The Windhover

POEM TEXT

To Christ our Lord

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

SUMMARY

This morning I was lucky enough to see a flying falcon, which seemed to me to be the morning's favorite creature, a prince of daylight with speckled feathers. He was riding the rolling air currents way up high. He seemed full of pure joy as he controlled the wind like a horse-rider does a horse. After hovering almost motionless, the bird suddenly dove in a smooth arc, like that of a skater's heel cleaning sweeping across the ice. The way the bird dove and glided revealed its authority over the strong wind. Watching the bird moved me profoundly—the bird's flight evidence of its sheer mastery and achievement!

All these different attributes meet together in this bird—beauty, honor, action, air and feathers all in one! But your fire, Christ, burns even more brightly, powerfully, and beautifully. Oh Christ, my knight in shining armor!

The bird was nothing special when you really think about it—even hard and boring work like plowing a field makes the upturned soil glitter and shine beautifully. And hot coals, fallen from a fire my lord, break open to reveal their beautiful red and golden colors.

THEMES

THE MAJESTY OF GOD AND NATURE

"The Windhover" is a celebration—even, perhaps, a kind of joyous prayer—that marvels at the wonders of the natural world and, in turn, at the majesty of God's creation. The poem strives to show that these two aspects of the world—nature and God—are not really separate: the beauty of nature is both evidence of and a way of experiencing God's sublime divinity.

The poem uses one small part of the nature—a falcon (specifically a kestrel)—to explore this relationship, with "the achieve of [and] the mastery" of the bird representing one small but undeniable proof of God's power. The first chunk of the poem brings nature to life on the page, while the latter half then develops the way that natural beauty relates to God.

In the octet (the poem's first eight lines) the poem's speaker is almost overcome by the beauty of the falcon. The poem's language is fittingly full of its own dazzling beauty here (through poetic techniques like alliteration), as the speaker tries breathlessly to capture the experience of the falcon. Indeed, the emotional impact of this encounter is clear from the start: "I caught this morning morning's minion," the speaker says. If part of the speaker's wonder at the falcon is its sheer and beautiful physical efficiency, the notion of "catching" it in flight shows that this is a rare—and profound—experience.

The speaker then marvels at different features of the falcon, each one of them majestic in its own way. The falcon's "dapple[d]" feathers, its ability to smoothly hover in the strong air currents, the way it swiftly turns and dives (presumably to catch prey)—all of these affect the speaker profoundly. This emotional reaction comes about because the speaker sees in the falcon—in its incredible *falcon-ness* (that is, the way it perfectly inhabits *being* a falcon)—as proof of God's existence, beauty, and power.

In other words, the falcon doesn't just exist for the sake of it—it exists to *express* God's will. The falcon's incredible aerial ability and seemingly perfect (divine) design stands in for God's masterful achievement in creating the world and all the beauty contained within it.

With the first part of the poem having proved the beauty of the

falcon, the sestet (the final six lines of the sonnet) places the bird in a wider and arguably more mysterious context. The speaker admires the falcon's "brute beauty and valour and act" (its fearlessness and physical abilities), but importantly sees these as proof of a type of metaphorical "fire" that also "breaks" from Christ, to whom the poem is dedicated. This fire is God's creation. Think about it as a kind of molten lava flowing underneath the surface of all (seemingly individual) things—and making them part of one perfect whole. The fire, according to the speaker, is the source of all existence and is stunningly beautiful.

And it's here the speaker makes the poem's final but crucial point. This "fire" isn't just perceptible in things that are obviously beautiful and impressive (like the bird, or, perhaps, a spectacular view); the fire of creation burns brightly within *all* things. Like embers fallen from a fire, even unremarkable surroundings can contain intense, "gold-vermillion" beauty. As an example, the speaker mentions the mundane and repetitive task of plowing the soil, which brings the reward of food and sustenance. A secondary, less literal meaning of this "sheer plod" could be the way that human beings serve God by staying true to their spiritual development. That is, even if the rewards of doing so don't seem immediately obvious, or if the spiritual path seems fraught with difficulty, sheer effort forms an important part of the expression of God's creation. Like the falcon's full-hearted expression of *falcon-ness*, humans serve God through seeking him.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon,

The poem is dedicated "To Christ our Lord." The reader immediately knows, then, that the poem will explore some aspect of Christianity and the relationship between humanity and God. (The dedication also informs the target of the phrase "O my chevalier" in line 11, which could relate to the windhover, to Jesus/God, or, quite plausibly, to both.)

A windhover is a bird of prey more commonly known as a kestrel, a type of falcon. As the name "windhover" suggests, the kestrel is a skilled hunter able to ride air currents with ease and dexterity, waiting for the perfect moment to swoop down and catch its prey. Indeed, this is ability to seemingly pause mid-flight forms an important focus point for the speaker's sense of wonder (and, in turn, how this impressive bird speaks to God's presence in the world).

It's worth noting the precise choice of verb the speaker uses to describe the encounter with the kestrel. The speaker doesn't say I *saw* "this morning morning's minion" (by which the speaker means the kestrel itself). Instead, the speaker "caught" the kestrel—which, of course, isn't meant literally. The speaker *catches* the rare beauty of the bird in its element, a brief moment in time that offers the speaker a powerful reminder of God's majesty. The word "caught" also relates to the kestrel, which is hovering in the air looking to catch a meal. This subtly suggests a kind of interconnectedness between different parts of nature (in this case, the speaker and the kestrel) *before* the poem has even really gotten started.

The poem is typical of Hopkins's work of this period in its rich and vibrant use of devices like alliteration, consonance, and assonance—all of which appear in these first two lines. Hopkins deliberately delays specifying the subject of the poem (that is, the bird) until near the end of line 2, instead offering three distinct ways of describing the bird metaphorically—and each of these is thick with sound patterning.

The kestrel is "this morning morning's minion," the first "morning" relating to the timing of the speaker's experience, and "morning's minion" suggesting that the bird is the favorite and/or servant of the morning time more generally. Both definitions of "minion" are useful, but the idea of being a servant is especially appropriate in a poem that discusses the relationship between humanity, nature, and God. The alliteration, assonance, and consonance (highlighted above) in the phrase suggest perfection and a kind of precision—a quality that the speaker perceives in the aerial abilities of the bird.

