

Poetry
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Gerard Manley Hopkins

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Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)



- Historical and Literary Context
- Gerard Manley Hopkins
- “The Windhover” Mss.
- Title and Subtitle/Dedication
- “The Windhover”
- Analysis
- Approaches to the Poem
 - Spiritual and Secular Readings
 - Poststructuralist Reading
 - A Human(istic) Reading



The last poet for this week on Victorian poetry, we see is Gerard Manley Hopkins, who lived between 1844 and 1889. First, we will see the historical and literary context, then a brief outline of his life. We will specifically focus on, The Windhover, with reference to the manuscripts, the title, subtitle, then read the whole poem, analyze it, and then we have some approaches to the poem, particularly three approaches: spiritual and secular readings, poststructuralist reading, and finally, a humanistic reading of this poem, ‘The Windhover.’

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Historical and Literary Context



- **1829:** Catholic Emancipation Act; relief for Catholics to participate in the political process
- **1833:** The Oxford Movement; a religious revival in the Church of England tracing its origin and practice to RC; led by J H Newman, John Keble, Edward Pusey
- **1845:** Cardinal Newman's conversion to RC Church
- **1871:** The Universities Tests Act; Catholics and other groups could study in universities and obtain degrees
- Religious literature; autobiography and poetry
 - Cardinal Newman's "Lead Kindly Light" (1834)
 - Christina Rossetti's "Up-hill" (1862)



Let us pay attention to the dates we have given, 1829. At this time, there was this Catholic Emancipation Act, which was passed by English parliament to give relief for Catholics to participate in the political process. We have to remember that historically, Catholics were neglected, discriminated against in England until 1829, when this Act was passed. After this Act was passed, from the year 1833, we find a movement called 'the Oxford movement.' It refers to a religious revival in the Church of England, tracing its origin and practice to Roman Catholic Church, led by John Henry Newman, John Keble, and Edward Pusey, among others. A major event of Victorian time was this that happened in 1845. Cardinal Newman converted himself into Roman Catholic Church. Later on, in 1871, we find this Act being passed, 'Universities Tests Act.' This Act enabled Catholics and all other different groups to study in universities and obtain degrees.

Until then, only Protestants who belonged to the Church of England were allowed to study in universities and obtain degrees, incredible. During this time, we find the growth of religious literature in which poets were writing about themselves and also about their relation to God. We have two famous examples here. Cardinal Newman's poem 'Lead Kindly Light,' published in 1834, and Christina Rossetti's poem 'Up-hill' published in 1862.

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Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)



- Born in a prosperous Protestant family
- Newman received him into RC Church in 1866
- (Jesuit) priest-poet: poet-priest
- Wrote poems and destroyed them
- Shared copies with Robert Bridges, poet laureate
- Poems published in 1918
- Victorian poet but with a modernist sensibility
- Considered difficult and obscure
- Imagistic, ambiguous, paradoxical
- Overtly experimental in form, language, and rhythm



Gerard Manley Hopkins was born in a prosperous protestant family. Cardinal Newman received him into Roman Catholic Church in 1866, causing this conflict in him between priest and poet, or between poet and priest. Hopkins wrote poems and destroyed them for fear. However, he shared some of his poems with Robert Bridges, then poet laureate of England.

Many of these poems were published in 1918 by Robert Bridges. Hopkins was a Victorian poet with a modern sensibility, often considered difficult and obscure for his imagistic, ambiguous and paradoxical language. He was overtly experimental in form, language and rhythm, and he was appreciated by poets like Pound and Eliot, much later.

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Robert Bridges (1844-1930)



- Hopkins's friend, preserver and publisher of poems
- Kate Hopkins, Hopkins's sister, helped Bridges in collecting and publishing.
- Poet laureate of England from 1913 to 1930
- Popular in his day but chiefly remembered today for his publication of Hopkins's poems in 1918.



Here we have the picture of Robert Bridges, who is remembered today, because he took care to publish the poems of Hopkins. He was a poet laureate himself at that time, but then, he is chiefly remembered today, because he contributed to literature, British literature by publishing the poems which he collected from Kate Hopkins, Hopkins's sister. So, we can serve society in so many ways, by writing poems, and also by publishing poems of others.

