

“Spring” by Gerard Manley Hopkins

This is one of Hopkins’ bright sonnets, in which he celebrates the beauty of nature and the glory of God. This is a petrarchan sonnet, consisting of an octave which is primarily descriptive, and a sestet which is more reflective. The octave describes nature and Hopkins’ appreciation of it shines through in his descriptive language. The sestet reflects upon the meaning of this wonderful nature. For Hopkins, there is a spiritual dimension of this physical landscape, and this is explored in the last six lines.

Many of the trademark conventions which define Hopkins’ poetry are to be found in this poem. We are presented with an innovated and technically accomplished piece which is written in a unique and distinctive way.

The poem:

Nothing is so beautiful as Spring —
When weeds in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;
Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush
Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring
The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing;
The glassy peartree leaves and blooms, they brush
The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush
With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling.

What is all this juice and all this joy?
A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning
In Eden garden. — Have, get, before it cloy,
Before it cloud, Christ, lord and sour with sinning,
Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy,
Most, O maid's child, thy choice and worthy the winning.

Nothing is so beautiful as Spring —

When weeds in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;

Octave

Hopkins begins with a very **bold** statement of his philosophy. His contention that **Spring is the most beautiful season is stated with absolute conviction, and allows for no debate.**

He proceeds to give the evidence in support of this contention, by presenting the reader with a series of images, which try to capture both the beauty and vibrancy of Spring. This introduces two important concepts in the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Inscape: For Hopkins, every single thing in the universe was unique. Everything contained qualities

that helped to define that uniqueness, and to distinguish it from all other things. Hopkins believed that God was responsible for each unique thing. For him, inscape was the essence of each thing, that unique quality that set it apart from everything else. **Instress:** Hopkins also believed that each living thing had its own unique energy which was also derived from God. This unique energy signature was instress. Hopkins immediately confounds expectations by celebrating the beauty of weeds, a type of plant we traditionally frown upon. He uses alliteration and metre to capture both the essence (inscape) and energy (instress) of these particular plants.

His focus turns to the thrushes in the next few lines. He uses another series of techniques to capture the inscape and instress that defines these wonderful birds. Ellipsis is used in describing the appearance of the birds' eggs. They are also compared to the heavens, as Hopkins subtly introduces a spiritual dimension to this poem. There are examples of sensuous imagery in evidence also, while the onomatopoeic "wring" further captures that elusive inscape.

Further intense images follow, as Hopkins champions this particular season. We are told "that blue is all in a rush," as he tries to capture the instress, the energy that defines that season. The final line, with its rather quaint, colloquial (localised dialect) language, is also designed to produce a similar effect. By the end of the octave, the reader has been swept along by Hopkins in his description of nature. His use of rhythm and enjambment, coupled with the absence of any full-stops in the entire octave, ensure that the reader is made fully aware of the beauty and vitality associated with spring.

Sestet

The poem becomes much more reflective in the sestet. Hopkins begins by posing a question: What does all of this beauty of nature actually signify? The reader is invited to slow down and contemplate the answer to this question. It is also a rhetorical

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winning.

question, however, and Hopkins presents his own answer to the reader.

The poet asserts that springtime is an image of what the world would have been like in the beginning, before mankind's sinning corrupted it.

In a series of complex images, Hopkins manages to suggest what is wrong with the world, provides a vision of the type of world he would like to see, and advocates a return to that time of innocence. He suggests our loss of innocence. He uses the image of fruit becoming overripe and decaying to suggest our loss of innocence. He proceeds to use different images of innocence to present his image of the world he would like to see, and finally, he advocates a return to that world of innocence.

Summary

'**Spring**' is a sonnet. A sonnet is a rhyming fourteen-line poem. The poem is divided into two clearly different parts. The first part, of eight lines, is known as the octave. The second part, of six lines, is known as the sestet.

'Nothing is so beautiful as spring' is the first line of the poem. This line clearly summarises the meaning of the first eight lines or octave of the poem 'Spring'. A lot of this part of the poem, the octave, is easier to understand than the sestet. In the octave, Hopkins mentions many of the details of spring that impress him. He gives a series of images one after the other that are typical of the season of spring. In the second line he pictures fresh weeds growing through a wheel in a yard. In the third line he praises the speckled colours on a thrushes' egg. In the fourth and fifth lines he shows his delight at the wonderful sound of the thrushes song in the woods and compares its effect to lightning. In the sixth line he portrays the shiny leaves and blossoms of the pear-tree. In the seventh line he describes the fast moving and richly coloured blue sky. In the eighth line he shows his delight at the playful lambs.

In the sestet, the last six lines, Hopkins looks for the real meaning that lies behind the happiness and energy of nature in springtime. Therefore the sestet develops the thought of the poem. It looks for the meaning behind the beauty. Hopkins finds that nature's beauty reflects God's perfect beauty. He then expresses a wish to shelter the beauty and innocence of childhood from sin.

