

H1 Poetry | Hopkins Sample Essay

‘In exploring his complex relationship with God, Hopkins produces poetry that ranges from delight to despair’

‘For a man to become a poet he must be in love, or miserable’ - Lord Byron

Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poetry expresses his love with the relationship between God and nature yet miserable and ambivalent when depicting his own personal relationship with God. In addressing this complex relationship, Hopkins produces delightful works like ‘Spring’ and ‘God’s Grandeur’ but also more pessimistic poetry such as ‘No worst there is none’ and ‘Thou art indeed just, lord, if I contend’. The clear line between positive and negative in these poems accurately conveys the plethora of psychological adversities Hopkins faces when trying to define his relationship with God.

‘Spring’ commences with an authoritative, forceful declaration that is incontrovertibly true: ‘nothing is so beautiful as Spring’. For Hopkins, spring is the beginning of new life, just as autumn was the end for Yeats. As a religious man, Hopkins credits God with the creation of all new life and the following energetic employment of celebratory wording can only be seen as Hopkins’ celebration of God in nature, ‘the racing lambs have too their fling’. From the opening alone, it is evident that Hopkins, at this stage in his career, had a positive relationship with God. The energy of this sonnet is not only in its wording but also in Hopkins as, through his poetic prowess, he transforms nouns into verbs, expressing the excitement and power he feels with nature and God, ‘The glassy pear tree leaves and blooms’. Hopkins continues throughout the poem in a positive fluency almost always praising some element of nature. This delightful celebration of life leads right up to the closing of the poem where Hopkins ultimately reveals his satisfaction and contentment with God and God’s decisions in his life. ‘Most, O maid’s child, thy choice and worthy the winning’. ‘Spring’ is quite simply the epitome of optimism for Hopkins. It would appear that Hopkins was most satisfied with life during

the period of writing 'Spring'. Essentially, I believe this is down to his positive relationship with God and virtually the entire poem can be seen as a delightful tribute to Him.

In 'God's Grandeur', just as in 'Spring', we note that Hopkins' affinity to see the almighty power of God in nature. This capacity can be credited to Hopkins' ever maturing relationship with God. The obviously positive connotations this poem has to offer begins with another short, emphatic opening statement. 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God'. Despite the positivity that permeates this poem, the true complexities of Hopkins' relationship with God still shine through in the form of a somewhat omniscient question: 'why do men then now not reckon his rod? Generations have trod, have trod, have trod'. Hopkins poses this question to mankind in a manner that suggests he excludes himself from this ignorant majority and in doing so becomes ignorant himself. I feel that the simple fact Hopkins seems to overlook his responsibility to mankind makes him just as culpable. I personally feel this point in Hopkins' career can be seen as the origin of his complex relationship with God. To reinforce my point on Hopkins' arrogance, he completely bypasses this topic of self-righteousness and returns immediately to ridicule mankind. 'And for all this, nature is never spent'. Hopkins argues that without the presence of God mankind would have wiped itself out long ago. Ultimately this poem shares both delight and despair but ultimately the latter as Hopkins' relationship grows ever more ambiguous.

'No worst there is none' brings the transition from delight to despair as we delve deeper into the complex nature of Hopkins' faith. Similar to previous poems the opening line is a declaration, this time permeated with powerful, explosive alliteration that conveys his despondent state. 'No worst there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief, more pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring'. This opening ultimately sums up his sense of abandonment as he references his pain and suffering. Hopkins yearns for a 'relief' he feels he can only achieve from a higher power. As an extremely religious man, Hopkins believes all adversities are a test from God the almighty. However, each

test seems to take its toll on our poet, and he begins to question his capacity for endurance. In doing so he almost demand God to open the proverbial flood-gates of pain and get it over with. 'No lingering! Let me be fell: force I must be brief'. Although Hopkins never explicitly references God throughout this poem, I know from previous annotations that he believes God and nature are two inextricably linked things. With the employment of natural imagery such as the mountain but more so Hopkins hanging from it, I understand that he believes his relationship with God is an exercise of endurance. The poem closes on a despairingly bleak note. 'All life death does end and each day dies with sleep'. I personally see this as Hopkins adopting an extremely fatalistic attitude. He almost hopes that death takes him sooner rather than later as he is under the impression that his relationship with God is withering.

'Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend' continues the despairing and bleak outlook on life Hopkins previously adopted in 'No worst there is none'. Hopkins makes an argument that can only be viewed as addressed to God, 'Why to sinners' ways prosper?'. I see this question as a question of his own faith rather than rhetorical. Hopkins has held his relationship with God above all else in life and this question brings him to conclude that 'the sots and thralls of lust do in spare hours more thrive than I'. He asks himself if his sacrifice has been worth it and we get the impression he is suffering some form of existential crisis. Despite the painfully unclear emotions he experiences that can all be traced back to his complex relationship with God, he seeks His guidance once again: 'Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes. Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain'. As Hopkins laments his shortcomings and failures, I feel despair for him, but as he asks God for an answer in the closing line, I cannot help but feel hopeful. I feel hopeful because despite what he has endured and sacrificed; Hopkins still sees God as he did before his evident bout of depression. He sees God as a helping hand to all those who believe. This is why I believe Hopkins' last words 'I am happy, I am so happy' are justified. For this reason, I contest that 'Thou art indeed just, lord, if I contend' is an admirable poem despite its questionable negativity.

Hopkins overcame his complex relationship with God to ultimately produce this stimulating infusion of despair and delight.

In conclusion, Gerard Manley Hopkins' poetry provides an honest exploration into his relationship with God. The complexities of this relationship unequivocally inspire the mentally refreshing combination of both delight and despair in his verse. Despite Hopkins' occasionally intensely religious stanzas, his poetry is undoubtedly applicable to today's world. I personally credit Hopkins for one of the most compelling arguments I have read for the existence of God.