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“The Windhover”: Manuscripts



- Three manuscripts: MS1 (A1), MS2 (A2), MS3 (B)
- No definite copy; even the author-signed copy is not authoritative.
- Dedication added six years after original composition
- Hopkins considered it his best poem
- Editors have presented the poem differently to indicate their own interpretations by modifying punctuations, capitalization, line arrangements, etc.



There are three manuscripts of the poem, 'The Windhover.' They are called MS1 that is A1, MS2 that is A2 and then MS3, that is B. However, there is no definite copy. Even the author signed copy is not exactly authoritative. We also have the indication of this dedication, which was added six years after the original composition of this poem. In all of his poems, Hopkins considered this to be his best poem. Editors have presented the poem differently to indicate their own interpretations by modifying punctuations, capitalization, line arrangements, and so on.

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Title and Subtitle

- **Title:** "The Windhover" (1877)
- A small bird of the kestrel family
- **Subtitle:** *To Christ our Lord* (1883)
- Dedication added after six/seven years of composition



• Problems

- Is the poem about Christ? Is it a spiritual poem?
- Is the poem about Christ through the symbol of the bird? A symbolic poem?
- Is the poem about the bird? Is it a nature poem?
- Is the poem about Joan of Arc? Is it a historical poem?
- Is the poem about Hopkins's own conflictual feelings? Is it a love poem?



The question begins with the title and subtitle itself. So, let us pay attention to this. The title of the poem is, The Windhover. It was published in 1877. This refers to a small bird of the kestrel family. The subtitle, 'To Christ our Lord' was added in 1883, almost six or seven years after the composition of the original poem.

So, this title and subtitle have led to serious problems like this: we have list of questions; Is the poem about Christ? Is it a spiritual poem? Is the poem about Christ through the symbol of the bird, that means is it a symbolic poem? Is the poem about the bird that means is it a nature poem? Is the poem about Joan of Arc? That means, is it a historical poem? Is the poem about Hopkins's own conflictual feelings? Is it a love poem?

Many critics have read this poem differently to find their own meanings from this poem. So, we have these questions. We do not have definite answers, each one will give his or her own answer based on certain evidences that they could collect from this poem and other Poems, or the life of Hopkins or from other accounts given by many others.

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Octave: First Eight 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! 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!



Let us read the poem. This is a sonnet. So, first, we have eight lines then we have six lines.

“I CAUGHT this morning morning's minion, king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn
[Falcon, in is 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!

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Sestet: Next Six Lines



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: sheer plod makes plough down

[sillion

Shine, and blue-bleak embers, **ah my dear,**

Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.



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, sheer plod makes plough down

[sillion

Shine, and blue-bleak embers, **ah my dear,**

Fall gall themselves, and gash gold-vermillion.

This is a powerful poem by Hopkins.

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Form



- A sonnet in the Petrarchan/ Miltonic tradition;
- 14 lines
- Octave and Sestet
- Theme of secular and spiritual love
- **Inscape** (whatness of a thing) and **instress** (the divine energy that supports inscape and brings it alive)
- Inscape of the bird and instress of Christ



The form of the poem is a sonnet in the Petrarchan and Miltonic tradition. It has 14 lines. We have octave and sestet. The theme of the poem is secular and also spiritual love. We have to remember that Hopkins introduced two critical terms called inscape or instress. Inscape refers to whatness of your thing or the thingness of a thing, and instress refers to the divine energy that supports inscape and brings it alive. The inscape of the bird and the instress of Christ are beautifully brought out in this poem, according to Hopkins and many other readers.

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Poetic Devices



- **Imagery:** flight, hovering, hurling, gliding, shine, fire, cross
- **Metaphor:** falcon, dauphin, chevalier, plough, Christ
- **Simile:** as a skate's heel
- **Ambiguity:** 7th type, contradiction in the mind of the poet (Empson)
- **Paradox:** bird of prey as Christ; living in death



Let us see the poetic devices in this poem. We have a few images in this poem. These are very powerful; flight, hovering, hurling, gliding, shine, fire, cross. These refer to the movement of the bird. Then we have the metaphor of the falcon, dauphin, chevalier, plough, Christ. Falcon is a bird. Dauphin is a reference to the King of France. Chevalier refers to Christ. Plough refers to a ploughman that is a farmer. And then finally we have Christ.

A simile is seen in as a skate's heel. And we have this notable ambiguity according to Empson that is 7th type of ambiguity. It refers to the contradiction in the mind of the poet. The whole poem is a paradox because The Windhover, kestrel is a bird of prey, and this is compared with Christ. And there is an element of living in death in this poem when it comes to the sacrifice of Christ. That is why this poem is paradoxical.

