Felix Randal

POEM TEXT

Felix Randal the farrier, O is he dead then? my duty all ended,
Who have watched his mould of man, big-boned and hardy-handsome
Pining, pining, till time when reason rambled in it, and some
Fatal four disorders, fleshed there, all contended?

Sickness broke him. Impatient, he cursed at first, but mended
Being anointed and all; though a heavenlier heart began some
Months earlier, since I had our sweet reprieve and ransom
Tendered to him. Ah well, God rest him all road ever he offended!

This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears.
My tongue had taught thee comfort, touch had quenched thy tears,
Thy tears that touched my heart, child, Felix, poor Felix Randal;

How far from then forethought of, all thy more boisterous years,
When thou at the random grim forge, powerful amidst peers,
Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal!

SUMMARY

Is Felix Randal, the young man who makes horseshoes, really dead? Are priestly duties really over for me—the person who watched Felix, a strong and handsome young man, cry and cry, until he finally was driven mad by his illness, which took hold of him and put him in great turmoil?

He was broken by his sickness. At first, he was impatient and angry about the prospect of death, but he improved when I anointed him with holy oil and so forth. Even before the anointment, he had started to turn towards God as a result of our lovely relationship. Oh well, may God forgive him for any sins he committed!

Taking care of the sick makes us love them more, and vice versa. Felix, my words helped you find solace, and my touch calmed your tears—while your tears moved me deeply, my child, poor Felix.

You would never have thought this could happen back in your stronger, louder days, when you were in your element: working hard in your dark farrier's workshop, respected by all those who worked with you, you who produced such beautiful and dependable horseshoes for the draft horses!

THEMES

RELIGIOUS HEALING AND COMFORT

"Felix Randal" explores the relationship between a priest and a young man—the Felix Randal of the title—who has recently died. When the speaker learns of Felix's death, he reflects on his role as a spiritual guide and friend to the young man in his final days. Through this, the poem explores how religion may act as source of comfort and solace to the dying—and particularly how religion can help someone come to terms with dying young. The poem also implies that the healing power of religion isn't a one-way street, as the speaker is deeply affected by his experiences with Felix Randal and finds purpose of his own in providing spiritual guidance.

The start of the poem makes clear that the speaker has been acting in an official capacity—that is, as an emissary of the church. He talks of his "duty" being over now that the young man has died, a turn of phrase that emphasizes the importance of spiritual comfort to the dying. This, the word "duty" implies, is the priest's *purpose* and something the dying *need*.

At the same time, the word "duty" might feel a bit cold and distant—perhaps *too* official and impersonal. Yet as the speaker goes on to discuss the effects that his counsel and spiritual authority had on Felix Randal during his final days, it becomes clear that this "duty" was nothing of the sort.

Understandably, Felix Randal was initially distraught at the prospect of dying young. He is described as "pining" and "impatient," and clearly felt a sense of injustice regarding his bodily suffering. Soon enough, though, the speaker helped Felix Randal develop a "heavenlier heart"—a religious perspective that took him beyond this initial sense of injustice. While Felix Randal was angry with his bodily reality, the speaker taught him to look beyond the limits of his physical existence. The poem, then, implies that religion offers the sick a unique yet important form of comfort. According to the speaker's account, religion

was able to tangibly improve the young man's final days by offering him a sense of peace and acceptance.

The poem also shows that the relationship between priest and his spiritual patient does not go solely in one direction. It's clear that providing religious care to Felix Randal has had a profound effect on the speaker himself. The dying man's tears—borne of both sorrow and acceptance—"touched" the speaker's heart. The poem thus implies that the speaker's religious authority is in part based on his own *humanity*—that is, his ability to empathize with the dying man's spiritual and physical anguish.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LIFE AND DEATH

"Felix Randal" reflects the idea that death come at any time, for anyone—no matter how young or strong. Though much of the poem concerns the more spiritual aspects of dying (and the priest's role in preparing someone for death), the poem also more simply suggests that the dead should be remembered and celebrated for who they were in life. Through its remembrance of Felix Randal, it also subtly urges an appreciation for youth and vitality, given that death is inevitable.

Felix Randal is struck down by disease (probably tuberculosis) when he is still an impressive specimen of a man, and the poem makes a point of emphasizing his physical strength. He was "big-boned" and "hardy-handsome," admired by his peers for his work as a farrier—someone who makes horseshoes (which is intense and arduous labor).

Despite the man's youth and physical health, however, "[s]ickness" eventually "broke him." The poem thus reminds the reader that death can strike at anyone, anytime. As the poem acknowledges, death often feels like a remote possibility (it was something "far from" the young man's thoughts), but Felix Randal's death shows that no-one is safe from its reach.

The poem doesn't only emphasize the *tragedy* of death, however, as the speaker points out that "seeing the sick" makes the living love them more, and vice versa. Knowledge of death, the poem implies, makes life seem all the more precious, and shows how interpersonal relationships with others are brief but brilliant gifts. Subtly, then, the poem implores the reader to value what they already have, to appreciate their world before its gone (or, more accurately, before they themselves leave it).

The speaker makes a point of ending on a powerful image of strength and vitality: Felix Randal at his most alive and vibrant. He is depicted putting the finishing touches to the "bright and battering sandal[s]" (horseshoes) of a "great grey drayhorse," a horse used for carrying heavy loads. This is the young man in his element, using his own skill and strength to enable another living creature to move through its own life more powerfully and purposefully.

Felix Randal, in death, becomes an affirmation of life itself—vibrant, bright, and powerful. And in a sense, Felix Randal does this for the speaker too. In the last months of Felix Randal's life, the two men embrace the emotions surrounding death without flinching, perhaps suggesting that this, though difficult, is the best way to approach death: with open eyes and an open heart.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-8
- Lines 12-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

Felix Randal the farrier, O is he dead then?

The first stanza establishes two things: that someone named Felix Randal had died, and the nature of the relationship between Felix Randal and the speaker, a priest. The poem is generally viewed as being autobiographical, with the speaker closely linked to Hopkins—who was in fact a Jesuit priest. (Hopkins changed the surname of the real-life Felix, however—more on that at the end of this analysis!).

The poem opens with a question that seems strangely casual, and perhaps suggests something about how priests are expected to behave. That is, it's not *immediately* clear that Felix Randal's death has had any major effect on the speaker—as though he is expected to maintain a kind of professional spiritual distance from his flock (his community), and can't make any great display of emotion (though he may feel pain inside).

But the way that the speaker phrases the first part of this question—"Felix Randal the farrier"—hints at the speaker's admiration for the dead young man. This type of description, in which a person's name is linked to something about them (e.g., a particular quality, like "Alexander the Great", or, as in this case, their occupation), is known as an epithet. This epithet conveys a kind of purity—that is, Felix Randal was such a good farrier (a blacksmith that shoes horses), that it's reasonable to define him by his work. That said, this could also be the speaker's way of specifying exactly who it is that has just died—Felix Randal *the farrier* (as opposed, perhaps, to some other person in his care, e.g., John Smith *the tailor*).

Though the reader doesn't yet know that Felix Randal was a strong young man, cut down in his prime, the alliteration, consonance, and assonance in this description hint at his impressive physical condition prior to death—"Felix Randal the

farrier." Try saying this out loud; there is something noticeably strong, robust and even proud about the sound of these words.

