Spring and Fall

POEM TEXT

to a young child

Márgarét, áre you gríeving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leáves like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Ah! ás the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you wíll weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sórrow's spríngs áre the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It ís the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

SUMMARY

Margaret, are you mourning Goldengrove's falling leaves? Can you, with your fresh young mind, care for leaves just as much as you care for people and their concerns? Ah, as your heart gets older, it won't be so sensitive to sights like this after a while; you won't sigh even once for whole worlds of fallen, rotten leaves. But you'll still cry, and you'll know why you're crying. Never mind what we think we're crying about: all our sorrows come from the same place. No one could ever say or think the truth that our hearts hear and our souls intuit. It's the curse that every human is born to face: it's you yourself, Margaret, that you're grieving for.

THEMES

THE INEVITABILITY OF LOSS

"Spring and Fall" observes that coming to terms with death and loss is a central part of life—and a painful one. Tenderly addressing Margaret, a "young child" mourning over falling leaves in autumn, the speaker reflects that "sorrow[]" like this will be with her all her life, just as it is for everyone. Loss, the poem suggests, is the inevitable "blight man was born for," an unavoidable part of the human condition that everyone alive must struggle with.

Margaret happens to be weeping over falling leaves now, but really, the speaker reflects, she's crying about something that she'll cry about her whole life long: the fact that nothing lasts forever. "Sorrow's springs" (that is, sorrow's sources) are the same no matter what age one is; all sorrows come from loss, and loss just can't be avoided.

Even when people aren't consciously grieving, their "ghost[s]" (or spirits) are still haunted by their awareness that everything passes and death is inevitable. They can always feel what's coming. Grown people might have gotten past mourning autumn leaves, but that doesn't mean that they don't have to grapple with the deep sadness of impermanence.

When Margaret cries for the leaves, the speaker reflects, she's thus really crying about the human condition itself. "It is Margaret you mourn for," the speaker tells her—words that suggest more than one kind of grief. Margaret's tears over the leaves are just her first taste of the lifelong pain of change and loss, and she's thus unwittingly crying about how much she'll cry in the future. What's more, she's literally mourning herself without knowing it: she'll die one day, just as the leaves do.

Being human, this poem suggests, means coming to terms with the painful fact that nothing lasts forever. Margaret is grieving this for the first time, but certainly not the last.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15

LOST INNOCENCE AND THE SADNESS OF GROWING UP

The speaker of "Spring and Fall" marvels that Margaret, a little girl, can mourn so deeply for the falling autumn leaves. "As the heart grows older," the speaker reflects, "it will come to such sights colder": adults, in other words, start to grow numb to loss and change. In her "grieving" over a changing landscape and passing time, Margaret is thus also unwittingly mourning her sensitive, receptive, innocent childhood, which will leave her as inevitably as the leaves fall from the trees.

Margaret's grief over the falling leaves feels especially raw because she's just a little kid, still not used to the idea that everything changes. Old enough to understand how beautiful the autumn leaves are, she's also young enough to feel the real pain of losing them.

Adults, the speaker observes, don't feel ordinary losses like

falling leaves anything like as acutely or as poignantly as children do. That's because they've had time to get accustomed to the idea that nothing stays the same forever. Children, however, new to the world and seeing everything "fresh," feel the pain of even the most predictable and natural changes.

As Margaret's "heart grows older," the speaker knows, she won't feel suffer so much over things like falling leaves. But that in itself is a loss! Grieving over the leaves, Margaret is also more alive to their beauty than world-weary adults are. For that matter, by the time Margaret is old enough not to cry when the leaves fall, she'll also be that much closer to the final "fall" of death herself.

Without knowing it, then, Margaret is crying for herself as much as for the leaves. Childhood comes to an end as inevitably as fall follows spring, and everyone who lives must face the sorrow of growing up.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-15

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

Márgarét, áre you gríeving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leáves like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?

"Spring and Fall" opens on a poignant scene. Margaret—a "young child," as the poem's epigraph reveals—is "grieving" over falling autumn leaves in a wood known only as Goldengrove.

Goldengrove's grave, mysterious name paints a picture of trees blazing with golden autumn color: a kind of every-wood, the archetypal forest in fall. But perhaps Goldengrove is also an enchanted place. Its goldenness might encourage readers to picture the kind of trees one can only find in a fairy tale.