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Alliteration

- caught ... king (1), morning morning's minion (1)
- dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn (2)
- steady air, and striding (3)
- rung upon the rein (4), wimpling wing (4)
- skate's heel sweeps smooth (6), bow-bend (6)
- heart in hiding (7)
- the achieve of, the mastery of the thing (8)
- Brute beauty (9) pride, plume (9)
- the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion (10)
- Times told (11)
- sheer plod makes plough down sillion (12)
- blue-bleak (13)
- Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermillion (14)



What is remarkable about this poem is alliteration. We can see this in the whole of the poem. We have to remember that Hopkins was interested in the alliterative poetry of British literature. He was interested in old literature and mediaeval literature; “Caught, king, morning morning’s minion, dom of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn, steady and striding, rung upon the rein, wimpling wing, skate’s sweeps smooth, bow-bend, heart in hiding, the achieve, the mastery of the thing, Brute beauty, pride, plume, the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion, Times told, sheer plod makes plough down sillion, blue bleak, Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermillion,” very powerful poetry. All emphatic poetry we can say that.

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Alliteration and Sprung Rhythm



- “The Windhover” is the best-known of Hopkins's poems, and its sound patterns are exemplary of his mature work.

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



Then we have the connection between alliteration and sprung rhythm here. The Windhover is the best known of Hopkins's poems, and its sound patterns are exemplary of his mature work. Hopkins himself has given notations for understanding the rhythm. This is an example of the sprung rhythm that he has given. I have presented it in a different form for us to understand easily.

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

That is a kind of poetry that he wrote from his heart about nature and Christ.

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The Significance of Alliteration



“The position of alliteration at the onset of the word makes it uniquely effective for emphasizing the stress. In the above passage, fourteen of twenty stresses, or 70 percent, alliterate within their lines.”

[Wimsatt, James I. 1998. “Alliteration and Hopkins’s Sprung Rhythm,” *Poetics Today*, 19 (4): 531-564.]



What is the significance of alliteration? We have a critic called Wimsatt. In an essay, he has written this statement,

“The position of alliteration at the onset of the word makes it uniquely effective for emphasizing the stress. In the above passage, fourteen of twenty stresses or 70 percent alliterate within their lines.”

[Wimsatt, James I. 1998. “Alliteration and Hopkins’s Sprung Rhythm,” *Poetics Today*, 19 (4): 531-564]

That is something remarkable, 14 of 20 stresses, that is 70 percent stresses are alliterate contributing to this sprung rhythm.

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Assonance



Caught this morning morning's (1)
dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn (2)
wimpling wing (4)
off, off forth on (5)
heel sweeps (6)
big wind (7)
Stirred for a bird (8)
and valour and act (9)
Brute ... plume (9)
Fall, gall (14)



We have also assonance here, number of them; caught this morning mornings, dauphin dapple-dawn-drawn, wimpling wing, off, off forth on, heel sweeps, big wind, stirred for a bird and valour and act, Brute plume, Fall, gall.

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Rhyme



- **Rhyme scheme:** abba abba cdc dcd
- **End rhyme:** king - wing; here - dear
 - Masculine rhyme:** king - wing; swing - thing
 - Feminine rhyme:**
 - Octave:** riding - striding; gliding - hiding
 - Sestet:** here - chevalier - dear;
billion -sillion, -vermillion;
- **Internal rhyme:** lovelier and chevalier



We have some element of rhyme in this; rhyme scheme is abba abba cdc and dcd. The end rhyme we have in king-wing, here-dear. We have some masculine rhyme in the case of king-wing, swing-thing. And feminine rhyme in riding-striding, gliding-hiding. In the

sestet we have both masculine and feminine rhyme; here, dear, then chevalier, billion
sillion, vermillion. We have with a case of internal rhyme as well, lovelier and chevalier
within the same line.

