

# God's Grandeur



## POEM TEXT

- 1 The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
- 2 It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
- 3 It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
- 4 Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
- 5 Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
- 6 And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with
- 7     toil;
- 8 And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the
- 9     soil
- 10 Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
- 11
- 12 And for all this, nature is never spent;
- 13 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
- 14 And though the last lights off the black West went
- 15 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
- 16 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
- 17 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright
- 18 wings.

the east. The source of this constant cycle of regeneration is the grace of a God who guards the broken world much like a mother bird uses its body to watch over and keep warm its eggs and hatchlings.



## THEMES



### GOD, NATURE, AND MAN

The poem's very first line establishes the profound connection between God and nature that the speaker explores throughout "God's Grandeur." God is not connected to nature merely because God *created* nature. Rather, the speaker describes God as actively suffused within nature, as an ever-present "charge" running through it. Further, by describing God's grandeur as being something that will "flame out," or as being something as tangible as the oil that oozes from a crushed olive, the speaker makes an additional claim: that human beings can perceive, contemplate, or even interact with God through nature. The speaker reveres nature not only because it is a divine creation, but also because it is a direct conduit between humanity and God.

The belief in such a deep link among God, nature, and humanity explains the speaker's despair about how humanity is ruining the natural world. In destroying nature ("sear[ing]", "smear[ing]", and "blear[ing]" it), humanity is destroying God's creation and severing its own connection to God. Even worse, humanity is not only destroying nature, but replacing the pristine sights, sounds, and smells of the natural world—and God's "charge" within it— with the "smudge" and "smell" of human beings.

At the same time, nature's connection to God gives the speaker hope: because it is the creation of an omnipotent God who continues to watch over the world, nature can never be obscured or ruined by human beings. The natural cycles of life and death (implied by the references to sunset followed by sunrise), and the fact that God is still fulfilling his "charge" to protect nature (the way a mother bird "broods" over an egg), give the speaker confidence that nature will endure humanity's plundering and be reborn. Yet the speaker seems unsure about humanity's own place within nature's endless cycles: it's unclear if the speaker's vision of a reborn world includes humanity or not.

#### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-14



## SUMMARY

The speaker describes a natural world through which God's presence runs like an electrical current, becoming momentarily visible in flame-like flashes that resemble the sparkling of metal foil when moved in the light. Alternately, the speaker describes God's presence as being like a rich oil (such as olive oil), whose true power or greatness is only revealed when crushed to its essence. Given this powerful undercurrent of evidence of God's presence in the world, the speaker asks, why do human beings not heed God's divine authority? The speaker starts to answer his own question by describing the state of human life: the way that humanity over the generations has endlessly walked over the ground, and the way that industry and economic pursuits have damaged and corrupted the landscape such that it looks and smells only of men (and not of God). Not only has the land been stripped bare of the natural things that once lived upon it, but even the shoes that people now wear have cut off the physical connection between their feet and the earth they walk on.

And yet, the speaker asserts, nature never loses its power, and deep down life always continues to exist. Though the sun will always fade into the darkness of night in the west, morning will always follow by springing up over the edge of the horizon in



## INDUSTRY AND DESTRUCTION

Hopkins wrote "God's Grandeur" in 1877, in the midst of the Second Industrial Revolution, which was a period of rapid technological advancement, including the expansion of factories, railroads, and electrical power. While the Second Industrial Revolution had many positive aspects, such as improving standards of living and loosening the social restrictions that blocked the lower classes from rising, it also had a brutal impact on nature: clear-cutting and mining for resources decimated the landscape; pollution from factories and trains darkened the air and water; and growing urbanization replaced countryside with cities and suburbs.

In short, the rise of industry came at the expense of the natural world. In lines 5-8, the speaker of "God's Grandeur" laments the destruction of nature and the reckless way that humanity is engaging in this destruction. The repetition of "have trod" in line 5 captures the unceasing and almost mindless way that humanity has worn down the earth over countless generations. Hopkins's expressive—or even graphic—choice of the words "seared," "bleared," and "smeared" conveys Hopkins's disgust at how "all" has been corrupted and destroyed by humanity's relentless "trade" and "toil." The rise of industry has caused nature, once pristine and free of the unnatural stains of mankind, to be marred by "man's smudge" and "man's smell."

Finally, in line 8, the speaker notes how the blind pursuit of economic growth has made humanity unable to even recognize the destruction that the rise of industry has left in its wake. The earth has been laid bare by industrial development, but people can no longer even feel the ground beneath their feet because they are wearing shoes that symbolize the mass production of the industrial world. In "God's Grandeur," the speaker describes a double tragedy: how humanity destroyed nature and its connection to God, and how the destruction is so complete that humanity can't even recognize what it has lost.

### Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-8



## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINE 1

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.*

The first line of "God's Grandeur" establishes the poem's main theme as well as several stylistic characteristics of the poem. The line, a single declarative sentence, uses a [metaphor](#) to compare "the grandeur of God" to an electric force that "charges"—that is, that suffuses and animates—the world. This idea, of God being both a force that powers nature and an essence found throughout nature, is a fundamental concept that pervades the rest of the poem.

The word "charge" also carries a second, less common, meaning that is important to understand. A "charge" can also be an obligation. For instance, a mail carrier is "charged" with delivering the mail; a military general is "charged" with leading troops in battle. Applying this second meaning of "charged" to the first line of "God's Grandeur" evokes the implication that the world has a responsibility to recognize the magnificence of God—and lines 4-8 of the poem describe the way that humanity has failed in this responsibility.

