet, the poet asserts his belief that 'nature is never spent' despite the negative influence of mankind on the natural world. In the second line of the sestet, Hopkins suggests that a deep and powerful sense of renewal is testimony to God's restorative presence, as it permeates the natural world. Evidence of this is seen in the 'dearest freshness deep down things', such as the balance and harmony that can be glimpsed in the opposition between night and day.

The closing lines of the final stanza offer an image of God in the form of the 'Holy Ghost' as it watches over the world. Here, God is likened to a brooding hen that nurtures and protects its creation while at the same time offering a worn and tired world the prospect of rebirth. The exclamatory final words of the poem ('ah! bright wings') capture the poet's genuine awe and joyful apprehension of God's grace in the world.

2. Stylistic Features

'God's Grandeur' is written according to the conventions of the Petrarchan sonnet. This type of sonnet has two parts, the initial eight lines (the octave), which is rhymed abba, abba, and the concluding six lines (sestet), which here uses the rhyme scheme cd, cd, cd. Typically, the Petrarchan sonnet poses a question or problem in the octave and then presents a resolution in the sestet. In this poem, Hopkins poses the problem of the human response to the beauty of nature as created by God. The resolution comes through God's grace, for divine concern preserves the beauty of the world intact despite the destructive impulses of humans. While Hopkins does not rely on sprung rhythm, he does depart from the conventional iambic pentameter that one normally associates with the sonnet.

The poem opens with an interesting metaphor of God's grandeur as an electrical charge that animates the entire planet. Hopkins was fascinated by lightning and he once admitted that 'God's Grandeur' may have been written simply to accommodate the memorable image of God's power surging forward 'like shining from shook foil'. This stunning visual image captures both the sense of God's brilliance and the fact that it can only be glimpsed occasionally. As Hopkins struggles to convey his awareness of God's presence in the world, he turns to another image: the oil oozing from crushed seeds communicates a sense of pressure building up and then being released.

Hopkins was greatly influenced by his study of Old English and Welsh literature and in particular by the alliteration that is a hallmark Anglo-Saxon poetry. In this poem, the letter 'g' is associated with God: 'grandeur', 'greatness', 'gathers' and 'Ghost.' This type of alliteration is repeated throughout the poem and combined with assonance and consonance to create a beautiful, intricate pattern of sound. You should read the following lines out loud in order to appreciate just how accomplished Hopkins is at creating such sound patterns:

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil; It gathers to a greatness, like
the ooze of oil.

In particular, the vowels (the long 'i' of 'shining' and 'like'; the 'a' of 'flame' and 'greatness') and the consonants (the repeated l, sh, f, m, n, s, and g) are echoed and re-echoed in these lines. In fact, such alliteration may have had a philosophical meaning for Hopkins. In his letters to Robert Bridges, he stated that he believed that the universe is built on the unity of God, which finds expression in the diversity of the natural world. Thus, for Hopkins, alliteration became a means of demonstrating the similarity and unifying thread of sound that existed in words of different meanings.

In the fourth line of the poem, Hopkins links the idea of God's power being like an electrical charge to the notion that man has refused to submit to the Creator's authority. The 'rod', a clear symbol of God's authority, also hints at the lightning rod invented some three years before the poem was written:

Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

The metre here is interesting. Departing from his signature sprung rhythm, Hopkins chooses instead to follow a stressed syllable by a stressed syllable. The effect of this is to juxtapose the examples of God's magnificence in the previous lines with a sense of urgency and worry in this line. Furthermore, Hopkins manages to unite the modern and elemental and the sacramental in this series of memorable images. Oil has been used in Catholic sacraments since the earliest days of the Church. Traditionally, lightning has been viewed as a manifestation of God's power in the universe, yet the Victorians were fascinated by science and in particular man's ability to create electrical currents. Rhythm and metre combine in the next line and work to create an onomatopoeic sense of the trudge and toil that have contributed to man's present state of spiritual deprivation. The words 'have trod, have trod' combine with the sound of the word 'Generations' to capture the cadence of plodding footsteps.

/ ~ | / ~ | / ~ | / ~ | / ~ |

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod

Here the iambic plodding at the end is achieved because of the disturbed metre in the first two feet of the line. Hopkins also borrowed from the musical term counterpoint. This effect is reinforced in the repetitive sounds of 'seared', 'trade', 'bleared', 'smeared', 'toil' and 'soil'.

The volta, or change of direction in the sonnet, occurs in the sestet. Here Hopkins asserts that for all man's obsession with material gain and endless toil, God's presence in the universe can never be diminished. In an interesting move, God is seen as a maternal figure that broods over the world. This is in sharp contrast to the series of predominantly masculine images that dominate the octave. Other critics have pointed out that the restorative image of the sun rising in the east points to the origins of the Church in the eastern Mediterranean, whereas the darkness associated with the sunset may be linked to the growth of Protestantism in the West. Whatever the case, this is a profoundly thought-provoking poem that in many ways is even more relevant today than it was when Hopkins first wrote it.

The questions surrounding the world's beauty and its divine origins were pressing ones for Hopkins, who was a talented artist and musician as well as a poet. Given that so many of Hopkins's poems on the course explore the notion of God's immanence in the world, you may wish to mention 'God's Grandeur' in any essay on Hopkins that you are asked to write. If you are including 'God's Grandeur' in a paragraph, try to bear the following points in mind.

- a.** By celebrating the beauty of the natural world as an expression of God's power and 'grandeur', Hopkins felt free to reconcile his religious faith with his love of nature. In 'God's Grandeur', this theme is developed with a great technical virtuosity to create a passionate poem that is somehow both a warning and a reassurance.
- b.** The language of this poem - with its heavy repetition, alliteration and internal rhymes - exemplifies Hopkins's style in general. Themes and sound patterns coalesce as the words themselves strive to imitate the wearying, deadening effect of demeaning materialism.
- c.** Once again, Hopkins makes use of the sonnet form. In this case, however, he uses the Petrarchan sonnet. Much like other Petrarchan sonnets,

'God's Grandeur' poses a problem in the octave and presents the reader with a resolution in the sestet.