Whatever enchantments Goldengrove has, stopping time isn't among them. Even now, it's "unleaving," losing its leaves. Poor Margaret, crying under the branches, seems to see each fallen leaf as a lost friend.

The adult speaker sympathizes, but they also marvel that Margaret can mourn so deeply and gently ask her:

> Leáves like the things of man, you
> With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?

That rhetorical question introduces the heart of the poem. On the one hand, the speaker is amazed that the innocent Margaret, with her "fresh thoughts," can grieve this very ordinary loss. Her youth makes her alive to the fact that this *is* a loss; she grieves the leaves as if they were the "things of man." (And what are those "things of man"? Human things, certainly—perhaps human sufferings, perhaps living people. This is a line we'll return to.)

On the other hand: the speaker is just as amazed that Margaret can *understand* this loss. Both young enough to love the leaves and old enough to mourn them, she's on a painful precipice of human experience. This will be a poem about the cost of being alive: the heartbreaking discovery that nothing lasts forever.

Within the sorrow of these first lines, there's a hint of consolation:

> Márgarét, áre you gríeving
> Over Goldengrove unleaving?

"Unleaving," at first glance, means "losing its leaves." Stay with the word for a moment, though: there's a pun here. "Unleaving" might also mean "never leaving"—in other words, eternal.

Goldengrove, then, is a place where everything is dying. But it's also a place where something *doesn't* die:

- Perhaps the "unleaving" thing here is loss itself: death is deathless, everpresent.
- Perhaps, though, Goldengrove itself is also eternal in some way that Margaret can't quite imagine from here on earth. Gold, after all, doesn't tarnish; because of its undimmable gleam, it's an ancient symbol for anything that's both eternal and precious, from the soul to the heavens.

There's a quiet paradox here. Even as Margaret comes to terms with the idea that everything that lives must die, the poem offers a glint of mysterious hope, like the underside of a leaf catching the sun.

These first lines introduce not just the sorrowful Margaret and the gentle speaker, but Hopkins's characteristic sprung rhythm—an easygoing meter in which lines use a standard number of stresses (four, in this poem), but don't stick to any particular flavor of metrical foot, like the iamb or the trochee. That means that, as long as the lines have those four strong beats, they can use any number of unstressed syllables.

A lot of lines written in sprung rhythm could be read in several different ways, so Hopkins sometimes places accents over words like musical notation, showing readers where to lay the stresses. For instance, he specifies that "Márgarét" should be pronounced with three syllables (MAR-ga-ret), rather than two (MAR-gret).

Here's how this all comes together in lines 3-4:

> Leáves like the things of man, you
> With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?

This gentle, flexible meter marries the natural sounds of everyday speech to a rhythmic pulse, creating verse that grows as organically as a forest.

LINES 5-8

Ah! ás the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;

The speaker recognizes Margaret's grief with a sympathetic sigh. Then, as if lost in thought, they turn aside, sinking into more adult reflections.

As people's "heart[s] grow older," the speaker says, they no longer weep over things like falling leaves. Margaret, too, will grow up one day and no longer "spare a sigh" for "such sights" as Goldengrove unleaving.

This isn't exactly a consoling idea. Grown-ups might not mourn as the leaves fall, but nor can they feel those leaves' beauty and value in quite the same way that Margaret can. Their toughness comes at a steep price.

The melancholy of this situation echoes in the speaker's sounds. Listen to the hushed music of this passage:

> Ah! ás the heart grows older
> It will come to such sights colder
> By and by, nor spare a sigh
> Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;

Here, a whispered sibilant /s/ sounds like the wind blowing away fallen leaves and childlike grief, while the curt /c/ of "come" and "colder" suggests cut-off adult hearts. The internal rhyme of "by and by" with "spare a sigh" creates a swaying, in-and-out rhythm not unlike a sigh itself.

Most of all, though, feel the intense alliteration and consonance of "worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie." Those quiet, rhythmic /w/ and /l/ sounds merge this line's words: notice the way that the last /l/ of "leafmeal" and the first /l/ of "lie" seem to melt into each other, for instance. That blurring of boundaries perfectly fits what the speaker describes here: whole "worlds of wanwood," vast, pale forests, reduced to "leafmeal," rotted away into a fine, even mulch.