The meter of the first line is also worth noting. "God's Grandeur" is a [sonnet](#), and all sonnets are usually written in iambic pentameter—a poetic meter in which five [iamb](#)s are written one after another to produce ten-syllable-long lines that follow a consistent pattern of **unstressed-stressed** syllables. However, while the first line of "God's Grandeur" starts with four syllables of iambic pentameter, it then goes a bit off the rails:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

Technically speaking, this line, rather than being made up of five iambs, is made up of two iambs followed by two [anapests](#) (which have an **unstressed-unstressed-stressed** pattern). This unconventional shift in meter creates a few notable effects:

- It signals that the rest of the sonnet will *also* likely play with and subvert the norms of a standard sonnet's poetic meter, which it does.
- It adds an extra "charge" to the stressed words in the line by reducing the number of stressed words in it from the traditional five of iambic pentameter to just four. Because the line contains fewer stressed words, those that are stressed get even more emphasis. This subtle unexpected "charge" makes the meter of the first line seem to embody and amplify the meaning of the poem's opening sentence.

### LINES 2-4

*It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed.*

The second line of the poem expands on the [metaphor](#) comparing God's grandeur to an electric charge. First it describes how God's charge can "flame out," which in this case means it can be seen flickering like a flame, not that it can burn out. The speaker then makes that description much more tangible to the reader by using a [simile](#) to compare the flame of God's charge to the metallic reflections created by shaking a piece of metal foil ("shining from shook foil"). By nesting a simile in a metaphor in this way, the speaker finds another way to "charge," or increase the intensity, of the poem's imagery. The

speaker goes on to "super-charge" the intensity of the language by using **alliteration**, such as in the repeated "sh" sound in "shining" and "shook."

While the first line of the poem is an abstract conceptual statement, the second line is a description that makes the reader see what the speaker is discussing. Just as someone in nature might suddenly be struck by the "spark" of a sublime view, the speaker's use of the simile of "shook foil" gives the reader a sudden tangible image of what it's like to experience God's presence in nature. The double meanings of the poem's language capture both the way that God is infused everywhere in nature, and the way that humanity is connected to God by perceiving God's grand "charge" throughout the natural world.

The third line of the poem uses another simile: it compares God's grandeur (or "greatness") to the oil exuded when something, such as an olive, is crushed. This simile of oil further develops the idea of how God is suffused in nature. The oil is invisible but always present within something like the olive, until a direct sustained engagement causes the "greatness" of the oil to emerge and become tangible. The speaker believes that God similarly exists in nature: superficially invisible, and yet everywhere present and accessible if you only engage directly and deeply enough. Also note that this third line of the poem contains twelve syllables rather than the ten syllables traditionally used in the lines of a sonnet. It's as if the line itself has oozed an extra two syllables, which is another example of the poem playing with meter to make the meter subtly support and emphasize its meaning.

In terms of structure, lines 2 and 3 are identical: both are lines of unstressed-stressed iambic pentameter ("it **will** flame out, like **shining** from **shook foil**"), and both lines are split by commas. In each case, the text before the commas is somewhat abstract, while the simile that follows is *extremely* descriptive ("shook foil"; "ooze of oil"). The reader is lulled into this rhythm, which makes the poem's sudden stop on "crushed" (achieved through **enjambment** at the end of line 3 and a **caesura** in the form of a period after "crushed") all the more jarring. This sudden stop once again illustrates how the poem's rhythm amplifies its meaning: the halt and intense focus on the word "crushed" embody what it actually feels like to be crushed.

At the same time, while "crushed" is part of the positive idea of the extraction of an essence, the word "crushed" does not itself have a very positive connotation, connected as it is to pain and destruction. The intense sudden emphasis on "crushed" at the start of line 4 marks a shift in the poem, away from the positive and beautiful images of God and nature in the first three lines to the poet's despair at the destruction of nature through the rest of line 4 until line 8.

## LINE 4

*Why do men then now not reckon his rod?*

The first three lines of the poem use vibrant, beautiful language

and imagery to describe God's grandeur as a force that "charges" nature. Further, by comparing God's grandeur to a flame, spark, or oil, the first three lines present God's grandeur as something that is evident and tangible—something that people can actually see and feel.

The **rhetorical question** that the speaker asks in the fourth line, however, turns the poem on its head. The word "then" in the question makes clear that the speaker is referring back to what he or she described in the previous three lines. The question is not simply asking: Why do men not obey God ("reck his rod"). Instead, it is asking: given that God is evident and tangible in the natural world, *then* why do men not obey God? The connection between the first three lines of the poem and the speaker's question accomplishes a few things:

- It connects the idea of obeying God to the concept of respecting and appreciating the natural world.
- It amplifies the sense of the speaker's despair by juxtaposing the speaker's obvious delight in the natural world and its connection to God with his inability to understand why other people can't see the same thing.
- It implies that humanity truly is blind, and its behavior truly incomprehensible, if it can't see what the speaker's sparkling language of the previous three lines has made obvious: that God is visible in nature.

The speaker is alone and in despair, while humanity is portrayed as cut off from God.

The meaning of the question is emphasized by its structure. Each word is a single syllable, and none of those syllables are long like the "ooze" in line three. Quite the contrary, they all have short vowels. Each word is short, cut off, and lands like a punch (just as the despairing question in its entirety seems to land like a punch after the beauty of the first three lines). The intensity of the question is ramped up further by the intensity of the **alliteration** and **internal rhyme** that it contains. In just the nine words that make up the question:

- "men" rhymes with "then"
- the "e" in "men," "then," and "reck" are all alliterative
- the "n" in "men," "then," "now," and "not" are alliterative
- the "r" in "reck" and "rod" are alliterative

These different alliterative sounds overlap with each other. The intensity lent to the words by this braid of alliteration makes the reader feel the intensity of the speaker's own feeling about the question.

