Binsey Poplars

POEM TEXT

felled 1879

My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,
Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,
All felled, felled, are all felled;
Of a fresh and following folded rank
Not spared, not one
That dandled a sandalled
Shadow that swam or sank
On meadow and river and wind-wandering weed-winding bank.

O if we but knew what we do
When we delve or hew—
Hack and rack the growing green!
Since country is so tender
To touch, her being só slender,
That, like this sleek and seeing ball
But a prick will make no eye at all,
Where we, even where we mean
To mend her we end her,
When we hew or delve:
After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.
Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve
Strokes of havoc únselve
The sweet especial scene,
Rural scene, a rural scene,
Sweet especial rural scene.

SUMMARY

My beloved aspen trees, whose airy branches held back or dampened the beams of sunlight in their leaves—they're cut down, they're cut down, they've all been cut down. Out of a long, lively, even row of trees, not a single one has survived: not a one of any of these trees, which once cradled my sandal-wearing summertime shadow as I swam or lay at ease in the meadow, in the river, and along the breezy, weedy riverbank.

Oh, if only we knew what we were doing when we dig things up or cut things down—when we chop at and torment the living green world! For the countryside is as fragile and delicate as an eyeball. Just as a mere poke can blind an eye forever, even our best-intentioned changes to the landscape spoil it, whenever we cut things down or dig things up. People who come here later will never be able to imagine how beautiful the places we destroyed once were. Ten or twelve—a mere ten or twelve chaotic axe-blows destroy the identity of this beautiful, beloved landscape. Oh, my countryside, my beloved, most special countryside.

THEMES

HUMANITY'S ABUSE OF NATURE

"Binsey Poplars" records Gerard Manley Hopkins's heartbreak after a row of riverside trees in Binsey (a hamlet just outside Oxford) was cut down. Appalled to discover that his beloved "aspens" have been "felled," the poem's speaker reflects that nature is as fragile as it is lovely. It takes only a moment of human thoughtlessness to "unselve" (or destroy the identity of) a whole landscape. Nature, this poem suggests, offers people boundless beauty and comfort—a gift that humanity often thoughtlessly abuses.

Mourning a row of chopped-down trees that once shaded a stretch of river near Oxford, the speaker (whom readers can interpret as Hopkins himself) sounds as devastated as if he were grieving a person: "all felled, felled, all are felled," he cries. He misses these trees, not because he used to feel that they "dandled" (or lovingly rocked) him like a child in their lovely shadows, but because without them the landscape itself seems "unselve[d]," robbed of its peculiar personality. These trees, he feels, were kindly beings that made the meadows around Binsey what they were. Not just he but the whole "sweet especial rural scene" is injured by their loss.

By treating these trees only as a resource or as unimportant ornaments to be rearranged or discarded, the woodcutters reveal just how greedy, selfish, and short-sighted humanity can be toward nature. As the speaker reflects, it takes only a moment of human thoughtlessness—a mere "ten or twelve" strokes of an axe—to create utter "havoc" in what was once a place of lovely, comforting harmony. Just as one "prick" destroys an eye's power of sight, a few lopped trees can change a landscape so radically that "after-comers cannot guess" how beautiful it once was. When people "hew and delve" (or chop and dig), exploiting nature for material wealth, they leave irreversible ruin in their wake.

This poem thus becomes a lament not just over a "sweet especial rural scene" that the speaker loved, but over humanity's relationship to the natural world in general. The speaker's lost aspens are figures for all the natural beauty that

humanity has carelessly spoiled.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-25

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,
Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,
All felled, felled, are all felled;

The first two lines of "Binsey Poplars" could almost be the opening of a Romantic ode: a nature-worshiping paean to a particularly beautiful stand of poplars (a kind of tree also known as aspen) growing alongside the River Isis in Oxford.

But this isn't an early-19th-century stroll through the countryside. It's later, "1879," the height of the Victorian era and the Industrial Revolution—and the trees the speaker sings of have been "felled," chopped down. This poem, which tells a true story from Gerard Manley Hopkins's years in Oxford, will be a lament both for these particular trees and for a whole maimed, exploited countryside.