This image, alongside the idea that children feel things adults can't, might draw the reader's attention back to the poem's title: "Spring and Fall." Symbolically speaking, these seasons suggest youth and old age. They also suggest different kinds of movement: an energetic "spring," a leap up, and a helpless "fall."

Within those contrasting images, though, there's also a subtle allusion to the Fall of Man:

- In this biblical story, Adam and Eve are cast out of the beautiful, deathless Garden of Eden after they eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.
- Understanding good and evil, this ancient story says, also means becoming self-conscious, understanding shame: once they've eaten the fruit, Adam and Eve realize they're naked and cover themselves with leaves.
- In other words, eating this forbidden fruit means losing one's *innocence*—and losing one's innocence means getting thrown out of Paradise.

Generations of interpreters have seen this story as a metaphor for growing up. Babies are literally unselfconscious, with no real sense that they're separate people among people. That innocence must be left behind "as the heart grows older." Its loss is painful.

The growing Margaret, then, is standing on the edge of Goldengrove and weeping like Adam and Eve looking back at Eden. Just as the leaves must fall, she must grow up, and she won't be able to take the bliss, freshness, and intensity of childhood with her. Nor will she be able to go on believing that anything in the world—her own life included—lasts forever.

LINES 9-11

And yet you wíll weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sórrow's spríngs áre the same.

Now the poem does something startling. The first lines of "Spring and Fall" have explored the difference between childlike sensitivity and adult world-weariness in a balanced pattern of rhymed couplets: "grieving" and "unleaving," "older" and "colder," "sigh" and "lie."

Here, all of a sudden, that pattern breaks. The speaker has just finished reflecting that Margaret will one day no longer "spare a sigh" for falling leaves. Look what happens in the rhyme scheme as the poem hits a turning point:

> [...] nor spare a sigh
> Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
> And yet you wíll weep and know why.

That extra end rhyme forms a triplet that stops readers in their tracks for a moment, asking them to stay with a new, contradictory, and ominous idea: "And yet you wíll weep and know why." The intense /w/ alliteration there, picking up on the "worlds of wanwood" in line 8, makes this line feel even weightier.

Margaret, this pivotal line insists, will one day no longer cry over falling leaves; she'll lose her childlike freshness. She'll still mourn, though. What's more, she'll still be mourning the same thing, even though she doesn't understand this yet.

At this turning point, the poem moves beyond the sadness of

Margaret's fading childhood and into the sadness of adulthood. The speaker explains what Margaret can't fully understand yet: the grief she feels over the falling leaves is just one facet of the great tragedy of human life.

Whatever anyone mourns, the speaker tells Margaret, "no matter" its name:

> Sórrow's sprígs áre the same.

In other words, all sorrows flow from the same source, like springs rising from one great underground fountain. Notice that insistent stress on "áre": "Sorrow's springs *are* the same." All grief flows from loss; every loss is a little death itself *and* a reminder that everything is mortal.

Mourning the leaves, Margaret is thus *also* mourning the "things of man"—everything humanity cares about, including human life—and the human condition, the fact of death itself.

LINES 12-13

> *Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed*
> *What heart heard of, ghost guessed:*

The sorrow Margaret is feeling now, the speaker says, can't quite be put into words. It's easy enough to spell out the bare facts: nothing lasts forever and everything that lives must die. Those words, however, don't get at what it *feels* like to understand mortality, especially for the first time.

As the speaker's personification here suggests, feeling the reality of death might even leave a person confused:

> Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
> What heart heard of, ghost guessed:

The active, reasoning "mouth" and "mind" can't quite hold onto what Margaret is discovering now. Only the "heart" and the "ghost" (or soul) can understand—and then only faintly. The heart has "heard of" the truth, like a rumor; the soul has "guessed" at it.

These lines end with a colon: they're working up to a conclusion. Listen again to these lines, noticing how the alliteration here slows the reader down a little bit, readying the stage for the speaker's final words:

> Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
> What heart heard of, ghost guessed:

The alliteration of "heart heard of, ghost guessed" demands that readers slow right down so as not to stumble. The similar-sounding words "ghost guessed" in particular need to be enunciated carefully and clearly. Quiet and soft themselves, they leave a pocket of airy space around them for the speaker's last words to drop into.