The phrase "reck his rod" also deserves some special discussion. "Reck" is a rather archaic way of saying "pay heed to" or "worry about," while "rod" is a metonym that stands in for

the concept of God's authority. This use of "rod"—which refers to the way that shepherds use a "rod" to punish wayward sheep—appears multiple times in the Bible and other Christian religious commentary. "Reck his rod," then, makes this question about man failing to obey God feel almost Biblical.

Finally, it is worth noting that it would be reasonable at this point in the poem to expect that the rest of the poem will attempt to answer the question that the speaker poses here in line 4. However, the poem actually *never* answers this question. Instead, lines 5-8 describe the world created by a mankind that does not obey God or respect the natural world, while lines 9-14 find solace in the fact that man's sinful disobedience can't actually ever deplete God or the natural world. But the question of *why* humanity loses sight of God and the magnificence of his creation is left hanging, an unanswerable mystery.

### LINES 5-6

*Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;*

Rather than expanding on the [rhetorical question](#) posed in line 4, the fifth line of the poem turns to a discussion of mankind's devastating impact on the natural world. The word "trod" in line 5 is the past tense of the verb "to tread," meaning "to walk." The speaker uses this word to demonstrate how, instead of stopping to "reck" God's power, mankind moves ceaselessly forward over the earth. "Trod" also introduces the symbol of feet, which here are not mentioned explicitly but are certainly evoked by the notion of walking, hinting at how mankind is disconnected from the earth even as it walks across it.

But this movement isn't just constant; it's also enormously destructive. The use of [epizeuxis](#) in line 5 emphasizes the speaker's belief that mankind's movement is truly endless, and this repetition of "trod" gives the word a relentless weight that mirrors the relentless weight of mankind on the world. The multiple instances of [caesura](#) in line 5 further emphasize the consequences of all this walking by forcing the reader to pause and experience the passage of countless destructive generations. These commas also act as a contrast to the line's iambic pentameter, setting up conflicting rhythms that hint at the greater destruction to come.

Line 6 literalizes the effects of the pattern the speaker describes in line 5. In line 6, the reader gets a vivid picture of exactly what happens when humans tread ceaselessly across the earth. The words "seared," "bleared," and "smeared" create an image of a world that has been damaged and made blurry by humans, while the [alliteration](#) of those words' long "e" sounds emphasizes this damage even further. While line 6 has the ten syllables typical of a line in a Petrarchan [sonnet](#) like this one, its meter breaks with the stressed/unstressed pattern of iambic pentameter:

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

By using three unstressed syllables in a row, the speaker highlights the importance of those vivid words and, furthermore, uses the broken meter to reflect the destruction caused by the action described in line 5.

Additionally, the mention of "trade" in line 6 sheds new light on exactly what kind of destruction the speaker is referring to. "Trade" here refers to economic development, so the phrases "seared with trade" and "smeared with toil" explicitly link humanity's destruction of nature to the changes brought by the Second Industrial Revolution. It is in this line that the theme of destruction and industry first becomes clear, as the speaker suggests that commerce and industrial development are largely to blame for the careless wreckage of nature that causes him or her such anguish.

### LINES 7-8

*And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.*

In lines 7 and 8, the speaker expands on the ideas of industrial destruction introduced in the previous lines. While lines 5 and 6 made it clear that nature—and consequently "God's grandeur"—is being profoundly harmed by the "generations" of "trade" and "toil," line 7 lays the blame for this harm squarely on mankind itself. It's clear that "man's smudge" and "man's smell" are the entities contributing to the "sear[ing]" and "smear[ing]" of the previous line. The [alliteration](#) in line 7, particularly of the "sm" sound in "smudge" and "smell," emphasizes the power of these corrupting forces. Even more powerfully, the dramatic use of [caesura](#) followed immediately by [enjambment](#) at the very end of line 7 brings the reader to an abrupt halt, forcing them to consider the vulnerability of "the soil" and directly confront the "bare[ness]" (line 8) that has come about as a result of "man's" destructive behavior. Further, the polysyndeton of the repeated "ands" in line 7 (in addition of the "and" of line 6) slows the pace of the line even more and gives the reader the impression of a crushing, overwhelming progression.

The relentlessly negative word choice and imagery of lines 5 through 7 create the sense that the speaker is experiencing true despair: he or she perceives a devastating trend and wonders why other people don't notice or care about it. By blaming "man" so explicitly in line 7, the speaker even suggests that he or she might feel real hatred toward other people and feels isolated in relation to them. However, line 8 also introduces the idea that this senseless destruction might hurt people as much as it hurts the natural world. "Being shod" refers here to wearing shoes, so line 8 seems to say that by embracing an industrialized world (symbolized by shoes, a man-made creation that physically separates humans from the earth), people are actually reducing their own ability to "feel." The symbol of feet expands in line 8 to include not just the destructive impact that humans can have on nature (or "God's

grandeur") but also the human capacity to experience meaningful feeling.

Line 8 also introduces a potential second meaning of the symbol of the "foot." In addition to referring to the literal body part, the word "foot" can also refer in poetic terms to a stressed/unstressed pair of two [iamb](#)s. Considering this second meaning of the word, it seems that the speaker might be wondering about the role that poetry (and perhaps literature and art more broadly) might play in all this destruction. Having composed this poem, the speaker likely believes to some extent that a poem might be able to make people more sensitive to the havoc they're wreaking on nature. But at the same time, line 8 seems to express doubt about whether readers will actually pick up on the poem's meaning—the speaker seems to fear that having embraced industry ("being shod"), people won't be able to "feel" in reaction to a poetic "foot". By casting doubt even on poetry, the speaker heightens the sense of despair and isolation that characterizes these lines.