LINES 1-2

my duty all ended,
Who have watched his mould of man, big-boned and hardy-handsome

The poem immediately follows its first rhetorical question with another. In this longer question, which runs from just after the question-mark caesura in line 1 to the end of the stanza (the next question mark in line 4), the reader learns more about the relationship between the two men—the speaker and Felix Randal. This section makes it clear that they got to know one another through the speaker's official "duty" as a priest. The speaker was tasked with helping Felix Randal come to terms with his impending death. Now that the priest's duty is "all ended," this poem offers a space for meditation on what this unusual relationship means to him.

It's easy for contemporary readers to get tripped up by Hopkins's grammar and syntax (his arrangement of words and phrases). When the speaker says "Who have watched his mould of man" in line 2, he isn't asking a question of the poem's audience—as in, "who has had a similar experience to me?" The "who" applies to the speaker himself, and what follows in the rest of the stanza is an account of his personal experiences with Felix Randal. He is asking—though, of course, he already knows the answer—if he no longer has any duties towards Felix Randal now that the latter is dead. In this discussion, the poem establishes the Felix Randal's physical prowess in life *and* the way that his illness—and knowledge of approaching death—affected him.

Line 2, then, contains the speaker's observations of Felix Randal's physical attributes. He describes Felix Randal as a "mould of man," which is a metaphor. Blacksmiths (and other craftsmen) sometimes use moulds to create their objects. The mould is a kind of pure, essential form, expressing something idealistic about the object that is to be made. This metaphor further implies that there was a kind of perfection—or realisation of perfection—in Felix Randal's earthly body. This physical strength, which the speaker clearly found attractive, is restated by the two alliterative phrases that appear in the same line. Felix Randal was "big-boned," and "hardy-handsome," the prominence of these sounds conveying the impressive physical presence that Felix Randal once had.

LINES 3-4

Pining, pining, till time when reason rambled in it, and some
Fatal four disorders, fleshed there, all contended?

Lines 3 and 4 are a continuation of the rhetorical question begun after the first question-mark in line 1. The speaker asks if his priestly duties towards Felix Randal are now finished now that the young man as dead. Of course, the speaker knows the answer—the question serves to express the speaker's disbelief that the man has actually died, even though he knew full well that he would. In other words, though death can strike at anytime, it's still shocking when it does.

Lines 3 and 4 work as a kind of overview of Felix Randal's last few months before death. Though he was a strong young man, knowledge of his coming death made him "pin[e]." To pine is to suffer through longing, and to express this suffering. The enjambment from line 2 to line 3 places extra emphasis on "[p]ining," which is typically associated with a broken heart (in the romantic sense)—as in "Mary still pines for John even though he died a long time ago."

But Felix Randal's pining is different—he already, perhaps, looked back nostalgically on the life he led, a life that he could never return to. Perhaps he was also probably grieving for the future that was now never to be. The immediate repetition (specifically epizeuxis) of "Pining, pining" suggests the depth of this pain, made especially hard to bear through the knowledge that nothing could be done about it. Notice how the repetition of the word places extra emphasis on its sound, giving the line an understandably whiny quality.

What follows the repetition of "pining" suggests that Felix Randal's illness took a heavy toll on his mental state. The real-life Felix, by whom this poem is most likely inspired, died of tuberculosis (frequently referred to as "consumption" in those days), a disease which can cause psychosis. Over time, says the speaker, "reason rambled in [his body]," a phrase that sounds all the more tragic given that the speaker has made it clear that Felix Randal's body seemed so strong and powerful. "Rambl[ing]" is probably meant here in the sense of talking incoherently. This emphasizes the power of death as a destroyer—firstly of Felix Randal's mental state (in spite of his physical strength), and then of his life itself. Of course, it was the speaker's duty to aid the first problem (he could do nothing about the second!) through his religious authority and understanding, and the poem turns to this subject in the following stanza.

For now, though, the speaker summarizes Felix Randal's death, saying that "Fatal four disorders, fleshed there [in Felix's body], all "contended." Here, the speaker is probably alluding to the four humors, a medical system that dates back to the ancient Greeks. A healthy body was thought to require the balance between four bodily substances: black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm. This theory was largely discredited by the time the poem was composed, so this could be a classical reference used for dramatic/poetic effect, depicting the four humors as fighting one another in Felix Randal's body.

Alternatively, the "four disorders" could be a reference to a more theological idea—the four wounds of original sin. Without going too deeply into what is a complicated idea, the four wounds are aspects of human behavior that make humanity act in ways that are not in accordance with God's original plan.

Either way, Felix Randal is depicted as a man who was in turmoil—both physically and mentally.

LINES 5-8

Sickness broke him. Impatient, he cursed at first, but mended
Being anointed and all; though a heavenlier heart began some
Months earlier, since I had our sweet reprieve and ransom
Tendered to him.

Line 5 marks the start of the second stanza, though this stanza is linked with the first. Together, the first eight lines form the sonnet's octet. In these lines, the speaker talks in greater detail about his relationship with Felix Randal during the dead man's final living months. The speaker recounts how he was able to offer spiritual comfort to Felix Randal as the latter man came to terms with his death.

First, though, the speaker makes one of the simplest statements in the entire sonnet: "Sickness broke him [Felix Randal]." While, technically speaking, this is a metaphor, it's a very down-to-earth one. The idea that Felix Randal was *broken* by death relates to his practical vocation as a farrier of horses (someone who makes and fits horseshoes). Like a broken horseshoe, he needed mending—but his body was beyond repair. The /k/ consonance here—"Sickness" and "broke"—sticks unpleasantly in the mouth, gesturing towards Felix Randal's ill health. The caesura that immediately follows this short sentence makes it sound very final—Felix Randal is broken, and he isn't coming back.

After this caesura, the poem tells the story of Felix Randal's last months in chronological order. Understandably, he "cursed at first," knowing that he was going to die. But though his body could not be mended, Felix Randal was open to a more divine kind of repair. The speaker, in his role as the local priest, had to help Felix prepare his spirit for the death of his body.

In the Catholic Church, to which, as a Jesuit, Hopkins belonged, preparation for death is made through the Last Rites. These usually occur in three stages. The first of these is Confession, in which the dying person confesses their sins—the poem doesn't mention this stage. Instead, it refers first to the Anointing of the Sick. In this ritual, a priest anoints the sick person with holy oil on their forehead and hands. It is, of course, a somewhat intimate situation, and certainly an uncommon one. Accordingly, its mention here attests to a kind of special bond between the speaker and Felix Randal, between priest and spiritual patient. The reference to anointment is accompanied by soft /n/, /m/, and /s/ consonance throughout the stanza:

[...] but mended
Being anointed and all; though a heavenlier heart began some
Months earlier, since I had our sweet reprieve and ransom
Tendered to him.

These sounds are placed throughout these lines with care and attention, almost in honor of the strange yet loving relationship between the two men. It's as though the speaker talks quietly because he doesn't want to disturb Felix Randal even though he is, of course, dead.