LINES 14-15

> *It ís the blight man was born for,*
> *It is Margaret you mourn for.*

No one, the speaker knows, fully understands the truth that Margaret is doing her best to come to terms with now. That truth, however, is also clear, simple, and final:

> It ís the blight man was born for,
> It is Margaret you mourn for.

Whenever Margaret mourns *anything*, then, she's mourning the reality of death itself—a reality that means she, too, will die. Crying for the leaves, Margaret unwittingly cries for her childhood, for herself, and for the fact that living means dying: there's no life without grief, no life without loss. This is "the blight man was born for": the painful price of being alive. Birth and death, spring and fall, are inextricably woven together.

The speaker's dramatic anaphora on the words "It ís" rings like a bell. This, his repetition insists, is the ultimate truth, the thing that just "is." In the face of such a "blight," what can anyone do but mourn?

This sorrowing picture of the human condition acknowledges that, as a great man once said, life is pain. Quietly, too, it offers a strange kind of consolation, a strange kind of hope.

Part of that consolation comes through the image of Goldengrove: a place whose beauty shines through its name. Part of it comes through the speaker's tenderness with Margaret, one poor mortal sympathizing with another. Part of it comes through the glorious music of Hopkins's poetry itself. The world is full of beauty, full of love: if it weren't, there'd be nothing to mourn.

Another consolation appears in the doubleness of the poem's language. We've already discussed the odd paradox of "Goldengrove unleaving"—Goldengrove dying and eternal in exactly the same moment. Now, look back at lines 10-11 for a moment:

> Now no matter, child, the name:
> Sórrow's sprígs áre the same.

"Sorrow's springs," of course, are its sources. But in the light of the poem's title, might they not also be its *springs*—its springtimes? Spring and fall, the poem has insisted, are interwoven—and a fresh, painful spring of sorrow might bring with it something like childhood's "fresh thoughts," a renewed sense of what is so beautiful, individual, precious about the thing that one is losing.

Through puns, of all things, "Spring and Fall" suggests that grief and love might be one creature with two faces. Quietly, mysteriously, it also offers the hope that the things we love might, in some way beyond earthly understanding, be

"unleaving."

SYMBOLS

SPRING AND FALL

In this poem as in many others, the seasons of the year symbolize the seasons of human life. The little girl, Margaret, is still in the "spring" of her youth, but as she mourns over Goldengrove's autumnal falling leaves, she's facing the inevitability of change and death for the first time.

The fall here might also suggest the biblical story of the Fall—that is, the story of the Garden of Eden, in which Adam and Eve are cast out of Paradise after eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. That ancient story has often been read as an image of what happens to everyone as they grow up. Just as eating the fruit of the tree makes Adam and Eve self-conscious and ashamed, growing up means leaving babyhood's blissful unselfconsciousness behind.

In both instances, the changing seasons suggest that one can't stay in Paradise forever: nothing in this world is eternal.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Goldengrove unleaving"
- **Line 3:** "Leáves"
- **Line 8:** "Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Intensely musical alliteration is one of the first things a new reader might notice about Hopkins's poetry. Interweaving, echoing sounds help to give this poignant poem its beauty.

Listen, for example, to the alliteration in this important passage:

> Ah! ás the heart grows older
> It will come to such sights colder
> By and by, nor spare a sigh
> Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
> And yet you wíll weep and know why.

The concentrated alliteration here makes these lines taste rich as cake—especially when deepened even further with consonance, as in "worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie." Notice the contrasts here, too: the clipped /c/ sounds that describe "colder" adult hearts feel sharp and hard next to the drawn-out, wistful /w/ and /l/ sounds that describe the pale, fallen woods. Besides being just plain euphonious in themselves, these sounds mirror the feelings they describe.

Listen, too, to what happens in the poem's closing lines:

> Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
> What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
> It ís the blight man was born for,
> It is Margaret you mourn for.