It's also worth noting that the meter of lines 7 and 8 does indeed hint at the idea that "feet" in the poetic sense may lack some power. Both lines feature standard iambic [pentameter](#), but both also feature caesura that breaks up this even meter and keeps it from flowing smoothly. This contrast creates a sense of the meter fighting against the opposing rhythm of the caesura, a struggle that mirrors the speaker's hints at poetry's fight against human insensitivity.

## LINES 9-10

*And for all this, nature is never spent;*

*There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;*

After the vivid destruction of the poem's opening octave, lines 9 and 10 turn away from despair and toward a new sense of hope. They describe how, even with all the harm humankind causes, nature continues on undaunted ("never spent") and remains able to birth new life ("dearest freshness"). Line 9 represents the "turn" of the [sonnet](#) form, in which the speaker begins to reach some sense of resolution to the poem's core problem. The exact moment of the change is marked by the [caesura](#) in line 9, which gives the reader an opportunity to pause and turn calmly toward contemplating the new ideas expressed in the remainder of the poem. Note, however, that this moment is not an answer to the "proposition" of line 4 ("Why do men then now not reck his rod?"). Indeed, the speaker never explains when men do not heed ("reck") God's authority ("his rod"). Instead, the turn offers a path toward hope in the face of destruction, even though that destruction remains senseless throughout the entire poem. The speaker's misery seems to recede in line 9 and may even turn to joy in line 10, with the mention of "dearest freshness."

The double meaning of the word "spent" in line 9 serves to further highlight the contrast between the agony of the previous stanza and the dawning peace of this second stanza.

The most obvious meaning for "spent" is a synonym for "exhausted," and this meaning shows that if nature is "never spent," it never runs out of its boundless power (the "charge" of "God's grandeur"). However, the word "spent" also brings to mind spending money, which echoes the discussion of commerce in the previous stanza. Considering this second meaning, "never spent" may also mean that nature is deeply separate from the sinful world of trade and industry. The speaker seems to imply that, even as commerce persists, nature stands apart; it is "never spent," so it remains essentially separate from destructive economic systems.

Similarly, the meter of lines 9 and 10 further reinforces the poem's shift toward a more hopeful perspective. Both lines have the ten syllables characteristic of lines in this kind of sonnet, but in line 9, the unstressed/stressed pattern breaks from iambic [pentameter](#), suggesting an approaching sense of peace that has not yet fully arrived:

*And for all this, nature is never spent;*

Line 10, however, falls fluidly back into standard iambic pentameter, uninterrupted by caesura:

*There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;*

This return to stable, straightforward meter—further emphasized by the [alliteration](#) of the repeated "d" sound—indicates a return to nature's inherent order and harmony, and suggests that such peace always exists, even when it's out of sight ("deep down").

## LINES 11-12

*And though the last lights off the black West went*

*Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —*

Lines 11 and 12 build on the notion of hope and rebirth that the speaker introduced in lines 9 and 10. In much the same way that lines 2 and 3 make the abstract idea of line 1 into something tangible, lines 11 and 12 give vivid, concrete examples of exactly how nature continues in the unstoppable cycle that lines 9 and 10 suggest. In other words, lines 11 and 12 give the reader a chance to see and feel what lines 9 and 10 described abstractly. Lines 11 and 12 do this primarily through introducing the key symbol of sunrise and sunset. Line 11 describes a sunset as the loss of light over the western horizon, depicted here through the [metonym](#) "West." This line proceeds smoothly and fluidly, with the [alliteration](#) of "last lights" and "West went" giving the reader the sense of a speedy progression toward some inevitable goal. Then, the use of [enjambment](#) at the end of line 11 lets the reader tumble directly into line 12, where the speaker describes a sunrise "spring[ing]" over the eastern horizon ("brink eastward"). This instance of enjambment emphasizes the cyclicity of the

process the speaker is describing; just as lines 11 and 12 glide smoothly and easily together, so too do day and night connect in a seamless loop. The certainty of this transition suggests that metaphorical light (“God’s grandeur,” which “flame[s] out”) will always follow metaphorical dark (“blear” and “smudge”) in a cycle of life. Through the images in lines 11 and 12, the speaker is able to illustrate just how meaningful it is that nature is “never spent.”

The use of [caesura](#) after the first and second words of line 12 also gives the reader an even more visceral appreciation of how wondrous this cycle of life can be. The commas in the phrase “Oh, morning,” stop the reader short, much as the similarly placed caesura in line 4 does. But while that earlier instance creates a harsh stop that mirrors the word “crush,” the stops in line 12 are gentle, coming as they do on the heels of the soft vowel sound of “oh.” This pair of pauses, then, gives the reader a moment of quiet reflection from which to appreciate the surprising way the light “springs” into view again at the end of the line. Through using caesura in line 12, the speaker mimics the way a person might feel upon seeing an unexpected wonder of nature, which in turn calls back to the image of “God’s grandeur” “flam[ing] out” at the start of the poem.

Finally, the meter of lines 11 and 12 also reinforces the poem’s overall transition to a balanced understanding of the natural world. Both continue the standard iambic [pentameter](#) that line 10 reestablished, and this regular, fluid meter reflects how the steady cycles of nature always maintain “God’s grandeur” as a kind of “charge,” even in the face of the destruction that the speaker describes in the first stanza.

