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Writing Sample

### Sprung Instress: The Sounds of Gerard Manley Hopkins

As a preacher and an aesthetic poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins often wrote about natural beauty and how it mirrors the beauty of god. Instead of using traditional forms of rhyme and meter, however, Hopkins created a “sprung rhythm” with lines that start with a stressed syllable, consist mostly of spondees and have a variable number of unstressed syllables. According to the *Norton Anthology of British Literature*, Hopkins believed in *inscape*, or the idea that everything in the universe is characterized by “the distinctive design that constitutes individual identity” which likely contributed to his own distinctive and experimental diction, meter and rhyme (1547). Moreover, Hopkins coined the term *instress*, which is the recognition of an object in an “intense thrust of energy toward it” which makes the viewer “a celebrant of the divine” – this celebratory energy is easy to appreciate in Hopkins’s poetry (1547). By using literary devices such as imagery, rhyme, consonance and meter, Hopkins was able to both capture his own experience and project that energy to readers. In “The Windhover”, “Pied Beauty” and “As Kingfishers Catch Fire” Hopkins’s unique poetic sound serves to mimic the actions of his poetic subjects, invoke his own reverence for individualistic beauty, and extend the opportunity for religious *inscape* upon readers to enjoy, all of which ultimately frames the assertion of individualism as a moral and aesthetic imperative. His use of sound does not merely describe beauty or divine order; it also actively structures how readers perceive, process, and emotionally respond to poetic experience. While grounded in Hopkins’s theological language, this essay focuses on how poetic sound structures reader perception, guiding attention and producing

affective recognition in a way that allows theological meaning to emerge through perceptual experience rather than explicit instruction.

Instead of sticking to conventional structures such as iambic pentameter, Hopkins uses sprung rhythm, consonance and rhyme schemes in “The Windhover” to create a linguistic metaphor for the sensory experience of the bird hovering in the tumult of air currents and wind gusts. For instance, in lines 3-4, “Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding/High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing” consonance exists between rolling, air, striding, there, rung, and ring, as well as how, wimpling, and wing, which creates a tremulous auditory pattern much like the miniscule muscle and feather adjustments performed by a Windhover. The soft “h” “w” and “r” consonants create a light, airy aural effect, as if the poem was as hollow-boned and airborne as the bird. These formal choices function as mediating mechanisms, shaping how meaning is encountered through sound. Moreover, many of the words end in “-ing” which produces a string of easy-to-follow rhymes:

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!

that guide readers along the currents of the sprung meter and create an almost conversational tone (5-8). In doing so, Hopkins displays his own *instress* as he structures a poem that auditorily mimics the actions of the Windhover through rhyme and consonance and, in meter, reflects his own experience and enjoyment of the bird. For readers, these sound patterns actively simulate motion, directing attention through rhythm and stress in ways that shape how the poem is

perceived before it is interpreted. This density of sound and stress demands active participation from readers, who must navigate rhythm and repetition as the poem unfolds. By using words such as “kingdom” “dauphin” and “chevalier” Hopkins invokes certain religious tones, which are reinforced with the play on words – a Windhover is a bird, but the name Windhover also represents Jesus Christ (1-2, 11). By describing the bird as a “my chevalier” Hopkins inserts himself into the poem and creates an allusion to knights as warriors of Christ – as though the bird’s actions take on a ritualized significance within Hopkins’s aesthetic and religious imagination (11). This self-indulgence in the poem, an icon of the aesthetic movement, can also be seen in his careful phrase, when his “heart in hiding/stirred for a bird” which changes from soft consonance to a strong rhyme, as though the encounter reactivates a dormant attentiveness that the poem then amplifies (7-8). By inserting himself and his gratification of the bird into the poem, Hopkins uses *instress* to show the significance Hopkins attaches to acts of attentive self-engagement. This moment of self-insertion also positions the reader as a participant in the experience, invited to feel the same surge of recognition as Hopkins.

Hopkins’s divine enjoyment of his surroundings can also be seen in “Pied Beauty,” which opens with the line “Glory be to God for dappled things” before explaining, in the subsequent lines, what is deserving of this glory (1). This opening sets the scene for a prayer, as though Hopkins himself were privately praising God, rather than speaking to the reader. While describing the dappled sky, brindled cows, fish, chestnuts, and birds, Hopkins dapples his own language and breaks traditional rules of meter, “For skies of couple-color as a brindled cow;/For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;/Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls, finches’ wings” using musical repetition of consonant and vowel sounds such as the rhymes in “couple” and “stipple” and consonance in for, fresh, fire, falls, and finches, and couple, color, cow and coal (2-