The poem's speaker loved these lost trees deeply: they were "his aspens dear," his familiar friends. These trees, the speaker recalls, gently restrained the sunlight, seeming to capture it in their branches. Listen to the lyrical repetitions he uses here:

> My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,
> Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,

These repeated sounds evoke the trees' rhythmic movements and the way their leaves held the light:

- The gentle epizeuxis and alliteration of "quelled, / Quelled or quenched" evokes the back-and-forth sway and rustle of trees in a light wind.
- The alliteration and assonance of "quenched in leaves the leaping sun," besides being just plain euphonious, mirror the leaves' action in language: by connecting the "leaves" to the "leaping sun," it suggests the way that leaves in sunlight seem to *fill up* with sun, soaking up the light at the same time as they shade the ground below.

All the beauty, peace, and pleasure of this scene comes to a sharp and painful ending in the third line:

> All felled, felled, are all felled;

Repeating those same words over and over, the speaker sounds as if he's in shock, trying to come to terms with what just *can't* be true: *All of them? All gone?* (Readers might even hear an echo of *Macbeth* here: the speaker's repetitions sound a lot like Macduff's disbelieving grief when he learns that all his children have been murdered.)

A change in the poem's rhythms makes this moment even more shocking. Like much of Hopkins's verse, this poem uses sprung rhythm, a kind of accentual meter in which lines use a certain number of stresses, but no set number or pattern of unstressed syllables. Here's how that meter unfolds in these lines:

- The first line of the poem is deceptive. It might make readers expect the whole poem to be written in neat iambic pentameter—lines of five iambs, metrical feet with a da-DUM rhythm, like this: "My as- | pens dear, | whose air- | y cag- | es quelled."
- The second line breaks from that pattern, using trochees (the opposite foot to an iamb, with a DUM-da rhythm), but still following a regular five-beat pentameter pattern: "Quelled or | quenched in | leaves the | leaping | sun."
- The third line still uses five strong stresses. But now strong stresses are just about *all* the line has. The gentle pulse of stress and unstress is gone, replaced by five gut punches (or axe-blows): "All felled, felled, are all felled."
- Throughout the poem, Hopkins will use flexible patterns of stresses to capture the agony of this great loss. Keep an eye out for the places his rhythms change.

The speaker feels this tree-cutting like a death. The rest of the poem will be his elegy both for these trees and for the landscape around them—a countryside world that will never be the same again.

LINES 4-8

Of a fresh and following folded rank
Not spared, not one
That dandled a sandalled
Shadow that swam or sank
On meadow and river and wind-wandering weed-winding bank.

Reeling from the sight of his beloved aspens reduced to stumps, the speaker can't believe what he sees. In his memory, the "fresh and following folded rank" of trees still stands; it seems impossible that it should be gone. Even his /f/ alliteration there creates an after-image of the trees, evoking the tall, regular, graceful "rank" (or line) that once followed the course of the river, their branches enfolding the path and each other. But "not one" has been spared.

Here, the speaker remembers the trees as they once were, personifying them as loving parents that "dandled" (that is,

affectionately rocked or bounced) those who passed by. He remembers, in particular, how the trees cared for "a sandalled / Shadow" that made its way along the "meadow and river and wind-wandering weed-winding bank."

That sandalled shadow belongs to the speaker himself, out for a stroll in his summer shoes. The image puts readers in his sandals. After all, you don't see yourself when you're out for a solitary walk, but you *do* see your shadow.

This vision also suggests the way the tree's shade and a walker's shadow intertwine, making it feel all the more as if the moving shadows of the branches were "dandl[ing]" the speaker. Shading his body and enfolding his shadow with theirs, the trees both sheltered him and merged with him.

When the speaker remembers how his shadow "swam or sank" in the fields, the river, and the banks, then, he's not just remembering what he literally did, how he would swim in the shade or sink into the water or the long grasses. He's also describing what he saw as his shadow seemed to swim through leaves or sink into tree-shadows—or, for that matter, the way his shadow followed the contours of the ground, sinking into low patches or swimming when it hit the water.

The image of the speaker's shadow among the leaf-shadows suggests that part of his joy in the trees was his sense that he could take part in their lives. Sheltered by the aspens of that "wind-wandering weed-winding bank," he felt at once safe and free, connected to the natural world's beauty and its twiny, weedy wildness.

All that beauty, of course, is just a grief-stricken memory now. The speaker breaks off his stanza here, mute for a moment as he feels what he's lost. Readers might imagine him blinking in glaring sunlight, unsheltered.

LINES 10-12

O if we but knew what we do
When we delve or hew—
Hack and rack the growing green!