## LINES 13-14

*Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*

In the poem’s final two lines, the speaker explains how God (“the Holy Ghost”) is watching over the entire hopeful natural cycle described in lines 9-12. Line 13 introduces a new [metaphor](#) to describe God’s role, depicting God as a nurturing, even motherly figure (“with warm breast”) who carefully tends to the world as a mother bird would tend to eggs or hatchlings. The word “bent” here indicates that the world is still broken, an idea that is reinforced by a slight breakdown in the poem’s meter. Though most of line 13 follows the conventions of iambic [pentameter](#), the unstressed/stressed pattern falters around the word “bent”:

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

The [enjambment](#) between lines 13 and 14 also highlights how broken the world is, by leaving the word “bent” emphasized on its own at the end of the line. However, that same instance of enjambment also suggests a quick transition into the next line and out of this state of brokenness. Indeed, the speaker’s word

choice indicates that God remains nurturing, despite the damage that humans have done to the natural world.

The word “brood” has a double meaning here. First, it brings to mind brooding in the sense of mulling over something negative, in much the same way that the speaker mulled over the state of the world in the previous stanza. But second, “brood” also refers to the behavior of tending to eggs or hatchlings as a bird or other animal would do, and this second meaning is the one primarily at play in line 14. By emphasizing this second, positive meaning of “brood” over the first, negative one, the narrator suggests God (and by extension, nature) can offer care and solace in response to the world’s pain.

The poem’s final [caesura](#) (and only exclamation point), in line 14, offers the reader another chance to experience the same kind of startling wonder that was hinted at in the description of the sunrise in line 12. By adding this breathless pause after “ah!”, the speaker heightens the excitement of the “bright wings” and enhances the reader’s perception that this moment is indeed a new birth. As in so many other places throughout the poem, this line also uses [alliteration](#) in the words “brood,” “breast,” and “bright” to “charge” the line with a sense of anticipation leading up to the conclusion. The speaker seems to suggest that this kind of excitement is always available to people who are willing to recognize “God’s grandeur” in the natural world.

Notably, however, the poem’s hopeful conclusion makes no explicit mention of humankind. Rebirth is certain, but the role of humans is much less assured. This final emphasis on the power of God and nature over the power of humans leaves the reader to wonder whether humans will ever find their place within the endless cycle that is “never spent”.



## SYMBOLS



### FEET

A foot is the surface through which people literally stand on and touch the earth. As such, in “God’s Grandeur” feet symbolize humanity’s interaction with nature—an interaction that can involve connection, but also, like a foot stepping on a flower, destruction.

Feet are implicitly referenced in the poem in line 5, in the words: “have trod.” By talking about how man has walked across the earth without mentioning feet explicitly, the poem creates a kind of *absence* of feet, which captures the way that humanity walks across the earth without connecting to it, and instead wears nature down with constant “trodding.” The repetition of “have trod” further emphasizes the mindless, unfeeling way that people are moving across the land.

The poem then makes this point explicit in line 8, noting how humanity’s feet can’t even feel the destruction they have

caused to nature (a destruction marked by “bare” soil), because those feet are in shoes (“being shod”). The poem uses feet, then, as a symbol of humanity’s capacity to touch and connect with nature—a capacity that has been blocked by the industry that humanity now pursues.

Additionally, the word “foot” has a second meaning that hints at the role of art and poetry in this ongoing conflict. In poetic terms, a “foot” refers to a pair of two [iambes](#), so “feet” are crucial for building a poem’s meter. By noting that even a “foot” cannot feel, the speaker seems to express doubt that even a poem like this one can do much to increase people’s sensitivity toward God and nature. But note that the speaker has written the poem despite this doubt, which suggests a hope that “feet” do have some potential to create feeling, even in a largely unfeeling world.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** “have trod, have trod, have trod”
- **Line 8:** “foot”



## SUNRISE AND SUNSET

Toward the end of the poem, the speaker introduces the symbol of sunrise and sunset to represent the never-ending cycle of nature’s power. While lines 9 and 10 introduce the idea that nature (and “God’s Grandeur”) can never truly be destroyed, this new symbol in lines 11 and 12 shows the reader exactly what this “dearest freshness” might look like. These two lines dramatize the world’s journey into darkness each night and the sun’s joyful return each morning, suggesting that even when the world looks bleak (as it speaker describes it in lines 5 through 8), light will always return in the form of God’s presence “charged” through the natural world.

#### Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** “And though the last lights off the black West went / Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —”



## POETIC DEVICES

### ENJAMBMENT

[Enjambment](#) occurs in four places in “God’s Grandeur”—at the ends of lines 3, 7, 11, and 13. In each case, Hopkins uses enjambment, sometimes in conjunction with [caesura](#), to play with the rhythm of the poem in order to emphasize certain words, or even to create a reading experience that mirrors what is being described in the poem.

At the end of lines 3 and 7, the poem couples enjambment with caesura to create a dramatic effect. In line 3, the reader speeds

through the end of the line to follow the meaning of the sentence, only to have to suddenly stop at the first word of line 4, “Crushed.” Just as the poem is here describing an olive being crushed into oil, the reader has been “crushed” by being forced to stop reading after the first word of line 4. The speaker then uses almost the opposite effect in line 7 by using a caesura near the end of the line to precede an enjambment leading into line 8. This puts great emphasis on “the soil,” which in turn heightens the sense of despair over the fact, revealed in the next line, that humanity’s recklessness has stripped that soil bare.

In line 11, the enjambment at the end of a sentence about a sunset causes the line to continue right into the next line about a subsequent sunrise, emphasizing the connection between sunrise and sunset, which together represent the cyclical nature of death and rebirth. The enjambment in line 13, meanwhile, puts focus on both the word “bent” and the word “world,” which can be read as emphasizing the brokenness of the world as well as the way that God (“the Holy Ghost”) nurtures that broken world to create new life. Throughout “God’s Grandeur,” enjambment creates emphasis and rhythm that hones and supports the meaning of the poem’s language.

#### Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** “oil / Crushed.”
- **Lines 7-8:** “soil / Is”
- **Lines 11-12:** “went / Oh”
- **Lines 13-14:** “bent / World”

### ALLITERATION

[Alliteration](#) occurs in essentially every line of “God’s Grandeur,” covering both consonant sounds (such as “grandeur of God” in line 1) and vowel sounds (such as “seared,” “smeared,” and “bleared” in line 6).

The incredible amount of alliteration in “God’s Grandeur” is no accident. The repetition of sounds that the use of alliteration creates allows a poet to play with and intensify the imagery and rhythms of a poem in general, and to focus the reader’s attention on places where the alliteration is active. In “God’s Grandeur,” Hopkins uses alliteration to achieve both of these effects. For example, the “grandeur of God” is made more grand by its alliteration, while the speaker’s disgust at the way that nature now “wears man’s smudge and share’s man’s smell” is similarly intensified by the alliteration on the “s” in that phrase.

Additionally, it’s worth noting that the alliteration in the poem also functions in a way that is similar to the way that the poem describes God functioning within nature. Just as “the world is charged with the grandeur of God,” one can argue that the language of “God’s Grandeur” is charged with alliteration. Someone reading the poem casually might overlook this

alliterative charge, just as (according to the speaker) someone not paying attention can lose sight of the awesome wonder of nature (and what nature reveals about God). But nonetheless the alliteration is there, ready to be noticed by anyone who is paying attention, just as (according to the speaker) God is always present in the wonders and beauty of the natural world.

#### Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "grandeur of God"
- **Line 2:** "shining from shook"
- **Line 3:** "gathers to a greatness"
- **Line 4:** "now not," "reck his rod"
- **Line 5:** "have trod, have trod, have trod"
- **Line 6:** "seared with trade; bleared, smeared"
- **Line 7:** "smudge and shares man's smell"
- **Line 8:** "now, nor," "foot feel"
- **Line 9:** "nature is neve"
- **Line 10:** "dearest freshness deep down"
- **Line 11:** "though the," "last lights," "West went"
- **Line 12:** "brown brink"
- **Line 14:** "World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings"

## CAESURA

The poem contains quite a bit of [caesura](#), and in every case where it appears, caesura works to increase the focus or stress on a particular word, phrase, or idea.

The most extreme cases of caesura in the poem occur in conjunction with [enjambment](#). In these moments—which occur at lines 3-4, lines 7-8, and lines 11-12—the poem uses enjambment to get the reader to rush through the end of one line and into the next, only to then be stopped short by caesura. This rush into a forced stop creates immense pressure just before the caesura:

- In line 4, the caesura creates a sensation that embodies the actual word "crushed," with the sense of rushing from line 3 and then being forced to stop just one word into line 4 feeling a bit like running headlong into a wall—like getting crushed.
- In line 8, the caesura is a bit less intense than it was line 4 because it occurs three words into the line. But the pause still forces the reader to stop and reflect on the fact that the soil "is bare now," and to fully register the speaker's despair at this turn of events.
- In line 12, the caesura once again occurs just one word into the line. However, because the word is "oh," which has a softness to it rather than the hardness of "crushed," the moment feels different than it did in line 4. Here the sense of being brought up short is not physical, like hitting a wall, but rather psychological, like noticing something with a gasp of

wonder—and, indeed, it leads into a description of seeing a sunrise peek over the horizon.

The other instances of caesura in the poem similarly work to emphasize that particular moment of the poem. For instance, the comma after "flame out" makes the reader feel the full force of the exploding flame, the pauses after each "have trod" makes the reader experience the way that the endless industry of humanity has ground down the natural world, and the exclamation point after "ah!" in the final line captures the startling wonder of seeing a hatchling emerge from its shell.

#### Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** " , "
- **Line 3:** " , "
- **Line 4:** " . "
- **Line 5:** " " " "
- **Line 6:** " , "
- **Line 8:** " " " "
- **Line 9:** " , "
- **Line 12:** " " " "
- **Line 14:** " ! "

## EPIZEUXIS

"God's Grandeur" contains a single instance of [epizeuxis](#), in the exact repetition of the words "have trod" in line 5:

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

At this point in the poem the speaker has just switched from describing how "god's grandeur" is gloriously suffused through the natural world to despairing about why humanity does not seem to recognize this. Now in this line the speaker begins to describe how humanity has, over hundreds of years, worn down the natural world through its commercial and industrial activities. The repetition of the identical phrase "have trod" captures the relentlessness of this process. It isn't just that humanity has "trod" (walked) across the world. It has trod, and trod, and trod—the repetition makes clear the way that humanity has ceaselessly and thoughtlessly ground down nature.

#### Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "have trod, have trod, have trod"

## METAPHOR

"God's Grandeur" establishes two different metaphors to describe God's relationship to the world. The first metaphor, which appears in the first line of the poem, likens God to a kind of potential that suffuses and "charges" nature. This metaphor is central to Hopkins's ideas about God and nature, in which

God is both at work through nature, and accessible through interaction with and appreciation of nature. What's also notable about this first metaphor is how vague it is. Many critics state that the metaphor defines God as a kind of "electrical charge," but that isn't quite accurate. The two different [similes](#) located in lines 2 and 3 give further nuance to this metaphor, but those nuances are different. The simile in line 2 does identify this potential as a kind of electricity or spark that will "flame out" in the way that glints of light sparkle from shaken metal foil. However, line 3 describes this potential not as energy but rather as a kind of hidden purity or essence, such as the olive oil that emerges when an olive is squeezed.