- The most important words here all travel in alliterative pairs: "mouth" and "mind," "blight" and "born," and—of course—"Margaret" and "mourn." These coupled sounds subtly suggest inevitability and balance: "Margaret" meets "mourn" as surely as life meets death.
- The effect is even more intense in "heart heard of" and "ghost guessed," where the pairs land right next to each other (and use strong consonance again: "heart heard," "ghost guessed").
- Try reading it aloud: those paired words, which demand careful enunciation, slow the line down considerably, preparing the poem for its unforgettable final lines. Here, alliteration doesn't just create music but *paces* the poem.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "gríeving"
- **Line 2:** "Goldengrove"
- **Line 3:** "Leáves like"
- **Line 4:** "care," "can"
- **Line 6:** "come," "such sights," "colder"
- **Line 7:** "spare," "sigh"
- **Line 8:** "worlds," "wanwood," "leafmeal lie"
- **Line 9:** "yet you," "wíll weep," "why"
- **Line 10:** "Now no," "name"
- **Line 11:** "Sórrow's sprígs," "same"
- **Line 12:** "mouth," "no nor," "mind"
- **Line 13:** "heart heard," "ghost guessed"
- **Line 14:** "blight," "born"
- **Line 15:** "Margaret," "mourn"

ALLUSION

"Spring and Fall" depicts the great tragedy of the human condition: everything that lives dies, and nothing lasts forever. Quietly, it also gestures to a specific idea about *why* that should be so. The poem's vision of a beautiful woodland world lost in the "fall" subtly alludes to the biblical story of the Garden of Eden.

In this story, Adam and Eve, the first people, are cast out of the paradisiacal Garden after they disobey God and eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (note: not merely the "Tree of Knowledge," as it's often misremembered!). Eating this tree's fruit makes them self-conscious and introduces them to the notion of shame: they realize they're naked and cover

themselves with leaves.

After that, they can't stay in Eden, where everything is perfect and harmonious. Instead, they have to go out into the world beyond, facing illness, pain, and death. This disobedience and expulsion is sometimes known as the "Fall of Man." Every person since Adam and Eve, the theology goes, is born carrying their sin—the "blight man was born for," as the speaker puts it.

Many generations of interpreters have read this story as a metaphor for a process people *have* to go through: growing up. Babies are born without self-consciousness, and as they grow, they have to learn that they're separate people among other people. Learning that, they also learn that no person lives forever.

Weeping over falling leaves, then, this poem's "young child" is also facing her own "fall" for the first time, in more ways than one.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Márgarét, áre you gríeving / Over Goldengrove unleaving? / Leáves like the things of man, you / With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?"
- **Line 11:** "Sórrow's spríngs áre the same."
- **Line 14:** "It ís the blight man was born for,"

PUN

A pair of quiet, elegant puns offer some subtle consolation in the midst of this poem's sadness.

The first appears in the poem's opening lines:

> Márgarét, áre you gríeving
> Over Goldengrove unleaving?

On a surface level, the image of "Goldengrove unleaving" merely suggests that Goldengrove is losing its leaves. But read another way, these words hint that Goldengrove might also, paradoxically, be "unleaving": never leaving, eternal. That idea chimes with the mysterious wood's name. Goldengrove's leaves are golden because it's autumn, of course. But gold, which doesn't tarnish or rust, is also an ancient symbol for things that are eternal, precious, and good: the soul, heaven, God.

The unleaving Goldengrove might thus hint at a hope of redemption beyond Margaret's loss. Being a person in the world, this poem suggests, means grieving over and over again. Perhaps, though, the love people feel for the things they grieve also points toward something that *doesn't* change or die. (The fervently Catholic Hopkins often saw images of such hope in nature's beauty.)

At just the same time, grieving over "Goldengrove unleaving" in this sense might suggest Margaret's disillusionment. She *thought* Goldengrove was eternal; it is not.

The poem's second pun, meanwhile, suggests an odd freshness or renewal *within* grief:

> Now no matter, child, the name:
> Sórrow's spríngs áre the same.

"Springs," here, at first glance seems to mean springs as in "sources": this is an image of sorrow bubbling up like spring water from a shared underground source. It could also suggest sorrow's sudden pounces, as if it's a cat springing on a mouse.