The second stanza begins in outrage and despair. When people "delve or hew"—that is, dig things up or chop things down—they simply don't understand the damage they're doing to the "growing green," the speaker cries.

Listen to the intense internal rhyme in these lines:

> O if we but **knew** what we **do**
> When we delve or **hew**—
> *Hack* and *rack* the growing green!

Like the axe-blows of "**All felled, felled**, are **all felled**," these rhymes make urgently stressed words ring out even more clearly. The phrase "**Hack** and **rack**" introduces some onomatopoeia, too: "hack," a word that evokes the *sounds* of tree-chopping, joins with "rack" (meaning "torture") to suggest that every whack of an axe torments the whole "growing green" world. The evenly alliterative /gr/ of "**g**rowing **g**reen" suggests a harmonious natural world, a whole being thoughtlessly chopped to bits.

The speaker's cry of dismay here might allude to famous words from the biblical story of the Crucifixion. Crucified, Christ is said to have prayed for his tormentors, saying: "Father, forgive them; for they **know not what they do**." Hopkins, a Jesuit priest, would have had in mind not just these words, but the full Bible verse they come from, in which soldiers share out Christ's clothes among themselves at the foot of the cross.

People, in other words, don't just crucify nature, tormenting and murdering a loving, living being. They also *exploit* it, killing it in order to steal its resources. These lines are a protest, not only against a single act of environmental vandalism, but against a whole economy that treats nature as nothing more than a warehouse of raw materials.

Worst of all, the speaker feels, people exploit nature *unconsciously*, not even realizing that they're doing irreparable damage.

LINES 13-20

Since country is so tender
To touch, her being só slender,
That, like this sleek and seeing ball
But a prick will make no eye at all,
Where we, even where we mean
To mend her we end her,
When we hew or delve:
After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.

Reflecting on humanity's thoughtless abuse of nature, the speaker turns to a disquieting simile to express his sense of loss. Nature, he says, is as delicate as an eyeball: one "prick," one good poke, and it's no longer itself, no longer capable of being the only thing it was meant to be.

Before considering that pricked eyeball, linger for a moment on the way the speaker personifies the "country" here. In the first stanza, the aspens were gentle parents, "dandl[ing]" the speaker on their knee. Now, the whole countryside in which the aspens grew is a "her," a vast goddess. She might be big, but she's also unspeakably delicate, "tender / To touch" and destroyed in an instant.

(This is also a good moment to take note of the accent Hopkins uses over the "só" in "só slender." Such accents mark words that Hopkins wants readers to be sure to stress: "her **be**ing **só** **slend**er." That "so," in other words, carries special weight here, emphasizing just how fragile nature is.)

This image of delicate living beings (the aspens) that live within a delicate living being (the countryside) starts to paint a picture of nature as a fractal, an endless pattern of lives within lives within lives. Humanity, in this vision, is one kind of life in and

among many, connected to all the others.
But humanity just can't *see* that, the speaker's ghastly simile hints:

> [...] like this sleek and seeing ball
> But a prick will make no eye at all,
> Where we, even where we mean
> To mend her we end her,

The image of the "sleek and seeing ball" vividly captures eyeball physicality: the "sleek" wetness and speed of a moving eye, the wonder of the thought that this soft sphere of jelly is "seeing."

But one "prick," and it's all over; that sleek miracle is now "no eye at all." Readers are left to queasily imagine what *is* there after an eyeball is pricked—and perhaps, again, to think of Shakespearean tragedy. No one who's experienced *King Lear* (and Hopkins certainly had) can forget the scene in which the vicious Cornwall and Regan blind the elderly Gloucester, poking out his eyeballs one by one.

That scene inspires disgust, outrage, and moral horror—and so, this simile suggests, should the greedy, thoughtless exploitation of the landscape. In chopping down those trees, the speaker feels, the woodcutters have blinded the countryside, mutilating it terribly and irreparably. They've also revealed their own blindness, their own inability to perceive the beautiful, fragile interconnection of the world they're part of.

Even when people alter the landscape with the best of intentions, trying to "mend her," they "end her," the speaker declares (with another moment of forceful internal rhyme). "When we hew or delve," for whatever reason, we maim a living, growing thing.

The speaker concludes his complex eight-line sentence with these poignant words:

> After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.

This line reminds readers that, since they're reading this poem, they *must* be an "after-comer": those trees are gone and will never come back. Even though poplars have since been replanted and replanted in Binsey, they're *different*; the ones the speaker loved were individuals, and those individuals are dead.