After line 1's caesura (in the form of a comma before "king"), the bird is described as the prince ("dauphin"—not meaning dolphin!) of the "kingdom of daylight"—with both kingdom and light suggesting a kind of divinity (as in, the kingdom of heaven). The third description of the bird ends up being clearest:

> [king]dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon,

The sheer quantity of /d/ sounds here suggests an abundance of beauty, with the delay of "Falcon" (the family of birds to which the kestrel belongs) making the reader experience the poem's beautiful sounds in a kind of climactic build-up. The bird is "dapple[d]" because it has a spotty pattern on its feathers. (Hopkins explores the relationship between God's majesty and "dappled things" in a poem written around the same time, "Pied Beauty.")

LINES 2-5

in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy!

The section running from "in his riding" (line 2) to the caesura in line 7 focuses on the bird's aerial abilities. The speaker marvels at the way the bird rides the currents of the air ("the rolling level"), able to both hover in place and to speed through the sky with grace and ease. In essence, the bird is a spectacular example of control and potential energy.

Here, as with the rest of the poem, this relationship between stillness and movement is conveyed by the use of enjambment and caesura. Notice how the enjambment creates a breezy flow between the lines, while the caesurae create little moments in which the sentence (and lines 1-5 form one long sentence) itself seems to hover and pause:

> [...] in his riding
> Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
> High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
> In his ecstasy!

Hopkins dexterously puts the sonnet form under pressure by resisting the natural pauses of line-endings and making the push and pull of the poem unpredictable (but never uncontrolled). In this way, the poem itself mimics the skill of the bird. The caesura after "high there," for example, seems to place readers themselves high up in mid-air too, awaiting the next gravitational pull of words as the sentence works its way towards its conclusion.

As with the poem's opening, alliteration, consonance, and assonance here conjure a powerful vision of the bird's beauty—and the way in which that beauty has a specific design behind it (i.e., God's plan for the world). The bird "ride[s]" the "rolling level," "strid[es]" the "steady air," and "r[ings] up the rein of a wimpling wing." The high number of chiming sounds seems to capture the "ecstasy" (the sheer joy) which the speaker feels—and witnesses–in the flight of the windhover.

The opening already described the bird as a kind of prince or servant—part of God's kingdom—and here the poem metaphorically likens the windhover to a rider on horseback. A good rider, of course, has skillful control over their horse, and is able to make the animal accelerate or come to a stop at their command and through using the reins. The speaker observes a similar relationship between the falcon and the air on which it flies. But Hopkins also sneaks another descriptive metaphor into line 4 through the adjective "wimpling." This word relates to the cloth worn by nuns around the head, and specifically to the way this cloth gathers in folds. Using the word here both adds visual color and subtly increases the sense that the speaker (and the reader) bears witness to the expression of God's majesty via the natural world.

LINES 5-7

> *then off, off forth on swing,*
> *As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding*
> *Rebuffed the big wind.*

After the climactic exclamation mark caesura in line 5, the kestrel suddenly swoops downwards towards the ground (having presumably hovered up high searching for prey). The repetition (specifically epizeuxis) in "off, off forth" suggests the suddenness and strength of this movement, while the /f/ consonance is intentionally airy (say the phrase out loud and see if it sounds like wind). The bird uses gravity to swoop down, before once again mounting the air and soaring high. This creates a kind of arc, or "swing," a shape which suggests grace, skill, and geometric beauty.

In line 6, the speaker compares this "swing" through simile to "a skate's heel sweep[ing] smooth on a bow-bend." An ice skater, of course, is another example of graceful movement through the control of stillness and energy. It's notable, too, that the bird is compared not to the skate or skater entirely, but specifically to the *heel*. This suggests that both bird and skate are out of sight almost as soon as they are seen, also reinforcing the sense of speed and power. The sibilance in this section provides smoothness and speed in the reader's experience too:

> [...] then off, off forth on swing,
> As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend:

After the caesura (the colon) in line 6, the speaker inverts the relationship between the bird and the wind. Wind is one of nature's elements, a demonstrably powerful force capable of great destruction. But here, it is the *wind* that is "rebuffed" by the "hurl and gliding" of the bird. In other words, the wind is no match for the windhover's skill, dexterity, speed, and power (though both wind and bird are, of course, made by God!). The windhover, then, provides an example of one small aspect of nature both literally and figuratively *in its element*, powerfully expressing God's majesty through simply being a pure and impressive embodiment of itself—an idea which finds full expression in the final line and a half of the poem's octet.

LINES 7-8

> *My heart in hiding*
> *Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!*

After the caesura in line 7, which affords the poem a moment to breathe and reflect, the speaker presents a personal response to the sight of the bird. A sense of awe has already been established, but here the speaker's feelings are made explicit:

> My heart in hiding
> Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

The speaker's heart "stir[s] for a bird," indicating a reaction of profound emotion which is based in no small part on the kestrel's apparent perfection. That is, the kestrel seems to inhabit *being* a kestrel entirely and perfectly—the design and execution, as it were, are both flawless.

Indeed, it appears that this emotional reaction represents something important for the speaker, because it has brought the speaker's heart out of "hiding." This is open to interpretation, but perhaps could signal that the speaker was struggling to see God's majesty in the world, or was depressed, until this experience with the windhover. Some critics also think the "heart in hiding" might relate to Hopkins's own struggles with the question of poetry itself, specifically whether poetry was an indulgent distraction from religious life.

Of course, one of the most remarkable things about the poem is the way that it seems to capture the speaker's initial sense of awe in vibrant and evocative language. The alliterating "heart in hiding" and the internal rhyme created through the assonance and consonance of "stirred for a bird" continue the poem's near-relentless use of sound patterning to express the beauty of nature and to praise God's creation.

After the caesura following "bird," the speaker tries to pinpoint the reason behind the overwhelming feeling of joy and awe provoked by the bird. The speaker describes this as "the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!" To the speaker, the bird's ability to be itself—to hover and swoop, to hunt so effectively—represents achievement and mastery. These belong, however, more to God than to the bird itself. Indeed, the perfection of the *bird* expresses the perfection of *God*. The placement of the comma caesura after "of" is quite unusual, indicating that the speaker is both revising and adding to their view of the bird, as though words perhaps are not enough to fully off justice to the bird and what it represents. The repetition of "the" (anaphora) and the similar grammatical construction of the two clauses ("the *x* of *y*") mimic the windhover's ability to control its speed at will (the comma deliberately slowing the flow of the line).