In line nine Hopkins asks the following basic question: 'What is all this juice and all this joy?' In line ten, Hopkins quickly answers that it all goes back to the Garden of Eden from

the bible. As a priest he believes in the stories of the bible. Spring is like an echo or a reminder of Paradise. In line eleven he begins a prayer. He prays God will preserve beauty before it loses its wholesomeness or purity. In line twelve he appeals to Christ and asks him to protect beauty from sin. In line thirteen he identifies the aspect of beauty he most wishes to see preserved. He is referring to childhood innocence. He obviously sees this as the springtime or 'Mayday' of human life. In line fourteen he appeals to Jesus as the child of Mary to win innocent children to his side and save them from sin. This is unusual because normally people who pray to Jesus want to be cleansed of sin after it happens. Jesus is normally the saviour of sinners. Hopkins wants Jesus to save the innocent. Overall it seems Hopkins changes the subject of the octave, nature, and introduces a new subject, religion, in the sestet.

Themes

Hopkins praises the **beauty of nature** in springtime:

'Nothing is so beautiful as spring'. He calls it 'all this juice and all this joy'.

Hopkins celebrates **energy in the natural world**:

'weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush'. Note how the 'w' and 'l' sounds are musical and add to the feeling of energy.

Hopkins celebrates **colour in the natural world**:

'that blue is all in a rush with richness'. Note how the repeated 'r' sound deepens the meaning.

Hopkins regards nature's beauty as a memory of Paradise:

'A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning in Eden garden'

Hopkins feels despair at the way maturity spoils childhood innocence:

'sour with sinning'. He worries for the future of innocent minds. He tells Jesus to preserve children's perfect innocence.

Tones

In the octave and the tone is **happy and full of celebration**:

'Nothing is so beautiful as spring'

In line nine the tone is **questioning**:

'What is all this juice and all this joy?'

Sometimes, also as in line nine, the tone is **full of energy**:

'What is all this juice and all this joy?'

In the sestet the tone changes and becomes **urgent and anxious**:

'Have, get, before it cloy, before it cloud'

In the sestet there is also a tone of **regret that contrasts with the joy of the octave:**
'Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning'

In the sestet the **tone is pleading:**
'Have, get'

In the sestet the tone is **prayerful:**
'Most, O maid's child, thy choice'

Imagery

Hopkins uses many comparisons:

He compares the 'eggs of a thrush' to the speckled and cloud patterned sky. This is a simile, with the word 'like' omitted. He compares the song of the thrush to lightning, another simile. He compares springtime to the Garden of Eden from the bible. This comparison is a metaphor. Notice how he compares the pear tree in the distance to a paintbrush colouring the sky, another metaphor.

Note how Hopkins uses contrast, especially between sinning and innocence. The whole poem contains a contrast between the joyful octave praising nature and the anxious sestet worried about sin and praying to God.

He uses images to capture beauty and energy:

'What is all this juice and all this joy?' and 'weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush' [these all have an appealing sound due to alliteration]. Find more yourself.

Hopkins uses various images of nature as examples of the beauty of spring:
'weeds', 'eggs', 'thrush', 'lambs' and 'peartree'.

Hopkins uses images from the bible:
'in the beginning in Eden garden'

The final image is an image of a prayer as Hopkins pleads to Jesus to preserve innocence:
'Most, O maid's child, thy choice'.

Sound effects

Alliteration [the repetition of first letters].

Note the 'j' as follows:

'juice and all this joy'; and 'l' sounds in 'look little low heavens' and 'like lightnings'

Assonance [repetition of vowels]:

Note the 'i'/'ea' sounds in 'rinse and wring the ear, it'. Note also the long 'ai'/'ea' of

'strain' and 'earth' at the start of line ten:

'A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning'.

Note also the long and musical 'e' sounds that are repeated in 'sweet', 'being' and 'beginning' in the second half of this line.

Rhyming:

There is a strong rhyming pattern. There are only three different ending sounds in the entire poem. This makes the poem very musical.

The 'ing' and 'ush' sounds are repeated at the end of various lines in the octave in the pattern: **abbaabba**

Likewise 'oy' and 'ing' form a pattern in the sestet: cbcxcb

Related images:



Beautiful plants



Trush





The blue sky



Glassy pear tree lives



In the woods (timber)



Racing lambs

Activity

1. Describe the structure of this poem fully. (4)
2. Using your OWN words, state how the speaker feels about Spring. (1)
3. Why is the speaker's description of weeds (line 2) unusual? (2)
4. Explain why the thrush's eggs are compared to 'heavens' in line 3. (2)
5. Refer to line 5 ('it strikes like ... hear him sing').
 - (a) Identify the figure of speech in this line. (1)
 - (b) Explain why this figure of speech is appropriate. (2)
6. Refer to lines 9–14 ('What is all ... worthy the winning').
 - (a) Quote TWO CONSECUTIVE WORDS from these lines that refer to paradise. (1)
 - (b) Choose the correct answer to complete the following sentence. Write only the letter (A–D) next to the question number. In the context of the poem, 'Mayday' (line 13) refers to;
 - A. Workers' Day
 - B. Spring Day
 - C. Good Friday
 - D. Arbour Day (1)
 - (c) To whom does 'maid's child' (line 14) refer? (1)
7. In your opinion, does the speaker succeed in convincing the reader about the beauty of Spring? Discuss your view. (3)