The lost beauty here, then, isn't just the beauty of a row of poplars beside a river. It's also the beauty the *speaker* experienced, the interaction between one particular person and a particular stand of trees.

LINES 21-25

> *Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve*
> *Strokes of havoc únselve*
> *The sweet especial scene,*
> *Rural scene, a rural scene,*
> *Sweet especial rural scene.*

The speaker has just developed a simile that presents greedy human interference with nature as a crime, a moral outrage, a tragedy. His argument has been a broad and sweeping one, an angry denunciation of what's being done to the "country" in general "when we hew or delve."

In the last lines, though, the speaker turns back in despair to his immediate, personal loss. Listen to his repetition:

> Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve
> Strokes of havoc únselve
> The sweet especial scene,

It's as if he can't quite believe that it took so few axe-blows to create utter "havoc" in this well-loved landscape—to "únselve" it, in fact, to rob it of everything that gave it its distinct identity. (Notice that accent: "unselve" should be pronounced, not "unselve," but "un-selve," in a one-two punch of pain and fury.)

Hopkins believed that everything in the world had what he called an *inscape*: a particular, one-of-a-kind character, bestowed on it by God. Both the individual inscapes of the poplars and the wider inscape of the *land*scape are gone, now: that which made them "especial," unique, has been destroyed.

Here at the end of the poem, all the speaker can do is lament the "scene" he knew. Now, his repetitions sound like those of a mourner crying a beloved name again and again:

> The sweet especial scene,
> Rural scene, a rural scene,
> Sweet especial rural scene.

SYMBOLS

THE POPLARS

The trees the speaker laments in this poem were very real. As the note at the beginning of the poem says, an ancient stand of poplars that shaded the riverside path near Binsey was cut down in 1879. (Readers might be happy to know that those poplars have since been replanted—though, as Hopkins points out, that doesn't bring the original trees back.)

These real trees also carry symbolic weight, representing all the natural beauty that humankind thoughtlessly destroys—whether for profit or because they've had a bright idea about how they can improve the landscape with their own little design ideas. Even the best-intentioned meddling with nature, the speaker sorrows, can only destroy what it means to "mend": the indescribably lovely innate character of the landscape.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-8:** "My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled, / Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun, / All felled, felled, are all felled; / Of a fresh and following folded rank / Not spared, not one / That dandled a sandalled / Shadow that swam or sank / On meadow and river and wind-wandering weed-winding bank."

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

By personifying both the lost aspens and the countryside at large, the speaker suggests that the natural world is a living thing: conscious, loving, and all too easily destroyed.

The speaker remembers the fallen aspens as affectionate protectors. Holding up the "airy cages" of their branches, they "quelled or quenched" the sunbeams in leaves, creating a shady haven that "dandled" the people who walked below—that is, that gently rocked or bounced them. The image of the trees cradling and rocking the speaker's "sandalled" shadow evokes branch-shadows swaying in a light wind at the same time as it paints a picture of a loving parent cradling a baby. To be under the aspens' gentle shade was to feel cared for, the speaker remembers.

Of course, that's all over now: the aspens are gone. The speaker laments not just those trees, but the countryside in general, which people are all too apt to thoughtlessly destroy. "Country," he says:

> [...] is so tender
> To touch, her being só slender,
> [...]
> Where we, even where we mean
> To mend her we end her,

Here, the whole countryside is a living woman, a goddess who contains many little goddesses. The personified trees were part of the bigger life of a personified world. The speaker's vision of nature starts to feel fractal: every little part of the living world is itself a living world. Kill any one tree, and you break the pattern, "end[ing]" the life of the whole countryside.

Through personification, then, the speaker insists that the natural world is one big kindly, living, beautiful being—a caring parent that humanity callously mistreats.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled, / Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,"
- **Lines 5-7:** "not one / That dandled a sandalled / Shadow"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Since country is so tender / To touch, her being só slender,"
- **Lines 17-18:** " Where we, even where we mean / To mend her we end her,"

SIMILE

A pointed simile in the middle of the poem evokes the speaker's despair at humanity's thoughtless abuse of the natural world—and hints that part of the problem is that people just don't *see*.

The countryside, the speaker says, is "so tender / To touch," so sensitive, that:

> like this sleek and seeing ball
> But a prick will make no eye at all,
> Where we, even where we mean
> To mend her we end her,

In other words, it's as quick and easy to destroy a landscape with a thoughtless tree-felling as it is to destroy an eyeball with a needle.