LINES 9-10

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle!

Line 9 marks the beginning of the sonnet's sestet, the *turn* (technically known as a volta) at which the poem changes direction after the octet (the first eight lines). The shift here is subtle. Though the speaker still expresses awe at the figure of the windhover, the scope of the poem widens out into something more abstract. Here, too, the speaker aims to draw the link between the marvelous spectacle of the windhover and God's majesty as expressed by the natural world.

The first sentence of the sestet runs from "Brute beauty" to "Buckle" at the start of line 10, which is stopped abruptly by the exclamation mark caesura. Here, the speaker lists the different qualities that the windhover represents. The bird is undoubtedly beautiful, but also capable of violence ("brute beauty"). The bird also seems honorable and proud; "oh" restates the speaker's awe; and "air" reminds the reader of what the speaker so admires in the bird (its skill and "riding" the air). The alliteration and assonance build a picture of both aesthetic beauty and physical power—indeed, the plosive /b/ and /p/ sounds create work for the reader's mouth, the expulsion of air on each syllable relating the poem's sound to the admiring picture it paints (in which wind is, of course, an important part):

> Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
> Buckle!

The monosyllablic sound of the speaker's list further creates a sense that speaker is almost overwhelmed by the sight (and contemplation) of the windhover.

Critics debate the meaning of "here / Buckle!" The latter word is the sentence's main verb, which some take to be an imperative, meaning that the speaker is *instructing* qualities like "beauty" and "valour" to "buckle" (bend) together. "Here" could mean "in the figure of the windhover," but this "here" could also be located in the speaker's "heart"—which is the last main grammatical subject of the octet. However it is read, this section undoubtedly focuses on the way that numerous characteristics come together in one place, finding full expression. This coming-together—this unification—gestures to the way that God's majesty is expressed by the natural world, essentially making different aspects of nature into the expression of one greater whole.

LINES 10-11

AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

After "Buckle," the poem continues its move away from the more visual descriptions of the bird itself into a discussion that is more focused on religion, spirituality, and Christ himself (to whom, it's worth remembering, is the poem is dedicated).

Here, the speaker compares the undeniable grace and power of the windhover with Christ's (apostrophized as "my chevalier"). Essentially, the speaker says to the reader "if you think the kestrel is impressive," which the speaker has worked hard to prove, "take a moment to contemplate the awesomeness of Christ." Christ and "the fire that breaks from [Christ]" are "a billion / Times told lovelier [and] more dangerous."

Fire as a symbol of God's power and creation also occurs in Hopkins' "God's Grandeur": "The world is charged with the grandeur of God. / It will flame out ..." Hopkins' poetry of this era admires the individuality of nature—different animals, plants, and so on—but sees them as essentially an expression of

the same thing: God (and God's will).

Addressing Christ as a "chevalier" (a knight) portrays Christ as a kind of valiant warrior, battling on behalf of truth, light, and love. This probably relates to medieval representations of Christ on horseback and in the gleaming armor of God. It's worth considering this in the context of this passage from the biblical Book of Ephesians (6:13-16):

> Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; and your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God ...

Evil, then, as embodied by Satan, represents Christ's sworn enemy—and it is to Satan himself that Christ is "dangerous."

LINES 12-14

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

In the final three lines of the sestet, the poem takes a surprising turn. Here, the speaker states that it is "no wonder" that the windhover portrays such "mastery." That's not because the windhover is somehow unremarkable, but rather because the *entire* world is a manifestation of God's own "mastery" and majesty. The windhover, in other words, is just one expression of God among limitless examples—but no less beautiful and impressive for that. After the caesura in line 12 in the form of a colon, the speaker provides two proofs that the world is *full* of God's majesty—that it isn't *only* found in obviously impressive creatures like the kestrel.

The first example is soil which, when freshly plowed through "shéer plód" (boring and backbreaking work), suddenly shines. The speaker presents an image of a field of "sillion" (freshly-upturned earth) gleaming in the sunshine (within the same "kingdom of daylight" mentioned in line 2).

Alliteration and consonance have already been linked to beauty and grace earlier in the poem, a relationship continued here: "shéer plód makes plough down sillion / Shine." Even the repetitive task of churning up soil here represents the majesty of God! The two stress marks on "shéer plód" give it a heavy, trudging kind of sound.

There's another important idea at play here, too, relating to a more spiritual kind of work. The poem suggests that serving God might not always be easy—a viewpoint certainly expressed by Hopkins in other poems—but that the hard and sometimes mundane work of religious life is an expression of God's majesty too.

The second example relates to the "fire" mentioned in line 10. Here, the speaker presents an image of "blue-bleak embers." Embers are pieces of wood or coal that have been burned by fire and, importantly, still retain that heat even if the fire is out. Indeed, sometimes the inside of these embers is still aglow at a temperature as hot as the fire itself. And this is at the heart of the speaker's image—that under the surface of appearance of *everything* in the world glows the fire of God's creation.

When "blue-bleak embers" fall out of the fire, they break open and "gash gold-vermilion." That is, they metaphorically bleed with the glorious red and golden color. Likewise, *all* of God's creation contains the majesty and divinity *of* that creation. The two instances of alliteration here, as highlighted above, are bright and vibrant, like the color they describe (the loudness of the two /bl/ sounds suggests the brightness contained within). All in all, then, Hopkins' poem is a hymn to creation that, through praising one small aspect of nature, praises all of God's creation.

SYMBOLS

THE WINDHOVER

The first nine lines of this poem focus intently on the windhover, a type of bird better known as a kestrel (a kind of falcon). The speaker is deeply moved by the sight of the bird as it hovers and then swoops down in a graceful arc towards the ground. But the speaker isn't merely a passionate birdwatcher! It's because of the symbolic qualities of the bird that the speaker's heart feels "stirred."