4). These sonic variations operate as a mediating mechanism, training readers to register difference and individuality through sound before assigning conceptual meaning. Indeed, while consonance and repetition serve to join these sounds together, varying assonance “With swift, slow, sweet, sour, adazzle, dim” splatters the poem with bursts of individuality (9). Together, these musical elements form a poetic example of *inscape*, as individual parts work separately to create a whole. These words signify sensory-rich and diverse things that are aesthetically pleasing, and Hopkins’s diction underscores their beauty through his acoustic tricks. The sporadic grouping of accented syllables in this sprung-rhythm poem “**fresh firecoal chestnut falls**” also create a staggered effect, especially with spondaic words such as “adazzle” and “fathers-forth” peppered in (4, 9, 10). Indeed, the variation of colorful objects and diverse diction are, themselves, *inscape*; and the closing lines “He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change;/Praise him” drive home Hopkins’s own appreciation of the beauty, as he articulates gratitude for its appearance (10-11). The pleasure produced here is carefully structured, encouraging readers to experience variety as coherence rather than disorder. The poem does not yield its coherence immediately, but asks readers to tolerate irregularity long enough for pattern and pleasure to emerge. Hopkins’s choice to create distinct rhythmic sounds that invoke a sense of speckled language and mimic the pied beauty he describes ultimately serve to underscore his deep, personal enjoyment of variegated things.

Not only is Hopkins masterful at mimicking visual phenomenon through sounds and linguistic tools, but he also expresses *inscape* in a way that purposefully leads his readers to experience their own appreciation for aesthetic individualism. Hopkins repeatedly positions sound as the first site of meaning, shaping reader response before theological or conceptual interpretation takes hold. This can be seen in his poem “As Kingfishers Catch Fire” which

combines optical and aural images to produce the idea of a natural, discrete self, created by god, which should be celebrated. The poem opens with the line “As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame” which invokes powerful and vivid visual images of radiant plumage and shimmering wings (1). True to style, Hopkins manufactures an auditory mimic for his imagery, “As tumbled over rim in roundy wells/Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s/Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name” where deep o- and uh-sounds, such as tumbled, roundy, stone, and staccato i- and eh-sounds, such as rim, ring, tell, work to imitate the alternating pitches of falling stones, tolling bells, and plucked strings (2-4). By coordinating sounds and image so tightly, Hopkins guides readers into an embodied mode of attention, where meaning emerges through sensory recognition. This combination of musical images and musical words adds meaningful depth, bringing Hopkins’s poetry to life for the reader. Interestingly, the objects described in both stanzas are also specifically described as functioning mechanisms – the stones fall down the well, the bell tolls, “the just man justices” and “each mortal thing does one thing and the same” – in doing so, Hopkins projects the concept that each individual serves a specific purpose (9, 5). This concept of *inshape* implies a creator and a standard of order for the reader to interpret, the idea of which is punctuated by Hopkins’s aural effects. Later in the poem, he uses sound to again gratify the reader to this message, “Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;/Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is—/Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places” with repetition, easy rhymes like “grace” “graces” “he is” and “places” and alliteration, Hopkins rewards readers for listening to his message with full, pleasing sounds (10-12). Hopkins also uses imagery and specified diction to guide the reader into introspection; the poem begins with a focus on external individualism but shifts to consciousness by turning the word “selves” in line 7 into a verb that means “fulfills its individuality” before shifting to theology – these lines

imply that enacting of self doesn't happen automatically but is a thing to be done. This grammatical transformation asks readers to participate in recognition, suggesting that individuality must be enacted and perceived rather than assumed. The manufacturing of "selves" as a verb also drives home Hopkins's message of *inscape* and *instress* – the recognition of one's individuality is framed through explicitly Christian metaphor.

By using literary devices such as imagery, rhyme, consonance and meter, Hopkins creates a unique poetic sound that serves to mimic the actions of his poetic subjects, invoke his own reverence for individualistic beauty, and extend the opportunity for religious *inscape* upon readers to enjoy. Across these poems, religious language provides a framework, but it is sound and form that carry readers into moments of recognition and aesthetic response. By shifting from concrete imagery to religious theology in each poem while maintaining his distinctive poetic style, Hopkins guides readers to consider divine creation and individual purpose. The commitment to his own sprung rhythm and unique poetic style stems directly from his concept of divine individualistic *inscape* and proves that he believes *instress* to be a standard for order within both poetry and the world. In this way, Hopkins's poetry functions less as doctrinal instruction than as a training ground for attention, shaping how readers learn to perceive individuality and meaning. In this sense, Hopkins's poetry models a way of reading that requires attentiveness, patience, and sensory engagement, and rewards readers who are willing to slow down, recalibrate expectations, and remain attentive through moments of irregularity. Like a true aestheticist, and by utilizing revolutionary rhyme schemes and invoking stunning imagery, Hopkins rebelled against his conventional contemporaries and unfalteringly kept faith in a vision of individuality articulated through explicitly Christian language, but realized through aesthetic experience and readerly engagement.