This queasy, visceral image (which might make readers think of the appalling blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear*) suggests that the speaker doesn't just feel aesthetically displeased by the loss of the riverside aspens. He feels a kind of moral *horror* about it, as you'd feel if you saw someone being blinded.

This simile might also hint that those who abuse the natural world so casually are themselves blind, unable to understand that they're doing something deeply wrong. The speaker's emphasis on the loss of a "sweet especial rural scene" at the end of the poem stresses that to *see* this landscape was to love it—and that not to see (literally or metaphorically!) what a difference these trees made is like having no eyes at all.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-18:** "like this sleek and seeing ball / But a prick will make no eye at all, / Where we, even where we mean / To mend her we end her,"

REPETITION

Heartbroken at the sight of stumps where his "aspens dear" used to stand, the poem's speaker falls into disbelieving repetitions. Those beloved trees are "all felled, felled, are all felled," he cries—a repetition so emphatic that it takes two technical terms, epizeuxis and diacope, to describe it.

Across the poem, repetitions like these will evoke the speaker's

grief as he tries to come to terms with what he (and everyone who knows this "sweet especial rural scene") has lost. When he marvels that it takes "ten or twelve, only ten or twelve" blows of an axe to "únselve" the landscape, for instance, his diacope makes it clear that he can hardly believe how quickly and thoughtlessly the woodcutters did such lasting damage. Any time people "delve or hew," "hew or delve," he stresses, they mutilate the countryside.

Other repetitions are differently poignant. At the beginning of the poem, for instance, the speaker remembers how the trees once "quelled, / Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun." That epizeuxis on "quelled" both evokes the gentle back-and-forth sway of a poplar in the breeze and suggests that the speaker is caught up in his memory of exactly how the leaves held back the sunlight.

His polysyndeton on "meadow and river and wind-wandering weed-winding bank," meanwhile, reflects the trees' generosity: they shed their shade over all these landscapes, protecting the "sandalled" wanderers who made their way along the path.

Perhaps the most touching repetition comes in the speaker's lament for the landscape he loved at the end of the poem:

> The sweet especial scene,
> Rural scene, a rural scene,
> Sweet especial rural scene.

Here, the speaker sounds like a mourner repeating a dead name over and over, interwoven with endearments: the "rural scene" he loved was also a "sweet especial scene," like no other.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "quelled, / Quelled"
- **Line 3:** " All felled, felled, are all felled;"
- **Line 5:** " Not spared, not one"
- **Line 8:** "and," "and"
- **Line 11:** " When we delve or hew—"
- **Line 19:** " When we hew or delve:"
- **Line 21:** " Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve"
- **Lines 23-25:** " The sweet especial scene, / Rural scene, a rural scene, / Sweet especial rural scene."

ALLITERATION

Alliteration works alongside internal rhyme and assonance to give this poem its intense music.

Listen to the sounds that flow through the first stanza, for instance:

> My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,
> Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,
> All felled, felled, are all felled;
> Of a fresh and following folded rank
> Not spared, not one
> That dandled a sandalled
> Shadow that swam or sank
> On meadow and river and wind-wandering
> weed-winding bank.

A lot of the alliteration here emphasizes the speaker's chanted repetitions:

- The /q/ of "quenched" picks up on the /q/ of "quelled, / Quelled."
- The /f/ of "a fresh and following folded rank" follows from the despairing "felled, felled, are all felled."
- These moments suggest the speaker's urgency and despair as he looks at the fallen poplars. The inescapably repetitive sounds make it feel as if he's in shock, trying over and over to fathom how the trees he remembers so vividly could be gone.

Other moments of alliteration here evoke the beauty and wildness of the landscape the speaker remembers:

- The chime between "leaves" and "leaping" (which uses /ee/ assonance as well as /l/ alliteration) suggests the way those leaves used to contain those joyfully leaping sunbeams: the sounds here make the leaves and the sunlight seem to interpenetrate.
- And the /w/ of the "wind-wandering weed-winding bank" suggests the dense, tangled wildness of the riverside walk (a similar effect to the famous closing lines of his poem "Inversnaid": "O let them be left, wildness and wet; / Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet").