Like a virtuoso violinist, the windhover is a master of refinement, grace, and precision. These qualities don't come from the bird itself, but from its master, God—who, of course, is also the speaker's master. The skill and dexterity with which the bird rides the wind is a representation and expression of God's majesty, and God's skill and dexterity in creating the world. However, it's worth noting that the poem widens its perspective towards the end by arguing that this divine majesty is perceptible in *all* the world—even those parts of it (and life) that seem boring, difficult, and painful. In that sense, then, the kestrel doesn't just represent its own majesty—it is one small aspect of nature that symbolizes the *entirety* of God's creation.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10

SOIL

In line 12, the poem takes an interesting turn. Having spent most of its lines talking up the awe-inspiring sight of the bird, the speaker now states that really, after all, the bird isn't that remarkable. That's not because it isn't a majestic expression of God's will, but because it is no *exception* in being so: all the world expresses the same thing. Here, the speaker gives the example of how freshly upturned soil—referred to here as "sillion"—sparkles and glimmers in the sunshine. The soil, then, becomes symbolic of the idea that the fire of God's creation is present in everything, just below the surface.

The act of plowing a field is, of course, backbreaking hard work. This moment can also be interpreted as a symbolic affirmation of the importance of *spiritual* work, which can seem similarly laborious, repetitive, and unending. Hopkins's point seems to wish to remind the reader that all such work functions as a way of praising God and acknowledging the inherent wonder and beauty of the entirety of the world in all its forms.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 12-13:** "shéer plód makes plough down sillion / Shine,"

FIRE

Fire in the poem essentially represents the glory and majesty of God. This is first clear in lines 10-11, which describes the "fire that breaks from thee"—Christ, to whom the poem is addressed—as far lovelier and more dangerous than even that of the magnificent windhover.

Fire reappears in the final two lines of the poem in the form of embers. Embers are pieces of wood or coal left after the main fire has burned out (though sometimes these pieces fall out of the fire while it is burning). They can be quite dangerous as it's not always immediately obvious that beneath their cool-looking surface they are still aglow with fierce heat and light. The poem uses embers as a second example of what has already been stated metaphorically by the previous section of line 12 and 13: that below the surface of appearances lies the intensely beautiful fire of God's creation. The earthly world is aglow with God's majesty, more obvious in some aspects of the world than others (to the speaker, the kestrel is perhaps a more obvious example). Finally, it's worth noting that the verb "gash" means to be cut open and is close in sound to "gush." This could be a gesture towards the crucifixion of Christ (to whom the poem is dedicated), whose own "gashes" (wounds) represent the salvation of humankind.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 10-11:** "AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion / Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!"
- **Lines 13-14:** "blue-bleak embers, ah my dear, / Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

"The Windhover" is packed with alliteration. As with the poem's use of assonance and consonance, alliteration serves one main purpose overall: to make the poem sound beautiful. This beauty, in turn, is a way for the poem to do justice to both the magnificent sight of the windhover soaring through the sky and, even more importantly, to the majesty of God's creation. Furthermore, the vibrant and frequent use of alliteration relates to the way that speaker projects a state of "ecstasy" onto the kestrel. This ecstasy is a kind of religious fervor, felt and perceived by the speaker (rather than the bird). Alliteration thus heightens the sense that this poem is a kind of prayer directly praising God.

The alliteration that begins the poem is immediately arresting and comes in a group of three: "morning morning's minion," "daylight's dauphin," and "dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon." All three examples sound bright and clear, reflecting the clarity of the speaker's experience—that is, the awe felt by the speaker in observing the bird, and the instinctive connection made by the speaker between nature and God.

From "riding" in line 2 to "wimpling wing" at the end of line 4, the alliteration serves more to evoke the way that the kestrel alternately hovers and dives. As with the poem's meter and rhyme, alliteration comes and goes with a kind of rhythm that creates a sense of stasis and motion—exactly the rhythm that the bird observes in the air. In lines 5 to 6, the /s/ alliteration (sibilance) gives the poem a smooth, gliding quality that relates to the comparison of the bird's flight to the heel of an ice skater:

> ... then off, off forth on swing,
> As a skate's heel sweeps smooth

The next main examples fall in lines 9-11:

> Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
> Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
> Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

As with all the other instances in the poem, the alliteration here still works to maintain the presence of beauty and deliberate

design. But here it's also used to evoke a sense of power through hard /b/ and /p/ sounds (highlighted above). These have a kind of toughness that matches with the description of the kestrel's beauty as "brute." This /b/ sound then links with the speaker's statement that Christ is even more "lovelier" and "dangerous" (meaning powerful)—a "billion times" more.

In line 12, "plod" chimes with "plough" to paint a picture of backbreaking farm labor, the closeness of the sounds suggesting repetitiveness. The three hard /g/ sounds in the final line return to the brightness of the opening, suggesting the intensity of the fire that burns inside all of God's creation ("gall," "gash," and "gold-vermilion"). Ending the poem with a color means that this bright sound also leaves the reader with a lasting impression of reddish-gold.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "morning morning's minion"
- **Line 2:** "daylight's dauphin," "dapple-dawn-drawn," "riding"
- **Line 3:** "rolling," "steady," "striding"
- **Line 4:** "rung," "rein," "wimpling wing"
- **Line 5:** "swing"
- **Line 6:** "skate's," "sweeps smooth," "bow-bend"
- **Line 7:** "heart," "hiding"
- **Line 9:** "Brute beauty," "pride, plume,"
- **Line 10:** "B," "uckle," "the," "fire," "that," "breaks," "from," "thee then," "billion"
- **Line 11:** "Times told"
- **Line 12:** "plód," "plough"
- **Line 13:** "blue-bleak"
- **Line 14:** "gall," "gash gold-vermilion"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is a prominent feature of "The Windhover." As with alliteration and consonance, this kind of sound patterning is used to create a sense of beauty and mastery. That is, the skill of the speaker in linking vowel sounds reflects the skill of the windhover "riding" on the currents of air, and, in turn, reflects the divine craftsmanship of God in the creation of the world. The vowels in this poem work much likes musical notes in a symphony.

The poem doesn't make any attempt to make its assonance subtle, instead starting with the poetic volume turned right up:

> I caught this morning morning's minion

This opening line is a bold announcement, the brightness of the open vowel sounds representing the speaker's sense of awe for the bird. Then, "dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon" suggests that the kestrel's spotted feathers have been painted (by God) with skillful precision.

In the lines that follow, phrases like "in his riding" and "striding / High" give the poem a quick pace and natural flow that deliberately evokes the aerial abilities of the bird. Likewise with "heel sweeps" in line 6, which also suggests the graceful movement of an ice skate on the ice. Line 7's "big wind" works a little differently, suggesting the wind's power but, in turn, the bird's ability to use that wind to its advantage (the bird's control over the wind is made clear by the full stop caesura that immediately follows this assonance). In line 8, the internal rhyme of "stirred" and "bird" link the speaker's profound emotion with the kestrel itself.