The second metaphor appears in the last two lines of "God's Grandeur," as the speaker describes the Holy Ghost "brooding" with "warm breast" over the "bent world." In this metaphor, the Holy Ghost appears as a mother bird hovering protectively over the world, which is itself metaphorically linked to a broken egg. The Holy Ghost here is a nurturer, while the broken egg captures not only the despair of the destruction of the natural world described earlier in the poem, but also the hope of re-birth, since new life must break the egg containing it in order to emerge. The final words "ah! bright wings" seem to imply that the more hopeful reading of the broken egg should be the primary one here (though without entirely forgetting the destruction)—the exclamation and the "bright wings" seem to imply the wonder of a hatchling emerging from an egg and the first fluttering of new wings.

Finally, it's worth noting that the speaker of the poem *only* ever describes God through metaphor. The implication of the use of metaphor to describe God is that humanity can't ever simply or completely understand or represent God. Metaphor solves this problem of understanding and representing God in two ways. First, metaphor offers a way to glimpse God through comparison to things that *are* understandable. Second, though, metaphoric comparisons never claim to be exact. The poem's final metaphor compares the Holy Ghost to a mother bird, but it is not claiming that the Holy Ghost *is* a mother bird. The comparisons of metaphor always contain some ambiguity, some space in which it is clear that the two things are related and yet not the same. In this way, metaphor provides a way to describe God while also making it clear that God is not confined by this comparison, and that the full complexity of God forever remains beyond humanity's conception.

#### Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The world is charged with the grandeur of God."
- **Lines 13-14:** "Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings."

## METONYMY

The poem contains two instances of [metonymy](#). In line 4, the "rod" stands in for God's authority. In line 11, during a description of the horizon, the "West" is used to stand in for the western horizon.

The poem uses metonymy in these cases for a few reasons. First, particularly in the reference to the "rod" in line 4, this use of metonymy links the poem to the language of the Bible and other Christian texts. In such texts, the use of the "rod" as a metonym for God's authority is fairly common, particularly in references to not just God's rod but also to God's staff, in which case the "rod" stands in for God's authority and ability to punish and the "staff" stands in for God's role as a shepherd who protects the safety of his flock. More generally, then, this language attaches the poem to a Christian tradition, which is important in a poem that is using the logic of Christianity to question humanity's treatment of the natural world.

Second, the use of metonymy allows Hopkins to more flexibly and musically work with meter and sound. The one syllable "rod," and the fact that it starts with an "r," allows the poet to maintain the iambic pentameter of line 4, to hit the 10 syllable line-limit that is required for a sonnet, and to build the alliterative phrase "reck his rod," which puts more emphasis on this statement. Similarly, the use of "west" as a metonym for "horizon" again lets the poet communicate within the demands of meter for the line while also creating an alliteration ("West went").

#### Where Metonymy appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "rod"
- **Line 11:** "West"

## POLYSYNDETON

In lines 6 and 7, Hopkins uses [polysyndeton](#) to link the poem's descriptions of how humanity, and human industry and commerce, has impacted the natural world:

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with  
toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell.

Hopkins could have written these lines without any of these "ands." But by using them, he accomplishes two things. First, he slows down the rhythm of the phrases, which puts more emphasis on the natural destruction that he is describing. Second, polysyndeton can make the items in a list seem to pile up against each other, which can give the reader the sense of being overwhelmed. That is true in this instance, which is another way of making the reader feel the speaker's urgency and sense that what mankind is doing to nature is both a physical catastrophe and a spiritual one.

**Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 3-4:** "It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil / Crushed"

**RHETORICAL QUESTION**

Line 4 of "God's Grandeur" is largely made up of a [rhetorical question](#). This question serves as a turning point in the poem. The first three lines focused on the glories of nature, and way that God "charges" nature, and therefore can be glimpsed by a person who pays close attention to nature. The rhetorical question in line 4, though, sets out the sonnet's "proposition"—which is the term for the problem that is usually presented in the first octave of a Petrarchan [sonnet](#) (of which "God's Grandeur" is one).

One of the common uses of a rhetorical question is to challenge the reader, which is what the poem uses it for here. Note that the poem never tries to answer the question. Instead, in the four lines immediately after the question, the poem describes the catastrophic impact of humanity's failure to obey God's authority ("reck his rod"). And then in the poem's final six lines, the speaker finds comfort in the belief that the natural world and God will endure despite whatever mankind does.

By posing a question that it never answers, the poem rather pointedly leaves the question hanging, and challenges the *reader* to grapple with how and why humanity and perhaps also readers themselves are failing in their duties to God.

**Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:**

- **Line 4:** "Why do men then now not reckon his rod?"

**SIMILE**

The poem employs two different similes in lines 2 through 4. Both similes are nested within the broader metaphor of the "charge" of "the grandeur of God" from line 1. The first simile compares God's "charge" to the kind of light that would reflect off of a piece of metal foil ("shook foil"). The second simile likens that same "charge" to the valuable oil of a fruit like an olive, which is initially hidden but then emerges when pressed. Both of these similes add nuance and dimension to the over-arching metaphor of the "charge," turning it into something that the reader can experience through the senses. In particular, the simile of the "ooze of oil" suggests that God's grandeur maybe as tangible and nourishing as olive oil, something that a human can actually touch if only they exert a little effort ("crushed"). Together, these two similes emphasize that "God's grandeur" is available to anyone through its constant presence in nature, and that humans need only pay attention and use their senses to access it.