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Rhythm and Meter



Rhythm: Sprung rhythm – “springs from one strong syllable to the next without any pause between”
[Wainright, 201]

Meter: iambic [x /], (de'scribe; I 'caught)
spondee [xx] ('gold 'coin; 'dawn-drawn)
trochaic [/ x] ('tiger; 'morning)
anapest [/ / x] (over'come; ah my 'dear)
dactyl [x / /] ('elephant; 'striding)



Let us connect rhythm with meter now in this part; rhythm is sprung rhythm; this is again a concept conceived by Hopkins himself. Sprung rhythm to quote ‘springs from one strong syllable to the next without any pause between.’ We have this quotation from Wainright to describe Hopkins’s sprung rhythm. We have also given some examples of iambic, spondee, trochaic, anapest and dactyl. Here equally we have given some examples from the poem, for iambic, we have ‘I caught.’ Spondee we have ‘dawn-drawn.’ For trochaic we have ‘morning.’ Anapest, ‘ah my dear’ and dactyl ‘striding.’ Some common examples also we have in between for better understanding.

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Approaches to The Windhover



- **Two major approaches:** spiritual and secular readings with and without the Christ symbol
- Hundreds of articles and volumes of books on the sonnet.
- Still fascinating for commentators/ critics
- Empson's seventh type of ambiguity
- Eagleton's poststructuralist reading
- A proposal for a humanistic reading



Now let us move on to the approaches to The Windhover. Two major approaches are always there, spiritual and secular readings, with and without the Christ symbol. Hundreds of articles and volumes of books on the sonnet are available. Still, after so many writings, still it is fascinating for commentators and critics. Well known ambiguity is seventh type of ambiguity discussed by Empson in his book, seven types of ambiguity. We also have a poststructuralist reading of this poem by Eagleton in his book, 'How to read a poem?' Then, we propose a humanistic reading, we will see all this now.

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Spiritual Reading (Stoneman, 1973)



- God manifests in nature in all forms.
- “The bird, the poet, and God buckle together as a source of spiritual power.”
- Christian militant interpretation
- Diving is an act of sacrifice.

[Stoneman, Patricia. 1973. “Hopkins: The Windhover, To Christ Our Lord,” *Critical Survey*, 6 (1/2):81-85.]



First spiritual reading offered by Stoneman. God manifests in nature in all forms, including this Windhover, the bird, the poet, and God buckled together, fastened together as a source of spiritual power. This is a Christian militant interpretation. And the bird diving down is an act of sacrifice. That is what Stoneman says.

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Secular Reading (Litzinger, 1987)



- No Christ, no dive, no collapse, no wonderment.
- Like Milton’s “They also serve who only stand and wait”
- “a poem of the modern world”
- A modern man’s aspiration to martyrdom is difficult to achieve.
- The dedication is an act of submission.

[Litzinger, Boyd. 1967. “Once More, The Windhover,” *Victorian Poetry*, 5 (3): 228-230.]



We have a secular reading from Litzinger; Litzinger says there is no Christ, no dive, no collapse, no wonderment. It is just like another sonnet; That is, Milton’s sonnet ‘On his

Blindness,' who says, "They also serve who only stand and wait. It is a poem of the modern world." It describes a modern man's aspiration to martyrdom, which is difficult to achieve. And the dedication by Hopkins is an act of submission. That is all, says Litzinger.

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Secular Reading (Vendler, 2018)

- Vendler proposes a new secular reading of the poem based on Hopkins's Latin grammar in the sestet, especially the six nouns as objects before the contentious verb 'buckle.'
- **Octave** – past tense; bird's action; all nature
- **Sestet** – present tense; the poet's reaction; no theology
- Buckle is a command to the self.
- **Identity**: I am the windhover.
- **Difference**: The bird is an animal species.
- "The Windhover" is a sonnet of the earth, not of heaven."
- The poem is both tragic and sublime.

[Vendler, Helen. 2018. "Catching Fire: The Windhover," *Victorian Poetry*, 56 (2): 111-127.]



We have another secular reading from Helen Vendler. She proposes a new secular reading of the poem based on Hopkins's Latin grammar, in the sestet, especially the six nouns as objects before the contentious verb buckle; buckle is a problematic verb in this poem. So, she explains it through Latin grammar; it is a fantastic reading. I would suggest you to read this article, which was published in 2018. In the octave, we have past tense, that refers to the bird's action, all-natural forms. Then in sestet, we have present tense. This refers to the poet's reaction. There is no theology according to Vendler. She says, buckle is a command to the self, she notices identity and difference; identity, in the case of I and the windhover coming together. That is, 'I am the windhover.' And difference, to differentiate between the speaking I and the object, that is the windhover, the bird is an animal species, and I am different from that. So Vendler says, The Windhover is a sonnet of the earth, not of heaven. The poem is both tragic and sublime.