Lines 9-11 rely more on alliteration and consonance for their sound patterning, but "brute beauty" is deliberately intense to conjure both beauty and a kind of fearsome power (both the kestrel's and God's).

In the closing stanza (the second half of the poem's sestet), the vowels are generally slower as the poem draws to its conclusion. "Plough down" in line 12 evokes the tough work involved with plowing soil, while "fall, gall" is a sudden, unexpected perfect rhyme. This unpredictability speaks to the way that God's majesty expresses itself in all things, and that this intensity lurks beneath the surface of all reality—but how to glimpse it, as the speaker did with the windhover, is not always immediately apparent.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "this," "morning morning's minion," "king-"
- **Line 2:** "dauphin," "dawn-drawn," "Falcon," "in his riding"
- **Line 3:** "rolling," "air," "striding"
- **Line 4:** "High," "there," "wimpling wing"
- **Line 5:** "In his," "swing"
- **Line 6:** "heel sweeps," "gliding"
- **Line 7:** "big wind," "in hiding"
- **Line 8:** "Stirred," "bird," "thing"
- **Line 9:** "Brute beauty," "and act," "air"
- **Line 12:** "wonder of," "plough down"
- **Line 14:** " Fall, gall"

APOSTROPHE

The poem is addressed to a specific recipient: Christ/God. The use of apostrophe thus makes the poem into a kind of prayer, a direct message from the speaker to God with the purpose of singing the praises of God's creation (and Jesus's sacrifice for humankind, hinted at by the word "gash in line 14). The speaker of the poem is an "I," making this a poem that is at once both deeply personal and a sincere attempt at expressing something profoundly universal. By reading the poem, the reader thus bears witness to the intimate relationship between one individual, the world around them, and their God.

There are also more specific examples of apostrophe. The first of these is in line 11's "O my chevalier" which, in light of the

dedication, is most likely a reference to Christ. Christ has sometimes been depicted as a kind of knight—which is what "chevalier" means. This makes this moment seem like the speaker's appeal towards the protective instincts of Christ, while also acknowledging Christ's honor and power.

In the penultimate line, the speaker says "ah my dear." The recipient of this apostrophe is less obvious. It could still be to Christ, but could also be to the reader, a kind of knowing tap on the shoulder through words. It's also possible that the speaker is, in a sense, addressing themselves, these three words expressing the speaker's intense sense of awe and wonder—perhaps in the way that people sometimes use "oh my God" to this day.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Before Line 1:** “ To Christ our Lord”
- **Line 11:** “O my chevalier”
- **Line 13:** “ah my dear”

CAESURA

"The Windhover" uses caesurae throughout—in fact, there isn't a single line without one! The most important general effect is the way that this creates a sense of tension and release, particularly with regard to the relationship between the poem's sentences and the sonnet structure into which they fit. Hopkins puts his lines under great pressure by ensuring that a line ending rarely fits with the end of a sentence—most of the actual sentence endings are caesurae. This signals the poet's control of poetic language, skillfully taking the sonnet form to its limits (without breaking it) and thus suggesting the kind of master craftsmanship used by God in creating the world.

Another general effect—and one which is crucial to the poem's octet—is the way that the caesurae, enjambment, and line length combine to mimic the bird's aerial abilities. That is, the windhover can hover or swoop pretty much at will, riding air currents in the search for prey and the using gravity to accelerate towards the ground when necessary. The poem does a similar thing—just look at the way the poem seems to pause and then resume its motion in the opening four and half lines:

> I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
> dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn
> Falcon, in his riding
> Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and
> striding
> High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling
> wing
> In his ecstasy!

Notice how the poem seems to be suspended right when the bird itself is in mid-air ("high there"), before reaching an "ecstat[ic]" height in the exclamation mark caesura of line 5. Tension and release, push and pull, air and gravity—all are in perfect harmony.

Apart from these general effects, there are also some key examples that are more specific. The full stop after "big wind" in line 7 demonstrates the windhover's control over the wind by literally stopping it mid-sentence. Then, line 8's comma after "the achieve of" allows the speaker to breathlessly revise/add to the admiration for the bird—it's not just the "achieve of," but also "the mastery" of the kestrel that is so remarkable.

Line 9 uses multiple caesurae to bring different attributes together into one place, in turn emphasized by the strong exclamation mark caesura after "Buckle" in the following line. Finally, the caesura of line 12 demonstrates that what follows is a kind of concluding explanation to justify the idea that it is "No wonder" (nothing special) that such an impressive creature as the kestrel exists—the world is full of God's majesty and grace. The commas that follow in the final two lines slow the poem's pace down to a sense of conclusion and resolution.

Where Caesura 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:** “,” “,”

CONSONANCE

Consonance is an important feature of "The Windhover." It works closely with alliteration and assonance to build lines that are full to the brim with sound patterning, evoking both beauty and craftsmanship. Both of these are important to the poem's message, because they reflect the aspects of God that the speaker sees when looking at the windhover—aspects which, argues the sestet, are present in *all* things (even those that seem unremarkable at first glance). The poem's consonance, assonance, and alliteration all three work together like different elements in a piece of music to create a striking poem that strives to be worthy of its subject—the windhover and God.

The first two lines are full of /n/ consonance (and the similar sound of /ng/):

> I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
> dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn
> Falcon, in his riding

Like a painter choosing colors, the speaker opts to focus on certain sounds to subtly suggest mastery and skill. The speaker *could* have said, "I saw a kestrel this morning," but the lack of sound patterning would make it a far less vibrant and exciting line of poetry. To make the poem *sound* exciting, then, is part of the speaker's way of expressing a sense of awe and wonder.

It's worth noting how every single line in the first stanza (the sonnet's octet) ends in an /ng/ sound. This means that the internal /ng/ consonance—the uses of that sound that aren't at the end of a line—chime together with the line endings. All together, this echo of /ng/ flows throughout the octet, giving the poem a kind of propulsion that relates to the kestrel's own momentum in the air.

Later in the stanza, the two /l/ sounds in "hurl" and "gliding" (line 6) have a graceful quality, while "rebuffed the big wind" (line 7) gives the reader a sense of the power of the wind (and the windhover's ability to be master, rather than servant, of that element).

