
THE WINDHOVER
BY GERARD
MANLEY
HOPKINS -
COMPREHENSIVE
ANALYSIS



CONTEXT

- Gerard Manley Hopkins' *The Windhover* is a sonnet that captures the poet's awe and admiration for a kestrel, a bird of prey, in flight. The poem reflects Hopkins' deep connection with nature, while also expressing his religious faith. The bird's flight becomes a symbol of Christ's sacrifice, and its mastery of the air is linked to divine power and beauty. Hopkins uses his characteristic sprung rhythm and rich, dense imagery to convey both the physical beauty of the bird and its spiritual significance. The poem is a meditation on the intersection between the natural world, human emotion, and divine grace, showcasing Hopkins' ability to infuse the ordinary with spiritual meaning.

STANZA BY STANZA ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

- "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"
- The poem begins with the speaker catching sight of a kestrel (referred to as a "Falcon") at dawn. Hopkins describes the bird as "morning's minion," suggesting it is a servant or favourite of the morning, and "dauphin," likening it to a prince of daylight. The bird is described in rich, dynamic language, with the alliteration of "dapple-dawn-drawn" reinforcing the beauty and movement of its flight. The kestrel rides the "rolling level underneath him steady air," suggesting a sense of effortless control as it moves through the sky. The phrase "rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing" suggests that the bird's wing movement is both powerful and graceful, as it navigates the air like a rider controlling a horse.

LINES 5-8

- "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!"
- Here, Hopkins emphasises the bird's "ecstasy" in flight, capturing the joy and freedom of the kestrel as it moves through the air. The comparison to a skate's heel sweeping smoothly on ice evokes the fluidity and grace of the bird's movements. Despite the "big wind," the kestrel remains in control, "rebuffing" it with ease. The speaker's "heart in hiding" is stirred by witnessing the bird's mastery and achievement, suggesting that this moment of observation awakens something deep within him. The speaker is moved by the bird's ability to navigate the elements with such skill and grace, reflecting Hopkins' appreciation of nature's beauty and its connection to the divine.

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!"
- In these lines, Hopkins brings together different qualities of the bird—its "brute beauty," "valour," and "act"—which seem to "buckle" or converge in a moment of intense power and beauty. The bird's pride and plume (feathers) are part of its physical majesty, but Hopkins also suggests that there is something even greater at work: the "fire" that breaks from the bird is a metaphor for divine energy or spiritual transcendence. The word "chevalier" (French for knight) connects the kestrel to the idea of chivalry, heroism, and nobility, implying that the bird represents more than just natural beauty—it symbolises a higher, spiritual force.

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, Hopkins reflects on the deeper spiritual message of the kestrel's flight. The "sheer plod" refers to the hard work of ploughing, which makes the furrows ("sillion") shine with an inner beauty. Similarly, "blue-bleak embers" of a fire, when they fall and "gall themselves," reveal a "gold-vermilion" glow. These images suggest that even the most mundane or difficult tasks can produce moments of divine beauty and transformation. The transformation of the ploughed earth and the embers into something beautiful reflects the redemptive power of Christ's sacrifice, a theme that underpins much of Hopkins' poetry.

KEY THEMES

THE MAJESTY AND POWER OF NATURE

- Hopkins vividly describes the kestrel's flight as a moment of grace and power. The bird becomes a symbol of the beauty and mastery inherent in the natural world, and Hopkins' language captures its elegance and strength. Through the bird, Hopkins conveys a sense of awe at the power of nature, but also at its ability to reflect the divine.

- Quotes:

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

This description of the kestrel as a "minion" of the morning and a "dauphin" of daylight elevates the bird's flight to something majestic and princely.

- • "The hurl and gliding / Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding / Stirred for a bird."

These lines capture the sheer physical beauty and power of the bird's movements, as it masterfully controls the wind and air.

INTERSECTION OF THE NATURAL AND THE DIVINE

- The bird's flight is not just a physical act, but also a metaphor for the divine. Hopkins sees the kestrel as a symbol of Christ, and its movements reflect the glory and power of God. The poem suggests that nature is a manifestation of divine beauty, and that even a bird in flight can inspire awe for God's creation.

- Quotes:

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

The "fire" that breaks from the bird is a symbol of divine energy, and the use of "chevalier" links the kestrel to the nobility and sacrifice of Christ.

- • "Shéer plód makes plough down sillion / Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear, / Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion."

These lines suggest that even in the ordinary (ploughing or embers), there is divine beauty and transformation, just as Christ's sacrifice redeems the world.

THE JOY OF ACHIEVEMENT

- Hopkins marvels at the kestrel's mastery of the air and its effortless ability to control its environment. This joy in achievement is not limited to the bird but extends to the spiritual realm, where Christ's mastery and sacrifice are seen as the ultimate act of love and redemption.

- Quotes:

- • "My heart in hiding / Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!"

Hopkins is moved not only by the bird's beauty but by its mastery of the air, which becomes a metaphor for divine achievement.

- • "Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here / Buckle!"

The convergence of these qualities in the bird reflects the moment of mastery and power, which Hopkins sees as a moment of divine beauty.

MOOD OF THE POEM

- The mood of *The Windhover* is one of awe and reverence. Hopkins expresses wonder at the beauty and power of the kestrel, whose flight evokes feelings of joy and admiration. This sense of awe is deepened by the religious undertones of the poem, as Hopkins sees the bird's movements as a reflection of Christ's divine power and sacrifice. The mood is both celebratory, as Hopkins marvels at the bird's mastery, and contemplative, as he reflects on the spiritual significance of what he has witnessed.

LITERARY DEVICES

ALLITERATION

- "morning's minion, king- / dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon"

Hopkins' use of alliteration creates a musical quality that mimics the fluidity and grace of the kestrel's flight, while also emphasising the beauty of the moment.

METAPHOR

- "The fire that breaks from thee then, a billion / Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!"

The kestrel's flight is compared to "fire," representing divine energy or grace. The metaphor of the bird as a "chevalier" (knight) further elevates the bird to a symbol of Christ-like nobility and sacrifice.

SIMILE

- "As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend."

This simile compares the bird's flight to the smooth motion of a skate on ice, emphasising the grace and fluidity of its movements.

SPRUNG RHYTHM

- Hopkins uses his distinctive sprung rhythm to capture the dynamic energy of the kestrel's flight. The irregular, stressed syllables mimic the bird's sudden movements and create a sense of spontaneity and natural power.

CONCLUSION

- The Windhover is a vivid and spiritually charged meditation on the beauty, power, and mastery of a kestrel in flight. Gerard Manley Hopkins uses rich imagery and complex metaphors to convey his awe at the bird's movements, seeing in them a reflection of Christ's divine sacrifice and the glory of God's creation. Through his characteristic use of sprung rhythm, alliteration, and metaphor, Hopkins elevates the natural world to a site of spiritual revelation, suggesting that even in the ordinary, we can glimpse the divine. The Windhover is ultimately a celebration of both the natural and the spiritual, capturing the joy of mastery and the enduring presence of divine grace in the world.