In the light of the poem's title, though, sorrow's springs could equally be sorrow's *springtimes*, its rebirths. New sorrows, this pun might suggest, are just as "fresh" as Margaret's youthful grief over the leaves. Grown people might not weep over "such sights" anymore, but they'll still feel a version of the exact same pain.

Perhaps, weirdly, there's something consoling about that, too. A springtime of grief doesn't sound pleasant, but it does suggest that fresh grief might also reawaken the soul to the value of what's beautiful and beloved.

Where Pun appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "unleaving"
- **Line 11:** "Sórrow's spríngs"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

The poem begins with a pair of rhetorical questions. Gently, the speaker asks "a young child":

> Márgarét, áre you gríeving
> Over Goldengrove unleaving?
> Leáves like the things of man, you
> With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?

These questions suggest that the speaker feels not just sympathy for poor Margaret, but also some genuine marvel over her tears. It's surprising that Margaret, with her "fresh thoughts," can "care for" the leaves so much that she mourns them when they fall.

That surprise points in two directions at once:

- The speaker is amazed at Margaret's tenderness: she's still so young that she can weep over an ordinary natural phenomenon that happens every year. Adults might feel a little twinge of melancholy as the seasons turn, but goodness knows they don't often sob their hearts out over falling leaves.
- Paradoxically, though, the speaker is also noticing that Margaret is dealing with a new and grown-up experience: an understanding of death, loss, and change.

By beginning the poem with these rhetorical questions, the speaker shows exactly what's so painful about Margaret's predicament. Young enough to keenly feel the loss of the falling leaves, she's also old enough to *understand* loss. As she herself moves from the "spring" of her young life into its "fall," she'll have to face that pain again and again.

The speaker's first question—"are you grieving / Over Goldengrove unleaving?"—thus also answers itself in another way. In a sense, Margaret *isn't* grieving over Goldengrove, but over mortality itself: as the speaker concludes, "It is Margaret you mourn for."

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "Márgarét, áre you gríeving / Over Goldengrove unleaving? / Leáves like the things of man, you / With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?"

REPETITION

The poem's repetitions help to create an atmosphere of tragic inevitability.

In a sense, this poem begins and ends in the same place. In both the first and last lines—the only two places the speaker addresses Margaret by name—Margaret is in mourning:

> Márgarét, áre you gríeving
> [...]
> It is Margaret you mourn for.

This return to where the poem started suggests that Margaret's grief over Goldengrove and her grief over her own mortality are one and the same.

She's still a child, though, and she can only sense this truth, not fully understand it as the adult speaker can. Listen to the speaker's parallelism here:

> Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
> What heart heard of, ghost guessed:

The echoing phrasings here set up a contrast between conscious, clear understanding and intuition: what the "mouth" and the "mind" can't comprehend, the "heart" and the "ghost" can.

The poem closes with a dramatic moment of anaphora:

> It ís the blight man was born for,
> It is Margaret you mourn for.

Besides connecting Margaret's mourning to "the blight man was born for"—death itself—the words "It is" feel certain, final, inescapable. The stress Hopkins places over that first "ís" makes this repetition even firmer.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Márgarét"
- **Line 12:** "Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed"
- **Line 13:** "heart heard of, ghost guessed:"
- **Line 14:** "It ís"
- **Line 15:** "It is," "Margaret"

VOCABULARY

Unleaving (Line 2) - Losing its leaves—with a possible pun paradoxically suggesting that Goldengrove is also eternal, never "leaving."

The things of man (Line 3) - The "things of man" the speaker alludes to here might suggest:

- The things people care about;
- Human life;
- Or the human condition itself.

Wanwood (Line 8) - "Wan" means pale or sickly; "wanwood," then, suggests pale and dying trees.

Leafmeal (Line 8) - A Hopkins-coined word suggesting that the leaves have decayed to the texture of meal (or grain).

Blight (Line 14) - Illness; curse.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Hopkins is famous for his inspired, inventive poetic form. In breaking from more regular patterns of meter and rhyme, he was way ahead of his time. Even the most innovative of his fellow Victorian poets (like Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Robert Browning) were still mostly using rigorous shapes like sonnets and blank verse.