In the poems last two lines, /l/ consonance is used again to suggest grace and beauty:

> Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
> Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.

These sounds chime together subtly, suggesting the way that below the surface of appearances burns the majestic "fire" of God's creation. That is, the beauty of the /l/ sound is contained *within* the words, just like the "gold-vermilion" of God's design flows within all things.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “morning morning's minion,” “king-”
- **Line 2:** “dom,” “daylight's dauphin,” “dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon,” “in,” “riding”
- **Line 3:** “rolling,” “steady,” “and striding”
- **Line 4:** “High,” “how he,” “rung,” “upon,” “rein,” “wimpling wing”
- **Line 5:** “his ecstasy,” “off, off forth,” “swing”
- **Line 6:** “skate's,” “sweeps smooth,” “bow-bend,” “hurl,” “gliding”
- **Line 7:** “Rebuffed,” “big,” “heart,” “hiding”
- **Line 8:** “Stirred,” “bird”
- **Line 9:** “Brute beauty,” “pride, plume”
- **Line 10:** “ Buckle,” “breaks,” “thee then,” “billion”
- **Line 11:** “Times told lovelier”
- **Line 12:** “wonder,” “shéer,” “plód,” “plough,” “down sillion”
- **Line 13:** “Shine,” “blue-bleak,” “embers,” “my”
- **Line 14:** “Fall,” “gall,” “ themselves,” “gash,” “ gold-vermilion”

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment is a vital part of "The Windhover." Enjambment helps the poem give the reader a sense of the windhover's aerial ability—the way it can alternately hover almost motionless before diving through the air with speed and precision. Just as the kestrel masterfully controls its relationship with currents of air, the speaker controls the relationship between the poem's sentences and the sonnet form. Enjambment, working closely with caesurae, allows for the speaker to show mastery of the poem's form—stretching it almost to breaking point but never losing control. This sense of skill and control relates to the speaker's profound perception that God is the craftsman behind the beauty of the windhover—and all other beauty in the world.

Another important feature of the enjambment is the way it creates a sense of air and freedom at the end of the lines. Remember, the kestrel is not just a symbol of control and skill but also of a kind of airborne freedom, and having empty space at the end of lines 2-4 and 6-8, for example, suggests the empty space in which the bird flies.

At the first line, enjambment actually occurs not just mid-sentence, but mid-word! This means that the reader focus on the first part of the word—"king"—and momentarily applies it to the poem's subject, the kestrel. For a moment, the bird is the king of the skies. But this is soon revised, because the bird is actually more of a prince (a "dauphin"), and there can be only one king: Christ/God himself.

Enjambment also allows the speaker to manipulate the grammar of the poem's sentences. The enjambment between lines 7 and 8, for example, lends greater emphasis to the "Stirred" that begins the latter line. Likewise with the enjambment before line 13's "Shine," which makes that word all the brighter and more powerful.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “king- / dom”
- **Lines 2-3:** “riding / Of”
- **Lines 3-4:** “striding / High”
- **Lines 4-5:** “wing / In”
- **Lines 6-7:** “gliding / Rebuffed”
- **Lines 7-8:** “hiding / Stirred”
- **Lines 9-10:** “here / Buckle!”
- **Lines 10-11:** “billion / Times”
- **Lines 12-13:** “sillion / Shine,”

METAPHOR

Metaphor is used throughout "The Windhover," starting right

from the first line. Though the poem's subject is of course stated in the title, it isn't until the concrete noun "Falcon" appears that it becomes clear precisely what the speaker is talking about. Instead, the poem begins with three metaphorical depictions of the bird—before announcing its bold arrival with the capitalized noun.

- First the windhover is presented as "morning morning's minion," meaning a servant or favorite of the morning itself (which is personified here). This suggests the way in which the kestrel seems to be utterly comfortable in its environment, but also hints at the way that it serves God simply by existing and expressing the majesty of God's creation.
- The second metaphor, "kingdom of daylight's dauphin," is similar. "Dauphin" here means "prince," suggesting something noble and refined—while also implying that there is a King too. That King, of course, is God/Christ himself.
- The third and final metaphor of the opening is the description of the kestrel as "dapple-dawn-drawn." This relates to the spotty pattern on the bird's feathers, but important suggests intentional design—that is, the bird is like a work of art that proves the skill and craftsmanship of the artist.

The poem then immediately shifts to another metaphor that is nonetheless closely related to "minion" and "dauphin." The kestrel is presented as a skilled rider on horseback, who, of course, rides air currents rather than actual horses. This explores the kestrel's evident mastery of the air—just as the rider must control the horse with authority, the bird must exert its own power over the wind. Hidden in this section is a metaphor that could easily be missed: "wimpling wing." "Wimpling" relates to an outfit with folds of cloth worn by nuns, reinforcing the sense that the windhover represents something divine and worthy of religious praise. Here, too, the speaker personifies the bird by projecting an emotion of "ecstasy" on to it. This ecstasy is, of course, more in the feeling of the beholder—but it also relates more widely to the idea that the entirety of nature is a joyful expression of God's will.

The poem presents two other images in its conclusion, both of which work metaphorically. The speaker believes that the entire world—not solely the windhover—expresses the majesty of God's creation. As in other Hopkins poems, this is presented as a kind of fire contained within every individual thing in the world (which makes them part of one greater whole). In the final three lines, freshly-plowed soil shines and dark embers contain glowing golds and reds—reminding the reader that the beauty of God lies beneath the surface of even those parts of the world that don't seem immediately and obviously beautiful.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 2-5
- Line 7
- Line 10
- Lines 10-11
- Line 11
- Lines 12-14

REPETITION

"The Windhover" uses repetition a few times. The poem's opening line repeats the word "morning," albeit with a different meaning the second time—making this an example of antanaclasis:

> I caught this **morning morning's** minion,

The first "morning" refers to the time of day; the speaker saw the bird early in the day, in the morning. The second personifies morning as a being with servants (minions)—one of which is the windhover. The immediate repetition of "morning" is meant to be somewhat confusing. The reader has to really engage with the poem in order to follow its sense. The repeat of "morning" situates the time of the speaker's encounter with the windhover while also setting up the metaphorical description of the bird as "minion" of the morning. This suggests there is a kind of perfection at work—the speaker witnesses the bird in its natural habitat of not just space but *time*: the morning.