After "all" in line 6, the speaker explains that Felix Randal had actually started to "mend[]" (in a spiritual sense) earlier than the anointment. Through conversations with the speaker, he developed a "heavenlier heart"—in other words, an acceptance of, and perhaps even anticipation for, his move from life to whatever comes next. The alliteration represents Felix Randal's prior physical strength, and, perhaps, at the same time, the breathlessness he may have developed through disease.

The enjambment between these lines allows the poem to flow easily, and the rhyme between "some" and "ransom" is unobtrusive. This gives the impression of brief comfort, echoing the short-lived but vital assistance that the speaker was able to offer to Felix Randal. The use of "our" in line 7 most likely refers to the church as an institution, or a kind of community of believers. The speaker states that he was able to "Tender[]" "ransom" to the young man before the latter died. This metaphor possibly suggests that the priest was able to give him something that had been stolen from by his illness—perhaps the ability to view death from a spiritual perspective, or, more simply, comfort and even happiness.

LINE 8

Ah well, God rest him all road ever he offended!

After the caesura in line 8 (following "him"), the speaker expresses acceptance of Felix Randal's death. In doing so, he also asks that God grant Felix Randal forgiveness for his earthly sins. The "Ah well" here gently suggests that, though Felix Randal is dead, this event should be put into a wider spiritual context. Felix Randal may have departed his earthly body but, if the speaker's religion is to be believed, his soul will love in.

It's remarkable how the poem handles this idea gently and non-dogmatically, expressing it as part-belief and part-hope. The direct appeal to God shows that there is a kind spiritual structure at work here. The speaker administers to his flock (his community) during their dying days, but after that he gives way to the greater spiritual authority of God.

Put simply, the speaker wishes Felix Randal comfortable passage to the afterlife, and freedom from earthly cares. "Rest him all road" borrows vocabulary and diction from Northern England—the poem was inspired by Hopkins's experiences in Liverpool, a northern city—gesturing at the use of "anyroad" to mean "anyway." In other words, whatever Felix Randal's troubles were in his short life, let them be over now. Of course, this also works as a reference to Felix Randal's job as a farrier (someone who makes and fits horseshoes). It was his skill to

enable horses (and their riders) to travel effectively over long distances, and it is now Felix Randal himself who has to make a significant journey.

LINE 9

This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears.

Line 9 marks the volta—or turn—in the poem's sonnet form. A volta often represents a change in direction, offering the reader a kind of commentary on what has been presented in the octet (the eight lines that came before). Here, it *looks* as if the poem is widening out to talk about sickness more generally, rather than just Felix Randal. But this is only maintained for line 9, with the speaker quickly switching back to reflections on his own experience with the dead young man.

Line 9, then, expresses the idea that ill health presents a kind of lesson. It "endears" the sick to the healthy/living, meaning that it makes the latter feel affection and warmth towards the former. This is reciprocated through sick people's appreciation for those who care for them. Ultimately, it can"endear" *both* the dying and the healthy to life itself, serving as a reminder that life is short and that death can strike at any time. The repetition of "endears" (known as diacope) represents this two-way relationship. It's also worth noting how the line is full of sibilance, creating a hushed, whispery tone:

> This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears.

This hushed sound lends the line a sense of quiet, dignified profundity, and could almost be uttered by someone drawing their dying breaths. The chiasmus here—"endears them to us, us too it endears"—reiterates that the healthy have something to offer the sick (care, and in this case, spiritual comfort), and the sick in turn have something to teach the healthy (the briefness of life itself).

LINES 10-11

My tongue had taught thee comfort, touch had quenched thy tears,
Thy tears that touched my heart, child, Felix, poor Felix Randal;

Lines 10 and 11 are the point in which the poem is most personal—and the speaker at his most emotional. In two lines packed full of tender feelings, the speaker sums up the relationship between himself and Felix Randal.

The speaker explains how the two-way endearment (mutual affection) between the sick and the healthy played out in his time with the dying young man. While the speaker was able to offer comforting thoughts and "touch" to Felix Randal, Felix Randal's tears moved the speaker's "heart."

The speaker is a knowledgeable priest, and so was working in a primarily official capacity based on his ability to offer an authoritative religious perspective. But he is also, of course, a human being, and there is a strong sense here that what he gained from Felix Randal was as important as what he was able to offer. It's well documented that Hopkins sometimes found priesthood extremely lonely, so perhaps this section speaks to a kind of friendship too.

These lines are heavy on metaphors, though they are very familiar:

> My tongue had taught thee comfort, touch had quenched thy tears,
> Thy tears that touched my heart, child, Felix, poor Felix Randal;

The first phrase is equal parts synecdoche, metonymy, and personification. That is, the speaker's tongue stands in for the whole of himself (synecdoche), but also for his language (metonymy), which expressed complicated religious ideas in a way that is relatable and, as stated, here, "comfort[ing.]" The tongue teaches (personification) these comforts to Felix Randal.

In the second phrase, the speaker states that his "touch [] quenched [Felix Randal's] tears." This "touch" was probably just a hand to the forehead. "Quenched" is the metaphor here—and could relate either to thirst (the more likely option) or to fire. The speaker's compassion, expressed physically, stems the flow of tears, and allows Felix Randal to gain a degree of control over his emotional state. These tears are in turn personified, touching the speaker's "heart" (another common synecdoche-metonymy hybrid). The speaker's heart is, of course, a physical part of him, but it also stands for his capacity to feel.

The speaker then once again refers to Felix Randal by name: "child, Felix, poor Felix Randal." The "child" is not literal, but relates to the paternalistic nature between priest (priests are commonly referred to as "father") and spiritual patient. This is also, in a much more general sense, a metaphorical relationship, in that the priest's fatherly role with his flock (his community) represents God's care and concern for humankind more generally. The repetition of "Felix" (specifically diacope) is gentle and tender—as are the multiple caesurae and the adjective "poor."

LINES 12-14

How far from then forethought of, all thy more boisterous years,
When thou at the random grim forge, powerful amidst peers,
Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal!

The poem's final three lines are the second half of the poem's sestet. Here, the speaker ends on an image of Felix Randal in his prime, subtly arguing that the dead should be remembered for their vitality in life.

Remember, the speaker already closely linked Felix Randal's identity to his occupation right at the beginning of the poem. Felix Randal's work as a farrier (someone who makes and fits horseshoes) stands in for his vigor and strength because, of course, both are required to do the job well. Though the poem has focused on Felix Randal's final months, the closing emphasis is on his "more boisterous years," when he was a kind of force of nature—young, respected, and physically powerful. Line 12 contrasts these two very different times—Felix Randal in sickness and Felix Randal in health—expressing a quiet disbelief that they both concern the same person.

The closing image, then, is of his work as a farrier. On the one hand, it depicts a typical day in Felix Randal's life. He is in his workshop ("forge"), making/reparing ("fettl[ing]") horseshoes for a horse. The assonance, consonance, and alliteration in these lines are intentionally prominent:

> How far from then forethought of, all thy more boisterous years,
> When thou at the random grim forge, powerful amidst peers,
> Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal!

There is a lot to unpack here, but it's worth noting the general effect of all of these sounds. They recreate the atmosphere of a blacksmith's workshop—the clang of metal on metal, the hissing heat of the furnace, and so on. Everything here suggests the need for physical strength and skill—the sounds are carefully placed, as though they have been intentionally shaped (which, of course, they have!). In this way, then, the poetic process through the crafting of sound mirrors the blacksmith's process in the crafting of metallic objects.