Hopkins, meanwhile, was finding shapes and rhythms of his own. "Spring and Fall" doesn't use a standard form. It's simply written as a single 15-line stanza. Its rhyme scheme, however, divides it into three rough sections: two runs of three couplets separated by a triplet. The emphatic extra line in that triplet delivers a sad warning: "And yet you wíll weep and know why." (Note that the accent over the word "wíll" there means that Hopkins wants readers to stress the word.)

The poem's deceptively simple shape suits its subject matter: death, the plainest and most difficult reality of all.

METER

Like many of Hopkins's poems, "Spring and Fall" uses what Hopkins called sprung rhythm, a kind of accentual meter in

which lines use a certain number of strong stresses (and usually start with one), but don't stick to any particular metrical foot (like the iamb or the dactyl). The poem's rhythm can thus change a lot depending on how many unstressed syllables each line uses and where those syllables go. This meter was meant to feel both familiar and lyrical, marrying the rhythms of everyday speech to a musical pulse.

Before scanning a couple of lines, take a look at Hopkins's accents. Readers new to Hopkins might notice that he often uses accents over words like musical notation, showing readers where to lay a special stress:

- The accents on "Márgarét," for instance, show that the name should be pronounced with three syllables—Mar-ga-ret—rather than with two—Mar-gret.
- Similarly, the line "Sórrow's sprígs áre the same" should be read with stresses not just on "Sorrow" and "springs" (which readers might tend to put there anyway) but on "are," making the speaker sound insistent: sorrow's springs are the same.
- The same effect appears in "And yet you wíll weep and know why": you will weep.

Here's how this all comes together in lines 5-6:

> Ah! ás the heart grows older
> It will come to such sights colder

Both of these lines use four strong stresses, but in varied patterns; they have a kind of metrical family resemblance without being twins. The resulting verse has the organic form of a budding twig.

RHYME SCHEME

"Spring and Fall" uses a deceptively simple rhyme scheme. The poem both starts and ends with a series of three rhymed couplets; one triplet stands out in the middle. Here's how it all comes together:

AABBCCDDDEEFFGG

Now look closer at the sounds of that central triplet:

> By and by, nor spare a sigh
> Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
> And yet you wíll weep and know why.

These lines don't just stand out because they use three end rhymes in a row. They also use intense internal rhyme, which gives line 7 in particular a rhythmic, swaying music. Copious alliteration and consonance doesn't hurt, either: the /l/ and /w/ sounds of "worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie" (to pick just one example) make the speaker's words even more striking.

The triplet at the center of the poem, in other words, seems to invite readers' special attention. One reason for that might be that these lines form a hinge between the first and second parts of the poem:

- The first section of the poem deals with Margaret's youthful grief: the speaker sympathizes with (and marvels over) her tears.
- The second part of the poem takes a broader look at loss and change: the speaker observes that Margaret's grief reflects the human condition.
- The central triplet bridges these two ideas. Someday, these emphatic lines suggest, Margaret will get used to some kinds of loss and change. But that doesn't mean she won't feel the pain of grief. As the speaker tells her, "you wíll weep and know why."

The rhyme scheme here thus gently draws the reader's attention to what's at the poem's heart: the inescapable sorrow of being alive, the price of admission.

SPEAKER

All readers can know about this speaker is that they're a melancholy, tender person. Watching a small child mourning the falling leaves, they feel deep sympathy with her, knowing that the grief she feels now is her first taste of a sorrow she'll suffer her whole life long.

Sighing over Margaret's pain, the speaker also mourns the human condition. It's tragic that Margaret will grow up and "come to such sights colder," no longer feeling her feelings so intensely. It's tragic that Margaret will face grief and loss many times over. And it's tragic that Margaret will die one day, like everyone else. Taken all together, the speaker says, this is the "blight man was born for," the great tragedy of being alive.

But the speaker's images of the glorious Goldengrove hint at a gleam of hope beneath all this sorrow. When the speaker says that Goldengrove is "unleaving," the word suggests both that Goldengrove is losing its leaves and that it might be eternal, *un-leaving*. Perhaps, the speaker subtly suggests, there *is* some lasting beauty in the world—or at least beyond it.

Both the melancholy and the quiet paradoxical hope here feel a lot like Hopkins's own. A devout Catholic and a Jesuit priest, Hopkins believed that the beauty of nature spoke of an eternal, loving, joyful God; he also suffered from deep depressions, times when he felt as if God could no longer hear him.