Elaborate tapestries of sound like these are a Hopkins hallmark. Here as elsewhere in Hopkins's poetry, alliteration helps to suggest a speaker's passionate, fascinated immersion in the landscape.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Quelled," "quenched," "leaves," "leaping"
- **Line 4:** "fresh," "following folded"
- **Line 6:** "sandalled"
- **Line 7:** "swam," "sank"
- **Line 8:** "wind-wandering weed-winding"
- **Line 12:** "growing green"
- **Lines 13-14:** "tender / To touch"
- **Line 14:** "slender"
- **Line 15:** "sleek"
- **Line 17:** "mean"
- **Line 18:** "mend"
- **Line 21:** "Ten," "twelve," "ten," "twelve"

VOCABULARY

Aspens (Line 1) - A kind of tree known for its beautiful shimmering leaves. Also known as a poplar.

Quelled (Line 1, Line 2) - Held back, restrained.

Quenched (Line 2) - Put out, extinguished.

Felled (Line 3) - Chopped down.

A fresh and following folded rank (Line 4) - Hopkins's words here suggest a long line of trees stretching along the riverbank: "following" each other, they stand in a "rank" (or a column).

Dandled (Line 6) - Affectionately held, cradled, gently rocked. (People often speak of a parent dandling a baby, for instance.)

Delve (Line 11, Line 19) - Dig, mine, excavate.

Hew (Line 11, Line 19) - Chop, cut down.

Rack (Line 12) - Torture, torment.

Mend (Line 18) - Improve, make better.

Unselve (Line 22) - Destroy the identity of. (A word of Hopkins's own invention!)

Especial (Line 23, Line 25) - Special, particular, singled out.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Binsey Poplars" is built from two irregular stanzas: one with eight lines and one with sixteen. (Some versions, however, divide the long second stanza into two separate seven- and nine-line stanzas.)

- In the version we're looking at, the first stanza records the speaker's initial shock and grief at discovering his beloved riverside aspens have been chopped down. Its comparative brevity suggests that he's still reeling from the discovery.
- The second stanza becomes a lament for the way that people treat nature in general. Even with the best intentions, the speaker sighs, people destroy the countryside the instant they meddle with it.

METER

"Binsey Poplars" uses a variation on the meter Hopkins is famous for: sprung rhythm.

Rather than using regular metrical feet like trochees or iambs, which dictate both the number of stresses and the number of syllables in a line, sprung rhythm only counts the number of stresses in a line. (The accents over certain words here show the places where Hopkins wanted to be especially sure his readers placed a stress: think of them as his musical notation.)

For example, count the stresses in each of the first three lines:

> My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,
> Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,
> All felled, felled, are all felled;

There are always five strong stresses per line here, but the number of *unstressed* syllables varies wildly. Notice the emotional effect: after the gentler, more spaced-out stresses in the first two lines, the news that the trees are "all felled" comes in a line that's nearly *all* stressed, so each word hits like an axe-blow.

However, Hopkins doesn't stick to five-stress sprung rhythm all through this poem. Other lines range from two stresses to seven: compare "To mend her we end her" to "On meadow and river and wind-wandering weed-winding bank." There's so much variation here that the poem turns into something more like a powerfully rhythmic free verse. The lines stretch or contract to mirror the speaker's feelings, expanding with his memories of gentle summer strolls and shrinking as he describes the cruel finality of "what we do / When we delve or hew."

The rhythm here thus ends up feeling as sensitive, thoughtful, and naturalistic as the speaker's language is heightened and musical. Metrical experiments like these are part of the reason that some claim Hopkins as a modernist before his time.

RHYME SCHEME

"Binsey Poplars" rings with rhymes, but its rhyme scheme isn't a clear or a simple one. Mapped out, it runs like this:

ABACBDCC EEFGGHHFGIFIIFFF

All this wild end rhyme isn't orderly, but it is intensely *musical*: the poem's harmonies sprout at unpredictable but graceful angles, like twigs.

What's more, Hopkins mixes his end rhymes with intense internal rhyme. Listen to the sounds of this lament, for just one example:

> O if we but knew what we do
> When we delve or hew—

Each of these /oo/ rhymes also lands on a strong stress, making the speaker's despair and dismay feel even more emphatic.

SPEAKER

The speaker here is Hopkins himself. Hopkins, who studied at Oxford and later served there as a Jesuit priest, used to love walking along the riverside in Port Meadow, a stretch of fields to the west of town. On his way past the tiny village of Binsey, he discovered one day that a row of riverside poplars (a kind of

tree also known as an aspen) had been cut down without warning. This poem is the true story of his sorrow; he felt the loss of his "aspens dear" as acutely as a death.