Of course, the reader already knows that Felix Randal used to have such physical prowess in great supply. More specifically, the sound seem to intensify everything that speaker mentions—the forge seems hotter, Felix Randal seems more respected (the /p/ sound in line 13), the horse seems even "great[er]" (as in large and strong, depicted by the /gr/ alliteration), and, finally, the horseshoe made by Felix Randal seems even more perfect, sturdy, and reliable (the two strong /b/ sounds at the end).

But the closing image is not *just* a depiction of Felix Randal in his element. It's more transformative than that, going beyond the specific historical and geographical location of Felix Randal's life and death to express something more essential and spiritual. The rhyme between "Randal" in line 11 and "sandal" at the end of the poem is crucial to this effect (and offers a tempting explanation as to why Hopkins's opted to change the real-life Felix's surname).

"Sandal" is a more striking word than "horseshoe," and carries with it connotations of Ancient Greece and Rome. Suddenly, the "great grey drayhorse" is not just one specific horse, but a kind of mythical creature, in turn casting a kind of mythological light on Felix Randal himself. The rhyme between "Randal" and "sandal," which could easily have seemed forced and pretentious, in fact embodies the dead man's strong and vital relationship with his physical labor, signalling a kind of perfection—both in the man himself, and in what he was able to produce. Ultimately, then, the poem ends on a note of tribute and celebration—made all the more poignant by the tenderness of what has come before.

SYMBOLS

HORSES AND HORSESHOES

Felix Randal was a farrier—someone who makes and fits horseshoes. The poem creates a strong bond between the man and his occupation, signalled by the speaker's use of epithet—"the farrier"—in the first line. The poem thus closely associates Felix Randal himself with the symbolic connotations of his job. Broadly speaking, in the poem horses and horseshoes represent vitality, strength, and youthful vigor—all of which Felix Randal possessed before becoming ill.

For one thing, horses are powerful, muscular, and graceful creatures—qualities also evoked in the speaker's description of Felix Randal in line 2. The speaker even calls him a "mould of man," perhaps alluding to the molds that would be used to create metal horseshoes and further linking the young man to his work.

Horses are also traveling animals. The "great grey drayhorse" mentioned in line 14 would have been a cart horse, helping people transport goods (or even other people) to far-flung places. There is another symbolic idea here, then; travel is a kind of transition between one place and the next, which here maps onto Felix Randal's journey from life to death (and, perhaps, to the afterlife).

While Felix Randal was a skilled craftsman who helped horses to travel more comfortably and reliably, the poem depicts him needing help to prepare for his *own* final trip. Nevertheless, it's for his skill that the speaker believes Felix Randal should be remembered. The final image—"the bright and battering sandal" (another reference to a horseshoe)—is a symbol of achieved perfection that takes on almost mythical properties. That is, the horseshoe is not just any horseshoe, but a perfect one—and a potent symbol of Felix Randal's once-vibrant life-force.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "farrier"
- **Line 2:** "mould of man"

- **Line 8:** "all road"
- **Lines 13-14:** "When thou at the random grim forge, powerful amidst peers, / Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal!"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is very common throughout Gerard Manley Hopkins's poetry, and "Felix Randal" is no exception. Generally speaking, this poem uses alliteration to intensify its images—to make them more vivid and lively on the page and to the ear.

The first example of alliteration is in the poem's opening line: "Felix Randal the farrier." This type of description uses what is known as an epithet, in which a person's name is linked to something defining about them, like their occupation or a particular trait (e.g., Alfred the Great). In this case, the alliteration makes the bond between name—Felix—and job—farrier—extra strong, as though in tribute to the nature of this work itself. That is, a farrier (someone who makes and fits horseshoes), has to create strong, dependable objects—reliable joins between different pieces of metal and, of course, between the horseshoe and the horse's hooves. The strong sonic link between "Felix" and "farrier," then, not only links the dead man to a picture of him as a strong worker but also relates to the kind of quality work he had to produce.

Three examples of alliteration in line 2 also support this idea of Felix Randal as a strong, vigorous young man. The speaker wants the reader to get an idea not just of the tragedy of Felix Randal's death, but of the way he was once so physically impressive, so vibrantly alive. "Mould of man, big-boned and hardy-handsome" ring out bold and clear, representing Felix Randal's once-impressive physicality.

Later in the stanza, alliteration is associated with Felix Randal's deteriorating condition, implying that a new kind of strength—the disease's—started to win out over Felix's own: "reason rambled [...] Fatal four disorder, fleshed there."

In the second stanza, the speaker describes how, in his role as priest, he was able to help Felix come to terms with his imminent death. The light, lovely sound of "heavenlier heart," which is what Felix developed through conversation and contact with the speaker, indicates a turn towards sacred and spiritual comfort. The gentle sibilance of "some," "since," and "sweet" in lines 6-7 give the reader a sense of the tenderness with which the speaker treated Felix Randal.

Interestingly, though, the /s/ carries different connotations in line 9 (working with the internal consonance found in the line). Here, there is almost *too much* of the /s/ sound, conveying a kind of sickliness, with the poem's voice reducing to a sibilant whisper to suggest the physical difficulty Felix Randal faced in his dying days:

> This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears.

The rest of the stanza features prominent /t/ alliteration that contributes to an atmosphere of tenderness that is not without its suggestion of physical pain:

> My tongue had taught thee comfort, touch had quenched thy tears,
> Thy tears that touched [...]

Finally, alliteration works in harmony with assonance and consonance in the poem's closing lines to create a vivid image of Felix Randal in his prime—hard at work in his blacksmith's workshop, making and fitting horses shoes for a "great grey drayhorse":

> How far from then forethought of, all thy more boisterous years,
> When thou at the random grim forge, powerful amidst peers,
> Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal!

The sounds here conjure the atmosphere of the workshop, which, of course, would have been full of loud noises. But, as mentioned at the start of this analysis, the sounds also work to intensify what's being described. That is, alliteration makes Felix seems *more* "powerful amidst [his] peers," the horse *more* "great [and] grey,"—and the "bright and battering" sandal more perfect.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Felix," "farrier," "dead," "duty"
- **Line 2:** "mould," "man," "big-boned," "hardy-handsome"
- **Line 3:** "Pining, pining," "reason rambled"
- **Line 4:** "Fatal four," "fleshed"
- **Line 6:** "heavenlier heart," "some"
- **Line 7:** "since," "sweet," "reprieve," "ransom"
- **Line 8:** "Tendered to," "rest," "road"
- **Line 9:** "seeing," "sick," "to," "too"
- **Line 10:** "tongue," "taught," "comfort," "touch," "quenched," "tears"
- **Line 11:** "tears," "touched"
- **Line 12:** "far from," "forethought"
- **Line 13:** "grim," "forge," "powerful," "peers"
- **Line 14:** "fettle," " ," "for," "great grey," "bright," "battering"

ALLUSION

There are two allusions in "Felix Randal." The first, while obvious in the sense that it is easy to spot, is up for debate in terms of what it actually alludes *to*.