SETTING

"Spring and Fall" is set in two places at once: a mysterious wood called "Goldengrove" and the whole world.

Goldengrove isn't a real place, but an imagined every-forest in fall. Its name suggests that it's at the height of its autumnal glory when Margaret weeps over its falling leaves. This grove's goldenness also paradoxically suggests deep, eternal beauty, even hinting at something like Paradise or Eden: gold, after all, is precious in part because it doesn't tarnish or fade, and it's a common symbol for the soul, Heaven, and eternity. Mourning for Goldengrove, Margaret might thus also be mourning for the very *idea* of something permanent and perfect.

What Margaret faces in Goldengrove—the inevitability of loss and change—is also, as the speaker observes, the human condition. Whenever and wherever a person is born and grows up, they'll have to deal with "Goldengrove unleaving," with beautiful, beloved things changing, fading, and dying.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) was a poet of deep and ecstatic faith. Born into a Protestant family, he converted to Roman Catholicism as an Oxford undergraduate. Much to his parents' horror, he later became a Jesuit priest. Though he'd always loved writing poetry, he burned many of his early works upon his ordination, feeling that he should turn away from art to devote himself fully to God. His superiors, however, wisely encouraged him to see his writing as a *means* of worship. The resultant body of sensuous, poignant poetry reflects Hopkins's fervent belief that God suffuses nature.

In some ways, Hopkins was a poet of his time. His sad nostalgia for a pre-industrial England (and horror at humanity's exploitative relationship to nature) is also evident in the work of other Victorian poets—for example, Christina Rossetti (whom Hopkins befriended) and Alfred, Lord Tennyson—as well as in the work of novelists like Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens.

But in other ways, Hopkins's poetry seems to both anticipate the future and connect to the deeper past:

- Hopkins's innovative style, with its freewheeling sprung rhythm and its richly interwoven sounds, is often seen as a precursor of the modernist free verse that would arise in the early 20th century.
- Meanwhile, Hopkins's fervent, religious love of nature hearkens back to both the pantheistic Romantics of the early 19th century (like Wordsworth) and the passionately Christian Metaphysical poets of the 17th century (like Herbert).

Perhaps critics are particularly inclined to think of Hopkins as a proto-modernist because the bulk of his work wasn't published until 1918, when Hopkins's friend (and fellow poet) Robert Bridges released the posthumous collection *Poems*. This book would deeply influence writers in the 20th century and beyond, from W.H. Auden to Dylan Thomas to T.S. Eliot.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote this poem in 1880, when he was only in his mid-30s. However, death might already have been much on his mind: he was often in bad health, and he would die of typhoid fever nine years later at the age of 44.

Always aware of his own mortality, Hopkins also deeply felt a melancholy nostalgia that influenced many of his fellow Victorian poets. England toward the end of the 19th century was in the midst of the Second Industrial Revolution, a period of rapid technological advancement in both manufacturing and transportation. Of the many dramatic changes this era brought about in British society—a decline in rural populations, a rumble of socialist protest—most pressing for Hopkins was the harm to nature: exploitative mining and logging, air and water pollution from factories, and the expansion of urban and suburban spaces into what was once countryside.

Many Victorian artists and writers (and people from all walks of life, for that matter) viewed the loss of the countryside with alarm and despair. For Hopkins, a pious Jesuit priest who saw the natural world as a manifestation of the divine, the impact of industrialization on nature was particularly painful. This poem's wistful longing for times past—especially times past in an Edenic wood—fits into a whole late Victorian mood.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/syXkF8wsn90)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Hopkins's life and work via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gerard-manley-hopkins)
- Hopkins's Legacy — Learn more about Hopkins (and his many enthusiasts) at the Official Gerard Manley Hopkins Website. (https://hopkinspoetry.com/)
- More Hopkins Resources — Visit the Victorian Web for a wealth of readings on Hopkins. (https://victorianweb.org/authors/hopkins/index.html)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS POEMS

- Binsey Poplars
- Felix Randal
- God's Grandeur
- Pied Beauty

- The Caged Skylark
- The Windhover

HOW TO CITE

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