A clear example of epizeuxis then appears in line 5:

> In his ecstasy! then **off, off** forth on swing,

This example is straightforward enough: two "offs" mark the way that the windhover's movement is sudden. The speaker hardly blinks and then the bird is already in a completely different part of the sky.

The final example of repetition is in line 8, in which the speaker states clearly why the bird is so admirable: "**the** achieve of, **the** mastery of the thing!" There is a grammatical repetition on either sides of the comma caesura, creating parallelism that suggests a delicate and skillful sense of balance. This also allows for the speaker to revise "achieve[ment]" to include "mastery," capturing the speaker's breathless awe at the sight of the bird. The repeated "the" also counts as anaphora.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "morning morning's"
- **Line 5:** "off, off"
- **Line 8:** "the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!"

SIMILE

Simile is used once in "The Windhover:"

> then off, off forth on swing,
> As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend:

This simile, found in line 6, compares two different images together. It likens the graceful arc shape created by the swooping dive of the kestrel with the shapes formed by an ice skate as an ice skater performs a figure eight ("bow-bend"). The poem thus argues that these two actions have something in common: grace, geometrical beauty, speed, and precision.

These qualities are granted to the world by God and thus both the kestrel and the ice-skater provide expression of God's majesty and divine design. It's also worth noting that simile specifically compares the windhover to the skater's *heel*, suggesting that it is only a fleeting impression. That is, both windhover and skater are so quick and precise in their actions that the actions are almost done before an on-looker can observe them. This contributes to the idea that the encounter between the speaker and the windhover is something fleeting and rare.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** " As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend"

VOCABULARY

Minion (Line 1) - This means servant or, in a less common usage, favorite.

Dauphin (Line 2) - A prince.

Dapple (Line 2) - Patterned with spots. In his sonnet "Pied Beauty," Hopkins explores the way that "dappled things" reflect the glory of God.

Riding (Line 2) - The bird rides through the air currents like a rider on a horse.

Rung upon the rein (Line 4) - This means to go around in a circle, and also relates to horseback riding.

Wimpling (Line 4) - The folded cloth worn around the head by nuns.

Ecstasy (Line 5) - Pure joy.

Hurl (Line 6) - A strong throw.

Rebuffed (Line 7) - Pushed back.

Valour (Line 9) - Courage and integrity.

Buckle (Line 10) - Bend under pressure.

Thee (Line 10) - Archaic form of "you," referring here to Christ/God.

Chevalier (Line 11) - A knight.

Shéer Plód (Line 12) - Boring, repetitive work—specifically plowing land. The two accent marks mean that the words should be stressed when reading the poem aloud.

Plough (Line 12) - The digging up of soil in order to plant crops.

Sillion (Line 12) - Freshly upturned soil that shines.

Blue-black embers (Line 13) - Burnt wood or coal that retains internal heat and light.

Gall themselves (Line 14) - Put themselves in pain.

Gash (Line 14) - "Cut," particularly in relation to a bodily wound (like Christ's wrists in the crucifixion).

Gold-vermilion (Line 14) - A brilliant golden-red color.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Windhover" is a Petrarchan sonnet. Its 14 lines can thus be divided into two main sections: the octet (the first eight lines) and the sestet (the final six).

Hopkins also divides the sestet into two equal halves (three-line stanzas known as tercets). Though sonnets differ widely, the form can be thought of generally as a kind of question and answer—or a set-up followed by a commentary. Here, the octet is mainly concerned with capturing the beauty of the windhover in order to give the reader a sense of its aerial skill. At the same time, the octet develops the speaker's awe and wonder. This section ends by noting "the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!"—which is the speaker's way of expressing admiration for the bird (and, by extension, God).

The sestet, starting at line 9, then marks an important shift in the poem because the speaker's focus becomes more abstract. The poem widens its scope to consider the way in which the bird's beauty and skill is an expression of the majesty of God—a majesty that, the poem argues, is present in *all* things. The tone in lines 9-11 remains ecstatic and joyous, as though the speaker is in a kind of rapture—and feels the overwhelming desire to sing a hymn of praise to God's creation. These lines are addressed to God/Christ.

The last three lines of the poem have a calmer tone, which makes sense in light of the progression of the sonnet's argument. The speaker says that it's "no wonder" that something as precise, graceful, and powerful as the windhover exists—because these qualities are present in *all* of God's work. Having soared to great rhetorical heights, the sonnet becomes literally more down to earth, making reference to soil and ashes, and expressing admiration for the way that the fire of God's creation burns within everything that's in the world.

METER

Hopkins's poetry is known for its emphasis on accentual meter and its high degree of flexibility when it comes to unstressed syllables. Hopkins called this sprung rhythm, which in essence means that the lines generally have a mostly regular amount of accents—or stressed syllables—but a varied number of unstressed syllables. So while Hopkins's contemporaries might stick to stricter meters, like iambic pentameter (five feet of unstressed-stressed syllables), Hopkins's poetry reads more freely. It is meant to feel like natural speech, to avoid the monotony of something like iambic pentameter while still retaining a sense of control.

The poetic feet of sprung rhythm usually begin with a stress, followed by another one to three unstressed beats. There is no need to get too caught up in the technical details however, and, indeed, Hopkins's only loosely defined the concept. The most important thing to focus on is where the stresses fall, and how the variation in foot length (how many syllables are in each poetic unit) contributes to the poem's overall tone.

The first line, for example, reads like pure iambic pentameter:

> I caught | this morn- | ing morn- | ing's min- | ion, king-

The poem, then, starts with a steady rhythm that is fairly typical of sonnets at the time. But then look at how this regularity is turned on its head in the very next line:

> dom of | daylight's | dauphin, | dapple- | dawn-drawn | Falcon, | in his | riding

This helps the language sound exciting and daring, evoking the speaker's ecstatic feelings towards the sight of the windhover. Other than the first line, no others in the poem strictly conform to iambic pentameter—which is part of what makes Hopkins's poetry so original (and perhaps contributes to the fact it wasn't until well after his death that people started to really engage with his work!).