In line 4, the speaker describes "four disorders" fighting one another within Felix Randal's body, leading to his death. There are two main schools of thought about this reference. It could refer to the Four Humors, which is a medical system/philosophy that governed western medicine for centuries. The Four Humors theory of health (both physical and mental) dates back to ancient Greece and claims that the body has four main substances: blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm. According to this (now discredited) theory, an imbalance of these substances causes a vast range of diseases and illnesses. The theory was no longer in use around the time of the poem's composition, but perhaps its link to the Classical Age appealed to Hopkins. This is possibly supported by the way that the poem seems to reach beyond its time-setting to something more mythical/classical in the final line.

Alternatively, this allusion could relate more to the speaker's role as a priest. Perhaps the "four disorders" are the four "wounds" described by the 14th-century Biblical scholar Thomas Aquinas. These are human characteristics that have their root in the Fall—the banishment of humanity from the Garden of Eden. Essentially, these four faults—ignorance, malice, moral weakness, and uncontrollable desire—prevent people from maintaining an authentic spiritual perspective. Perhaps, then, this allusion speaks to the way that the speaker helped Felix Randal come to a more developed spiritual understanding based on the Christian faith. On balance, the Four Humors theory seems more likely.

The other allusion in the poem is to the speaker's role as priest. The speaker engaged with Felix Randal in an official capacity, having been tasked with administering the Last Rites to the dying young man. Line 6 makes specific reference to the second stage of this Catholic Ritual, known as the Anointment of the Sick. This refers to the application of holy oil to the sick individual's forehead and palms. "Child," in line 11, also makes reference to the paternalistic relationship between priest and the people they look after. Priests are often referred to as "father," and this father-child dynamic is in part a kind of symbol for the relationship between God and humankind.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "Fatal four disorders"
- **Line 6:** "anointed"
- **Line 11:** "child"

ASSONANCE

Assonance occurs throughout "Felix Randal." Despite this, and surprisingly by Hopkins's standards, it isn't an especially prominent feature. Generally speaking, the assonance that occurs is quite natural in sound and doesn't draw too much attention to itself. Sometimes, though, assonance intensifies the poem's images and ideas.

One important example is in line 4:

> Fatal four disorders [...]

These vowels sounds are noisy and boisterous, signalling the way the "four disorders" fought a kind of battle in Felix Randal's body—and ultimately killed him.

Assonance in line 5, the first of the second stanza, subtly suggests the futility of Felix Randal's anger. The internal rhyme (created through both assonance and consonance) at once turning up the volume on his cursing and making it sound a bit silly:

> Sickness broke him. Impatient, he cursed at first [...]

Perhaps the most significant examples of assonance, however, occur in the poem's final three lines:

> How far from then forethought of, all thy more boisterous years,
> When thou at the random grim forge, powerful amidst peers,
> Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal!

The sounds highlighted above ring out loud and clear, recreating the noisy, bustling atmosphere of a blacksmith's workshop, working closely with alliteration and consonance. They help form a vivid picture of Felix Randal in his prime, making and fitting horseshoes for a powerful horse. The /a/ sound in "battering" and "sandal" may ring out as being slightly different to some readers, depending on their accent, but the similarity is strong enough to end the poem on a bold note that implies that Felix Randal should be remembered in his prime rather than his dying days.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "dead then," "ended"
- **Line 2:** "mould," "boned"
- **Line 3:** "Pining, pining," "time"
- **Line 4:** "four disorders"
- **Line 5:** "Sickness," "him," "Impatient," "cursed," "first," "mended"
- **Line 6:** "anointed," "some"
- **Line 7:** "Months," "sweet reprieve"
- **Line 8:** "ever," "offended"
- **Line 9:** "This," "seeing," "sick," "endears"

- **Line 10:** “tongue,” “comfort,” “touch”
- **Line 12:** “forethought,” “more,” “boisterous”
- **Line 13:** “forge”
- **Line 14:** “great grey,” “ drayhorse,” “battering sandal”

CAESURA

Caesurae appear frequently throughout "Felix Randal," popping up all but one of the poem's 14 lines. Generally speaking, these mid-line pauses are an important part of the speaker's tone.

The speaker is still puzzling out his reaction to Felix Randal's death. The poem even conjures the illusion that the speaker responds to the death in real-time, signaled by the opening question. The caesurae, then, make the speaker sound hesitant and emotional as he tries to figure out how he feels—in both an official (as priest) and personal (as an individual) capacity. They also help with the control of the poem's overall rhythm.

Of the more specific effects, the first example is right at the start. Notice how the comma after "farrier" in line 1 gives the "O" more of an impact. This could signal the speaker's surprise at hearing of the death, and hint at the way the death moves him deeply.

Later in the stanza (lines 3 and 4), caesurae create a chaotic effect:

> Pining, pining, till time when reason rambled in it, and some
> Fatal four disorders, fleshed there, all contended?

These caesurae suggest Felix Randal's turmoil—the way the physical and mental pains of his illness made him anxious and restless. It's as though the words themselves can't stay still.

The next key example of caesura follows soon after. Notice how the full-stop after "him" in line 5 completely breaks the poem's flow, an effect made all the more the strong by the stanza break that has come just before:

> Sickness broke him. Impatient, he cursed [...]

This underscores the sheer, stark reality of what's happened: Felix Randal is dead.

The other caesurae in lines 5 to 7 allow the poem to construct a long sentence running from "Impatient" to "Tendered to him," having the opposite effect of the caesura at the start of the stanza. These allow the lines to stretch out more freely (working closely with enjambment) and paint a vivid picture of the way Felix Randal was able to find a degree of comfort with the speaker's assistance. The full-stop after "to him" in line 8 mirrors the one in line 5, ending the section in which the speaker discusses Felix Randal's fleeting moments of happiness during his final days. Again, this reiterates that Felix Randal is never coming back:

> Tendered to him. Ah well [...]

Line 9's caesura between "us" and "us" allows the speaker to create a chiasmus to describe the reciprocal relationship between the healthy and the sick. The sick come to appreciate the healthy more, and vice versa, the comma creating a sense of balance and unity. The comma in the following line has a similar effect, while the multiple caesurae in line 11 help the poem reach its emotional peak. That is, they give the speaker's tone a sense of tenderness and near-overwhelming emotion.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “farrier, O,” “then? my”
- **Line 2:** “man, big-boned”
- **Line 3:** “Pining, pining, till,” “it, and”
- **Line 4:** “disorders, fleshed,” “there, all”
- **Line 5:** “him. Impatient,” “, he,” “first, but”
- **Line 6:** “all; though”
- **Line 7:** “earlier, since”
- **Line 8:** “him. Ah,” “well, God”
- **Line 9:** “us, us”
- **Line 10:** “comfort, touch”
- **Line 11:** “heart, child, Felix, poor”
- **Line 12:** “of, all”
- **Line 13:** “forge, powerful”

CONSONANCE

As is typical for a Gerard Manley Hopkins poem, thick consonance appears from start to finish in "Felix Randal." Much of this is also alliteration, for which there is separate entry in this guide. Generally speaking, consonance helps support the poems ideas and images, making them move vivid and/or mirroring some aspect of what is being described.

One significant example of consonance can be found in the second stanza. In the phrase "Sickness broke him"—the short, matter-of-fact sentence that confirms Felix Randal's death—the two hard /k/ sounds stick in the mouth. There's something quite ugly about these consonants that reflects Felix Randal's struggle with illness.