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Empson and “The Windhover”



Best illustration of William Empson's seventh type of ambiguity – contradiction due to a split in the mind of the poet.

Poet of the windhover or priest of Christ

[Empson, W. 1949. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Chatto and Windus, London.]



Empson identifies this ‘Seventh Type of Ambiguity’ in this poem, because he says, ‘this is the best illustration of the seventh type of ambiguity referring to that contradiction due to a split in the mind of the poet.’ There was a split in the mind of the poet, because he was drawn to nature he was also drawn to God. So consequently, there was a conflict within him, and that conflict is reflected in this poem. So, he says, Hopkins is a poet of The Windhover. He is also a priest of Christ, and that is where we have the conflict between the two.

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A Poststructuralist Reading



- “language works more by **compression and association** than by fully spelt-out connections.”
- “a peculiar verbal self-consciousness”
- “The Windhover” – “a pretty exotic example of the play of the signifier – of language focused flamboyantly upon itself.”
- Modernist suspicion of language and even a celebration of it
- “The modern idea of the **‘materiality of the signifier’** – that the word has its own texture, pitch and density, which poetry exploits more fully than other verbal arts.”

[Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*, pp.42-43]



Let us see Eagleton’s poststructuralist reading. According to him, ‘language works more by compression and association than by fully spelt-out connections.’ So, it means the poem is a compressed one. The compressed poem shows a peculiar verbal self consciousness. According to him, ‘The Windhover is a pretty exotic example of the play of the signifier of language focused, flamboyantly upon itself.’

It also shows the modernist suspicion of language and even a celebration of it. The modern idea of the ‘materiality of the signifier’ that the word has its own texture, pitch and density, which poetry exploits more fully than other verbal arts. That is why we have this poststructuralist reading from Eagleton.

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A Human(istic) Reading (SPD)



- The poem offers three options for living.
- The **windhover** is an option. We can be **animalistic** and use brute force for our existence.
- The **Christ** is also an option. We can be **divine**, and use spiritual force for our own and the existence of others.
- The **ploughman** as a **human being** lives for himself and for others too. We shine in our responsibility to ourselves and to others. An element of sacrifice is inevitable, but then we also have our own splendor.
- All three options have the fire of life.



After reading so many articles, we propose this Humanistic Reading. We did not find this focus on deployment, so we thought it would be good to have this reading as well. The poem offers three options for living; The Windhover is an option, that is bird's life, we can be animalistic, and use brute force for our existence. We can kill other animals, other things and eat and survive.

Then we have the example of Christ, who is also an option. We can be divine and use spiritual force for our own existence and for the existence of others. Then in the poem this I find to be very important to understand this poem. There is a reference to the plough; there is a ploughman as a human being who lives for himself and for others too. At all times all of us say that we should pay attention to farmers. I believe that the ploughman is very important for us to understand how he, as a farmer lives for others and for himself too. If you follow the ploughman, we shine in our responsibility to ourselves, and for others. Element of sacrifice is inevitable, but then we also have our own splendor.

All three options have the power of life, we can live like a bird, we can live like Christ, we can live like the ploughman. And, for me, the ploughman is so appealing because the ploughman is a symbol of hard work for himself and for the rest of humanity.

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Summary



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 - A Human(istic) Reading



In summary, we have seen the historical and literary context of Gerard Manley Hopkins, who wrote this poem ‘The Windhover’ in different contexts, having three manuscripts without any authoritative manuscript for us, giving title and also subtitle, causing so many interpretative problems.

We read the poem, analyze the poem; rhetorically, poetically, and then we offered three approaches from critics and ourselves; spiritual and secular readings, poststructuralist reading, and finally, we offered this humanistic reading. This is a fantastic poem, which has generated so much of meaning. Hope, you will read this again and again and enjoy it. There are some references as usual.

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Further References



- Mackenzie, Norman H. 1981. *A Reader's Guide to Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.
- Owens, Thomas. 2019. "Hopkins's Kestrel: Drafting 'The Windhover,' 1877-1884," *Victorian Poetry*, 57 (1): 43-72.
- Servotte, Herman. 1989. "A Deconstructionist Reading of The Windhover," *English Studies*, 70 (3): 253-255.



We have given further references because, we have already referred to many references within the discussion. Hope you can find at least some and increase your understanding of the poem. Thank you.