Hopkins deeply loved nature, seeing it as one of the clearest and loveliest ways that God speaks to humanity. Here, he argues (like a Romantic) that nature has a deeper wisdom than humanity, and warns that people try to "mend" nature at their peril: trying to manage, exploit, or improve what's already perfect, people can only cause harm.

SETTING

"Binsey Poplars" is set, as its title suggests, in Binsey, a hamlet on the outskirts of Oxford. At the edge of the green fields of Port Meadow, beside the River Isis (that is, the section of the Thames that flows through Oxford), Binsey was (and is) a lovely "rural scene," nestled into the landscape.

The speaker is thus all the more dismayed when some unknown axe-wielder chops down a row of lovely old poplars that once sheltered the river and offered dappled shade to swimmers and wanderers. Such an assault on the "growing green," he feels, is an affront to the whole world.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) was a poet of deep and ecstatic faith. Born into a stern Protestant family, he converted to Roman Catholicism as an Oxford undergraduate. Much to his parents' horror, he later became a Jesuit priest. Though he'd always loved writing poetry, he burned many of his early works upon his ordination, feeling that he should turn away from art to devote himself fully to God. His superiors, however, wisely encouraged him to see his poetry as a *means* of worship. The resultant body of sensuous, poignant poetry reflects Hopkins's fervent belief that God suffuses nature.

In some ways, Hopkins was a poet of his time. His sad nostalgia for a pre-industrial England (and horror at humanity's exploitative relationship to nature) is also evident in the work of other Victorian poets—for example, Christina Rossetti (whom Hopkins befriended) and Alfred, Lord Tennyson—as well as in the work of novelists like Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens.

But in other ways, Hopkins's poetry seems to both anticipate the future and connect to the deeper past:

- Hopkins's innovative style, with its freewheeling sprung rhythm and its richly interwoven sounds, is often seen as a precursor of the modernist free verse that would arise in the early 20th century.
- Meanwhile, Hopkins's fervent, religious love of nature hearkens back to both the pantheistic Romantics of the early 19th century (like Wordsworth) and the passionately Christian Metaphysical poets of the 17th century (like Herbert).

Perhaps critics are particularly inclined to think of Hopkins as a proto-modernist because the bulk of his work wasn't published until 1918, when Hopkins's friend (and fellow poet) Robert Bridges released the posthumous collection *Poems*. This book would deeply influence writers in the 20th century and beyond, from W.H. Auden to Dylan Thomas to T.S. Eliot.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1879, when Hopkins wrote this poem, Britain was in the midst of the Second Industrial Revolution, a period of rapid technological advancement in both manufacturing and transportation. Of the many dramatic changes this era brought about in British society—a decline in rural populations, a rumble of socialist protest—most pressing for Hopkins was the harm to nature: exploitative mining and logging, air and water pollution from factories, and the expansion of urban and suburban spaces into what was once countryside.

Many Victorian artists and writers (and people from all walks of life, for that matter) viewed this destruction of nature with alarm and despair. For Hopkins, a pious Jesuit priest who saw the natural world as a manifestation of the divine, the impact of industrialization on nature was particularly painful. "Binsey Poplars" records both a personal grief and a general outcry against the cavalier exploitation of irreplaceable beauty.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Brief Biography — Visit the Poetry Foundation's website to learn more about Hopkins's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gerard-manley-hopkins)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of the poem. (https://youtu.be/rthImdqeW4c)
- The Poem in Manuscript — Take a look at one of Hopkins's drafts of the poem in his own handwriting (and get a sense for how this poem developed and changed). (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/02/bodleian-gerard-manley-hopkins-manuscript)
- Hopkins's Legacy — Find more Hopkins resources (and a community of ardent Hopkins-lovers) at the Official Gerard Manley Hopkins Website. (https://hopkinspoetry.com/)
- A Hopkins Documentary — Watch a short documentary

about Hopkins. (https://youtu.be/PEfUpgERIN0)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS POEMS

- Felix Randal
- God's Grandeur
- Pied Beauty
- The Caged Skylark
- The Windhover

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Nelson, Kristin. "*Binsey Poplars.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 1 Aug 2022. Web. 12 Aug 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Nelson, Kristin. "*Binsey Poplars.*" LitCharts LLC, August 1, 2022. Retrieved August 12, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/gerard-manley-hopkins/binsey-poplars.