In the same stanza, however, the poem dwells on the brief comfort that the speaker was able to helping the dying man find in his final months. To this end, the poem uses /m/, /n/, /t/, and /s/ sounds throughout lines this section (lines 5-8):

> [...] him. Impatient, he cursed at first, but mended
> Being anointed and all; though a heavenlier heart began some
> Months earlier, since I had our sweet reprieve and ransom
> Tendered to him. [...]

Taken together, the repetitive sounds of the stanza are gentle yet inescapable. The carefully-chosen sounds evoke the speaker's care and tenderness towards Felix Randal, as though anything that sounded harsher might be too disturbing—and out of keeping with the atmosphere between the two men during those final months.

Lines 9-11 maintain this gentleness for the most part, but line 9 features many /s/ and /z/ sounds:

> This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears.

This sibilance gives the line a whispery, hushed quality. This could be interpreted as a way of representing Felix Randal's physical difficulty during his final days—his problems with breathing and speaking. (The real-life Felix, on whom the poem may be based, died from tuberculosis, a disease which primarily affects the lungs.)

Finally, consonance in the last three lines helps to create an image of Felix Randal in his prime—hard at work in his job as a farrier. The thick consonance here helps recreate the atmosphere of a noisy blacksmith's workshop:

> How far from then forethought of, all thy more boisterous years,
> When thou at the random grim forge, powerful amidst peers,
> Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal!

The mixture of consonance and assonance in the final line is especially loud and striking. These sounds make the poem's closing image feel like a kind of epiphany, with Felix Randal's skillfully crafted "sandal" (a horseshoe) representing an almost mythical sense of perfection and achievement.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12
- Line 13
- Line 14

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment appears a few times in "Felix Randal." In the first stanza, enjambment is used to lend dramatic weight to a new word at the start of a line. This happens twice, with "Pining" in line 3 feeling sudden and loud—as though the poem has just burst into tears. The enjambment that follows between lines 3 and 4 sets up "Fatal" as a disconcerting and sudden intrusion on the poem, its abruptness gesturing towards that Felix Randal's life was taken from him all too soon.

Enjambment has a markedly different effect in the second stanza, all of which is enjambed (excluding the break between this stanza and the next). Here, the speaker describes how Felix Randal's condition improved under his (the speaker's) spiritual guidance. Remember, the speaker is a priest and knew Felix Randal through this official capacity. The enjambment allows for one long, soft sentence to unfurl from "Impatient" in line 5 to "to him" in line 8. This sentence speaks of a brief but important comfort and even happiness that Felix Randal was able to find in thoughts of the divine. The gentle but purposeful flow of these lines represents the "heavenlier heart" that the speaker was able to help Felix Randal to find in his last few months.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 2-3:** “hardy-handsome / Pining”
- **Lines 3-4:** “some / Fatal”
- **Lines 5-6:** “mended / Being”
- **Lines 6-7:** “some / Months”
- **Lines 7-8:** “ransom / Tendered”

METAPHOR

Many of the metaphors in the poem relate to Felix Randal's job as a "farrier," or someone who makes horseshoes. In line 2, for example, Felix Randal is described as a "mould of man." A "mould"—or, more commonly "mold"— is an object that can be used to replicate a particular shape (including a horseshoe). A man-shaped "mould" could be used to make numerous man-shaped statues—but they'd all be cast from the original "mould." Being a "mould of man" suggests there is something essential about Felix Randal, as though he represents a kind of ideal physical form. He is, after all, "big-boned" and "hardy-handsome"—seemingly the epitome of masculinity. This idea of him being a "mould" is subtly picked up on by "broke" and "mended" in line 5, as though Felix Randal was a kind of object that could be fixed or destroyed.

The first stanza also contains a minor metaphor in line 3: "when reason rambled in [Felix Randal's body]." This presents Felix Randal's troubled mental state as a kind of incoherent speaker.

Two more metaphors appear in the second stanza. The speaker describes giving Felix Randal spiritual guidance, which returned something to the young man that is hard to define—his comfort,

perhaps. This was the metaphorical "ransom" that the speaker, as a representative of the Catholic Church, "[t]endered," or paid, "to him." Then, at the end of this stanza, "all road" plays on a colloquial northern English expression meaning "anyway," metaphorically referencing the journey of Felix Randal's short life. Of course, reference to travel makes sense given Felix worked as a farrier—someone who makes and fits horseshoes (so that horses can travel effectively).

In lines 10 and 11, the speaker again dives into deeply metaphorical language:

> My tongue had taught thee comfort, touch had quenched thy tears,
> Thy tears that touched my heart, child, Felix, poor Felix Randal;

This section mixes metonymy, personification, and synecdoche. The speaker's "tongue" refers to his religious instruction (metonymy) and to himself as a whole (synecdoche). That is, the speaker was able to assist Felix Randal through his understanding of the Christian faith. Felix Randal's "tears" are then quenched by the speaker's "touch," the latter word probably meaning "affection" more generally. "Tears" stand in for Felix Randal's emotional state in his last few months—when he felt at his worst. These "tears" are then personified, touching the speaker's "heart." The latter word is another hybrid between synecdoche and metonymy, standing in for the speaker as a person *and* relating specifically to his ability to empathise with the dying man.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "mould of man"
- **Line 3:** "when reason rambled in it"
- **Line 5:** "broke," "mended"
- **Lines 7-8:** "ransom / Tendered"
- **Line 8:** "all ," "road"
- **Lines 10-11:** "My tongue had taught thee comfort, touch had quenched thy tears, / Thy tears that touched my heart, child"

REPETITION

Repetition is a subtle but effective device in "Felix Randal." First, look at the way the poem uses the name of its main subject: "Felix Randal." The dead man's name begins the poem, foreshadowing the way that Felix Randal had a great and lasting impact on the speaker's life. It then reappears in line 11:

> Thy tears that touched my heart, child, Felix, poor Felix Randal;

This repetition appears at the poem's emotional height—the point at which the speaker most openly acknowledges the effect that his relationship with Felix Randal had on his own life. The repetition is like the ringing of a bell that marks Felix Randal's passing, and the more the speaker says his name the more its obvious that Felix Randal is gone forever.

The speaker also uses epizeuxis in line 3, with "Pining, pining." This repetition makes it clear that Felix Randal didn't just *pine* about having to die early, but he *pined* and *pined*—he expressed his sadness and anger twice as strongly, frequently, and, ultimately, hopelessly.

The other examples of repetition occur in the third stanza and intensify the speaker's emotion. The antimetabole of line 9 strengthens the idea that there is a reciprocal relationship between the sick and the healthy, with each gaining comfort, understanding, and tender admiration from the other:

> This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears.

Note that this phrase also feature two more kinds of repetition within it in order to create this symmetry: the diacope of "endears" and anadiplosis of "us."

Finally, lines 10-11 features parallelism combined with more antimetabole. Each phrase here follows the same grammatical structure, emphasizing the cause and effect between the speaker's actions and Felix Randal's improvement. The speaker introduces a thing he does and then how that affects Felix Randal:

- His "tongue," or talks/prayers, comforted Randal;
- His "touch," or gentle sympathy, alleviated the young man's fear and sadness.