Hopkins was certainly very attentive to the metrical effects of his poems, to the extent that he sometimes marked particular syllables to ensure that they were stressed by the reader. "Shéer plód" in line 12 is meant to be read as two stressed syllables, conjuring a sense of what's being described: the hard, back-breaking work of plowing soil.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Windhover" uses rhyme throughout. Unusually, the entire octet (the sonnet's first eight lines) shares the same rhyme sound—though with one important variation. All eight lines end in the /ing/ sound, but sometimes this is stressed and sometimes it is not; think "wing" vs. "riding." When the final /ing/ is *not* stressed, the prior syllable rhymes too; look at "riding" and "striding." The octet's scheme, then, might be thought of as:

> AaaAAaaA

The capital letters mark stressed syllables and the lowercase unstressed. It could also be thought of as ABBAABBA; we like using lowercase and uppercase to illustrate the interesting relationship between these sounds. The most important thing to notice about the rhymes in the octet is the way that most of them refer to action and movement: "riding," "striding," "wing," "swing," and "gliding." This helps build the picture of the kestrel as a master of aerial skill, manipulating the wind to hover and dive at will.

The rhymes in the sestet follow a pattern of:

> CDCDCD

The C rhymes—"here," "chevalier," and "dear"—all relate to the religious aspect of the poem, while the D rhymes suggest beauty and abundance: "billion," "sillion" (shiny soil), and "gold-vermilion."

SPEAKER

The poem's opening dedication to Christ is important: it marks out the speaker as a Christian, and tells the reader that the sight of the windhover has religious significance. There is a sense of intimacy in the poem as well—in the speaker's rare encounter with the bird, and in the speaker's desire to directly address God about that experience. The poem thus becomes a kind of prayer, the speaker offering a song of praise to God's creation, and directly addressing Christ as "my chevalier" ("my knight").

The speaker of "The Windhover" is often interpreted as being Hopkins himself, though this isn't made explicit in the poem. What is clear is that the speaker is in awe of the windhover, and sees in the bird a kind of perfection that stands in for the craftsmanship of God in the creation of the world. The first eight lines (the poem's octet) capture that sense of wonder specific to the windhover, while the final six lines (the seset) allow the speaker to place this feeling in a wider religious context.

SETTING

The dedication at the start of "The Windhover"—"To Christ our Lord"—marks the poem out as a kind of prayer. This means that in one sense the setting of the poem is the speaker's mind, and the space between the speaker and God.

Looking at the poem on a more specific level, there's a clear distinction between the octet and sestet in terms of setting. The octet is almost exclusively concerned with the windhover itself, while the sestet widens out to place the speaker's

experience in a wider religious context. The octet, then, is set high in the skies, full of movements and stops in a way that mimics the bird's ability to hover and swoop. The poem catches the speaker's breathless excitement in witnessing the windhover's incredible skill.

The second half of the poem is more abstract, comparing the "fire" within the kestrel to the fire of God (which runs through all creation—even, in the speaker's example, the soil). Here, the setting widens to discuss the entire world (through specific examples), with the reference to backbreaking farm work alluding to the difficult task of being a good Christian and spiritual servant of God. Both soil and ashes here stand in for the entirety of creation.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Windhover" is one of Gerard Manley Hopkins's most celebrated poems. Though the poem was written in 1877, it was only published posthumously in 1918 in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Hopkins, a Jesuit priest, in fact burned his poems during his lifetime, feeling that they were against the principles of his Catholic religion; his friend and fellow poet Robert Bridges kept copies and ensured they were published after Hopkins's death.

Hopkins counts as a Victorian poet simply by virtue of writing during the Victorian era, but his work was unique for its time. Indeed, Hopkin's poetry wasn't entirely embraced at first, and looking at "The Windhover," it's perhaps easy to see why. His gymnastic use of grammar, decadent alliteration, and use of sprung rhythm were all strikingly original literary techniques. For Hopkins's part, he felt that "The Windhover" was the finest poem he ever wrote.

Hopkins loved language, and it's worth noting that in poems like "The Windhover" and "Pied Beauty," he was reaching for a language *worthy* of the beauty of God's creation, "the fire that breaks" from all things. His poetry shares themes with that of Christina Rossetti, who also frequently wrote devotional (religious) poetry and whose work Hopkins admired. An interesting poem of the era to *contrast* with Hopkins's is Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," which laments humankind's *loss* of faith in God—while Hopkins's poem seems to *affirm* this faith.

Hopkins was also deeply influenced by the poetry of John Keats, who wrote beautifully about nature in poems like "Ode to Autumn" and "Ode to a Nightingale." Finally, it's worth acknowledging that, though he was unknown during his own era, Hopkins's poetry became greatly influential during the 20th century, with poets like T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, and Dylan Thomas all acknowledging Hopkins's effect on their work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Windhover" is a religious poem, specifically offering praise to "Christ our Lord." Hopkins became a Roman Catholic while studying at Oxford University and, indeed, gave up poetry for a while, giving up "all beauty" until he felt he had God's approval.

Catholicism grew in popularity during the Victorian period (which refers to the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901), as did other denominations outside the Church of England. By the time Hopkins converted in 1866, Roman Catholics, though still a religious minority, had largely the same rights as other Christians. Nevertheless, the decision estranged Hopkins from family members—who were devout Anglicans, or members of the Church of England.

"The Windhover" intersects with an important question in religion: the extent to which God is present in the world and, in turn, knowable by man. This poem, as with Hopkins's others written during the same era, views the world as a *manifestation* of God—with the beauty of the world as an expression of God's own beauty, power, and craftsmanship.

Hopkins was also writing during the era of Romanticism, which saw an embrace of the natural world in response to the industrialization and urbanization of society. Such an appreciation for the beauty and wonder of nature is clearly present in this poem.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Hovering Kestrels — Learn more about kestrels and how, exactly, they hover in the wind. (https://www.discoverwildlife.com/animal-facts/birds/how-do-kestrels-hover/)
- More Poems by Hopkins — A valuable resource from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gerard-manley-hopkins#tab-poems)
- A Deep Dive Into Sprung Rhythm — An in-depth look at Hopkins's metrical innovations. (https://web.stanford.edu/~kiparsky/Papers/Sprung_Rhythm_89.pdf)
- The Poem in Song — "The Windhover" set to music (alongside other bird poems). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1PDIXgjaMu8)
- Hopkins's Life and Work — An informative BBC Radio documentary discussion about the poet. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0003clk)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS POEMS

- God's Grandeur

- Pied Beauty
- The Caged Skylark

HOW TO CITE

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