The parallel structure here then repeats with a slight twist in the third phrase: this time, it's something coming from *Felix Randal* that affects the *speaker*:

- His "tears," or fear and sadness, "touched" the speaker, moving him to gentle sympathy.

The parallelism of the phrases shows how the relationship between the speaker and Felix Randal was a kind of feedback loop of emotion, with both men deeply moved by each other. The anadiplosis in the repetition of "thy tears" and repetition of "touch"/"touched" creates another moment of antimetabole that, in turn, reinforces this close, reciprocal connection:

> [...] touch had quenched thy tears,
> Thy tears that touched my heart [...]

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Felix Randal"
- **Line 3:** "Pining, pining"
- **Line 9:** "endears," "us, us," "endears"
- **Lines 10-11:** "My tongue had taught thee comfort, touch had quenched thy tears, / Thy tears that touched my / heart"
- **Line 11:** "Felix," "Felix Randal"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The opening stanza of "Felix Randal" consists of two rhetorical questions. The first question simply confirms (and informs the reader) that Felix Randal is dead:

> Felix Randal the farrier, O is he dead then?

This could be the read as the expression of surprise, or perhaps the matter-of-fact tone represents an attempt by the speaker to maintain an air of professional, priestly duty—as though, as a priest, he shouldn't be too moved by somebody's death, seeing as he is a kind of ambassador of the Christian afterlife.

The second rhetorical question is more revealing, and lasts from "my duty" in line 1 to the end of line 4. This question provides a general overview of the relationship between the speaker and Felix Randal, while also expressing a subtle sense of disbelief—and perhaps even disappointment—that the speaker will no longer see the other man. The question packs in a lot of information, revealing the speaker's appreciation for Felix Randal's strong physical form. It also outlines how Felix Randal's disease took its toll on his emotional state, making him "pin[e]" for life.

This question, then, marks the end of a difficult but profoundly meaningful period of time, with the speaker presenting it as a question almost as if to test whether it's actually true. It's the speaker's way of asking whether his duty, which he was fulfilling only the other day by providing Felix Randal spiritual comfort and guidance, has truly come to an end. Of course, he knows the answer.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Felix Randal the farrier, O is he dead then? my duty all ended, / Who have watched his mould of man, big-boned and hardy-handsome / Pining, pining, till time when reason rambled in it, and some / Fatal four disorders, fleshed there, all contended?"

VOCABULARY

Felix Randal (Line 1, Line 11) - The poem is generally thought to commemorate the death of Felix Spencer, who was one of Hopkins's parishioners in 1880. The name change might have motivated by the rhyme with "sandal" at the end.

Farrier (Line 1) - A blacksmith who makes, fits, and repairs horseshoes.

Who Have (Line 2) - This isn't the start of a new question, and the speaker isn't asking a group of people if anyone else has had a similar experience. The phrase could have an "I" in front of it, and focuses specifically on the relationship between the speaker and Felix Randal.

Mould (Line 2) - A mold; generally meaning shape/form/style, but could also relate specifically to a hollow object used by black smiths (or in crafts like sculpture) to create other objects.

Hardy-handsome (Line 2) - Strong and attractive.

Pining (Line 3) - Missing/longing for something or someone—with a broken heart.

Rambled (Line 3) - Talked incoherently.

Four disorders (Line 4) - This could be a reference to the four humors (a medical system dating back to ancient Greece) or the four wounds of the Fall (discussed by biblical scholar Thomas Aquinas). This is discussed further in the "allusion" entry in the "Poetic Devices" section of this guide.

Fleshed (Line 4) - Took physical form (in the body).

Contended (Line 4) - Fought with one another.

Mended (Line 5) - Improved, repaired.

Anointed (Line 6) - Blessed with holy oil or water.

And all (Line 6) - A colloquial expression meaning "and everything else."

Reprieve (Line 7) - A cancellation or postponement of pain or punishment.

Ransom (Line 7) - A sum of money paid to release a prisoner/captive.

Tendered (Line 8) - Here this means "paid," but plays on the "tenderness" meaning as well.

All road (Line 8) - Here, Hopkins is playing with northern English dialect. "All road" means "in any which way." He is asking for forgiveness on Felix Randal's behalf for any sins the latter may have committed in life.

Endears (Line 9) - Makes something or someone loved.

Thee (Line 10) - An archaic form of "thee."

Thy (Line 10, Line 11, Line 12) - An archaic form of "your."

Forethought (Line 12) - Predicted.

Boisterous (Line 12) - Noisy and full of life.

Thou (Line 13) - An archaic form of "you."

Random (Line 13) - An old definition meaning with "great force/violence."

Grim (Line 13) - Fierce.

Forge (Line 13) - A blacksmith's workshop, and also the furnace used in that workshop.

Amidst (Line 13) - Amongst.

Peers (Line 13) - Friends and colleagues.

Didst (Line 14) - An archaic form of "did."

Fettle (Line 14) - To make or repair something.

Drayhorse (Line 14) - A big horse used for pulling carts.

Battering (Line 14) - Strong and powerful, relating to the the impact that the horse's hooves will have on the ground beneath.

Sandal (Line 14) - Horseshoe.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Felix Randal" is a Petrarchan sonnet, made up of 14 lines divided into two main sections—the octet (the first eight lines), and the sestet (the final six). This poem makes further divisions by splitting each section in half, making the poem total up as two quatrains followed by two tercets.

These four stanzas serve relatively distinct purposes. The first four lines consist of two rhetorical questions, which confirm Felix Randal's death and hint at the speaker's "duty" during the former's final months. The second half of the quatrain provides an overview of the time that the two men spent together. This outlines how the young Felix Randal struggled at first to come to terms with his impending death, but that he found spiritual comfort—"a heavenlier heart"—through time spent with the speaker.

Line 9 marks the beginning of the poem's sestet. Traditionally, this section is known as the volta—the poem's main shift in direction. Often, the sestet provides a kind of commentary or reframing of what came in the octet. Here, line 9 marks a turn towards a more general discussion of the relationship between the sick and those who care for them. This change in direction isn't sustained, however; instead, the speaker refocuses on Felix Randal specifically in the final sestet, underscoring the fact his death has moved the speaker deeply.

METER

"Felix Randal" employs Gerard Manley Hopkins's distinctive approach to meter, which he called "sprung rhythm." This refers to a metrical approach governed by having the same number of stressed syllables per line alongside a flexible number of unstressed syllables. Usually the first beat in each foot is stressed. Generally speaking, this type of meter is known as *accentual* as opposed to *accentual-syllabic* (meaning it places less importance on the overall amount syllables per line than does, for example, iambic pentameter).

This poem *usually* uses six stressed syllables per line, something called hexameter. The variable amount of unstressed syllables means any two lines in the poem can sound very different from each other, however. Some lines are much longer than others, and some lines also break from this pattern and have more than six stressed beats. All that said, hexameter still marks the overarching meter of the poem.

To see this in action, look at lines 4-6. Some readers may scan a few of the feet here differently, but in general there are six stressed syllables per line with a falling rhythm, moving from stressed to unstressed beats:

> Fatal four disorders, fleshed there, all contended?
> Sickness broke him. Impatient, he cursed at first, but mended
> Being anointed and all; though a heavenlier heart began some

Sonnets usually follow the much stricter meter of iambic pentameter. That the speaker does away with such patterns here reflects his contemplative tone; it is almost as though he is receiving the news of Felix Randal's death, and formulating his response to it, in real time. It makes sense, then, that the meter feels controlled yet fluid, steady yet never rigid.

RHYME SCHEME

"Felix Randal" is a Petrarchan sonnet and uses a tight rhyme scheme. The sonnet is split into two main sections—the octet/octave (the first eight lines) and the sestet (the final six). The rhyme scheme in the first section is typical of the Petrarchan form, and runs:

ABBAABBA

The sestet features the slightly more unusual:

CCDCCD

Generally speaking, the robustness and dependability of the rhyme scheme mirror the speaker's description of the Felix Randal as a once-powerful, physically attractive young man (prior to disease). The line endings ring out loud and clear, though the use of feminine rhymes with unstressed final syllables ensures that the poem isn't *overly* bold in tone (e.g., "ended"/"contended").

The most attention-grabbing rhyme of all is that between "Felix Randal" and "sandal." It's possible that Hopkins changed the name of the real-life Felix—Felix Spencer—to allow for this particular rhyme. "Sandal" here refers to horseshoes. The speaker clearly admired Felix's work ethic, and linking his name with his work ends the poem with a kind of final flourish that celebrate's the young man's skill in life.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Felix Randal" is a priest who provided religious comfort and guidance to the young Felix Randal during the latter's last few months. The poem is at least in part autobiographical; Hopkins, himself a Jesuit priest, played a similar role in the dying days of Felix Spencer, a farrier from the English city of Liverpool.

Though the speaker's relationship with Felix Randal was an official one on behalf of the church, it's clear from the speaker's tone that the two men formed a strong personal bond based on mutual admiration and respect. Over the course of the poem, the speaker makes clear that Felix Randal's final days and death moved him deeply. In this way, the poem suggests spiritual healing and guidance is a two-way street, with religious leaders and their parishioners learning from and enriching the lives of one another.

One other point worth noting is the way the speaker shifts his grammatical position in relation to Felix Randal. At first, he speaks of Felix Randal in the third person—"he," "his," and so on—but by the end he addresses the dead man directly. This supports the idea that the bond between them was strong and personal, not limited to the official duties between priest and parishioner.

SETTING

"Felix Randal" takes place just after the speaker finds out that the title character has died. He even seems to learn about the death in real-time and then takes the reader along with him as he processes his grief.

After the opening rhetorical question, the poem moves through distinct stages. In the rest of the first stanza, the speaker gives a general overview of the time he spent with Felix Randal. In the second, he is more specific, chronologically tracing the events of Felix Randal's final months. Through this, the reader learns that the two men spent a significant amount of time together, and that the speaker was there in his official capacity as priest. There is an intimacy to the way the speaker describes this time that suggests that his meetings with Felix Randal were emotionally charged and tender.

For the most part, the poem doesn't rely on painting a particularly strong sense of place (though colloquial language like "and" and "rest him all road" suggest the north of England). However, this is perhaps how the poem prepares the reader for the ending, which is very much about recreating the atmosphere of a specific location. The speaker closes the poem by depicting Felix Randal in his prime—hard at work in his farrier's workshop. The sound of the poem's last three lines recreates the noisy acoustics of the workshop, and the intensity of this final image suggests that Felix Randal should be remembered for his life—not his death.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

This poem was written in 1880 but not published until 1918, after Gerard Manley Hopkins's death. Though generally grouped in with the Victorian poets based on the time period in which he wrote, Hopkins's poetry was so unusual and original that it's fair to say he was in a category all of his own. Indeed, he hardly published anything during his lifetime, and it was only due to the foresight of his friend and fellow poet, Robert Bridges, that Hopkins's work ever found the light of day. That said, even Bridges found Hopkins's daring use of meter and grammatical dexterity, both of which are on display in "Felix Randal," alienating and hard to understand.

The poem sits somewhere between elegy—a poem that laments someone's death—and a eulogy—a speech or composition that celebrates the life of someone who has recently died. Death, of course, is just about the most popular and enduring subject in poetry, with only love to rival it. The elegiac form has its roots in ancient Greece and Rome, though it did not always directly address death and was also a set of formal/metrical constraints (unlike the modern elegy). Famous poems on the subject of death during Hopkins's era include "In Memoriam A. H. H." by Alfred, Lord Tennyson and "Remember" by Christina Rosetti. For more contemporary takes on the elegiac form, it's worth taking a look at Denise Riley's "A Part Song" (which examines the grief of a parent who has lost a child) and Emily Berry's "Freud's Beautiful Things."

This poem is also a Petrarchan sonnet, a form widely used by the 14th-century Italian poet Francesco Petrarca. Most English-language sonnets use strict iambic pentameter, however, which contrasts with the looser and more unpredictable pattern of sprung rhythm that Hopkins regularly turned to in his work.

Finally, while "Felix Randal" is sure-footed in its belief that the Christian faith can provide comfort to the dying, readers should compare the group of later poems by Hopkins known as the "terrible sonnets" for the way in which they express a more doubtful and anxious relationship to religion.

Historical Context

There is evidence to suggest that "Felix Randal" draws from Gerard Manley Hopkins's own life. Hopkins was not really a poet in his lifetime—in the sense of *publishing* his work—but a priest. He belonged to a religious order known as the Society of Jesus, itself a branch of Roman Catholicism. Members of the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, follow the teachings of Ignatius of Loyola, a Spanish priest and theologian in the 16th century. Jesuits follow a strict code of self-denial and place emphasis on

a process known as contemplation, in which an individual learns to appreciate God's presence in all things.

The idea that the world expresses God's will and creativity directly is known as *immanence*, and is explored in some of Hopkins's most famous poems (e.g., "Pied Beauty" and "God's Grandeur"). "Felix Randal" makes specific reference to a Catholic ritual known as the Last Rites, in which a priest helps a sick or aged individual prepare for death. The second stage of this ritual is mentioned in line 6—the Anointment of the Sick with holy oil, which is placed on the sick person's forehead and hands.

The poem is at least in part inspired by Felix Spencer, a farrier whom Hopkins knew while stationed at the St. Xavier church in Liverpool, a large city in the north of England. The poem was written in 1880, shortly after the death of Felix Spencer from pulmonary tuberculosis. As with the speaker in the poem, Hopkins was tasked with administering the Last Rites to his parishioner.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poet's Life and Work — A valuable resource on Hopkins from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gerard-manley-hopkins)
- The Jesuits in Context — An informative lecture about what distinguishes the Jesuits from other branches of Catholicism. (https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2007/01/15/what-distinguishes-jesuits)
- "Felix Randal" Explored — An interesting article on the poem from the newspaper The Guardian. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2020/aug/24/poem-of-the-week-felix-randal-by-gerard-manley-hopkins)
- A Sprung Rhythm Explainer — A short discussion of Hopkins's metrical innovations. (https://www.britannica.com/art/sprung-rhythm)
- Behind the Scenes With a Farrier — Watch what a day in the life of a farrier looks like. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7r1hMZpfNMM&ab_channel=ustrotting)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS POEMS

- God's Grandeur
- Pied Beauty
- The Caged Skylark
- The Windhover

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