**Where Simile appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "It will flame out, like shining from shook foil"

**VOCABULARY**

**Charged** (Line 1) - In the poem, the word "charged" primarily refers to the force stored within something. In the poem, the speaker states that the natural world contains and is animated by the "force" of the "grandeur of God." The word "charge" also has a less commonly used secondary meaning that, it can be argued, also relates to the poem. In this secondary meaning, a "charge" refers to an obligation or requirement. The implication in this meaning is that the world has an obligation to respect the "grandeur of God"—an obligation that the poem will go on to show has not been met by humanity.

**Grandeur** (Line 1) - "Grandeur" means the state of being grand, magnificent, or awesome. In the poem, "grandeur" refers specifically to the majesty and awesome power of God.

**Reck** (Line 4) - "Reck" is an archaic word of Old English and Germanic origin that means "to pay heed to" or "to obey." Though archaic, "reck" was used somewhat often by poets of the 19th century.

**Rod** (Line 4) - A "rod" can refer to a stick used to punish. In the context of the poem, it refers more specifically to a rod that belongs to God, and is a symbol of God's authority. It is also possible to argue that the word is also being used here to extend the metaphor of God as a kind of electrical force, with the "rod" recalling lightning rods, but this reference, if it was purposeful at all, is certainly very subtle.

**Trod** (Line 5) - "Trod" is the past tense of the verb "to tread," which means "to walk." The poem uses "trod" not just to specifically describe men walking across the ground, but to more broadly capture the idea of humanity "walking all over" and thereby destroying the natural world.

**Trade** (Line 6) - In the poem, "trade" refers to commercial and economic activity.

**Bleared** (Line 6) - The verb "blear" refers to making something (usually the eyes) sore or watery. As an adjective, the word can mean either something that appears dim or indistinct because of water or tears, or, more generally, something obscure or indistinct to the view or imagination. In the poem, even though the word is used as a verb ("bleared"), it seems as if the intended meaning of the word is closest to its second meaning as an adjective. In this case, that means that the labor and industry of humanity has made the natural world obscure and indistinct, something that humanity can no longer really see or honor.

**Toil** (Line 6) - "Toil" refers to work or labor. In the poem, it refers not just to one person's labor, but to *all* of humanity's

labor, and therefore to the increasing industrialization of the world that has driven the poem's speaker to despair.

**Foot** (Line 8) - Here, "foot" refers not just to the human body part, but also to a poetic term. In poetry, a "foot" is a pair of two [iamb](#)s, so each line of standard iambic [pentameter](#) contains five "feet" (ten syllables total). This second meaning allows the speaker to consider the way the poetry may (or may not) be a tool for helping people "feel."

**Shod** (Line 8) - To be "shod" is to be wearing shoes. The poem means the word in just that way, but it uses the idea of wearing shoes symbolically: a foot that's in a shoe can't feel or connect with nature in the way that a bare foot can.

**Spent** (Line 9) - The poem uses the word "spent" primarily in the sense of being exhausted or drained of energy. The poem is saying that, regardless of what humanity does to nature, nature will never run out of energy. Additionally, the word "spent" brings to mind commerce, in the sense of spending money. Through that second meaning, the speaker seems to call back to the points about industry and trade made in the previous stanza. By saying that nature cannot be "spent," the speaker subtly implies that nature is inherently separate from the commercial activity through which mankind is destroying God's creation.

**Brink** (Line 12) - An edge, especially if located at the top of a steep place. Within the poem, Hopkins plays with the regular meaning of "brink" in order to refer not to an actual edge, but rather to the seeming "edge" that is the eastern horizon, from which the sun rises.

**Bent** (Line 13) - The poem uses "bent" not for its primary meaning—something that is sharply curved or angled. Rather, the poem uses the word to mean both "broken" and "corrupt," in order to describe a natural world that has been broken by human industry, as well as the human world that has transgressed against God through its destruction of the natural world.

**Broods** (Line 14) - The most common meaning of "brood" refers to thinking deeply on an unhappy subject. And there is a wisp of that meaning of the word in the poem, as the poem portrays God looking over the natural world destroyed by humans. But in the poem "brood" is much more strongly associated with an alternate meaning, which refers to the way that a bird or other egg-laying animal sits on and cares for its eggs before they hatch. So in the poem, God is nursing and caring for the broken world, from which a new world will surely hatch.

Sonnet). Italian sonnets such as this one consist of fourteen total lines. And as is typical of an Italian sonnet, the poem begins with an eight-line stanza called an octave, which is itself made up of two four-line quatrains, and ends with a six-line stanza called a sestet, which is made up of two three-line tercets:

- Octave
  - Quatrain
  - Quatrain
- Sestet
  - Tercet
  - Tercet

"God's Grandeur" also follows the pattern of an Italian sonnet in that its octave sets out what's called a "proposition," which establishes a problem. The sestet then begins with what is called a "turn," which marks a shift in the poem's focus from presenting a problem to resolving that problem.

In a typical Italian sonnet the problem is often something like unrequited love. In "God's Grandeur" the problem presented is a bit bigger: that humanity has destroyed much of nature and, in the process, lost the ability to sense God's "charge" in nature.

## METER

While "God's Grandeur" follows the form of an Italian [sonnet](#), there is one aspect in which it differs. Italian sonnets written in English almost always use the meter iambic pentameter. And, in fact, "God's Grandeur" does contain many lines of iambic pentameter. Yet, at the same time, the poem often *doesn't* use iambic pentameter, instead using less regular or structured meters. For instance, the poem's eleventh line contains the five unstressed-stressed pairs of syllables that mark iambic pentameter:

And though the last lights off the black West went

But the poem's first line follows a quite different pattern:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

In addition, even when the poem uses iambic pentameter in the poem, it often subverts the rhythm created by the meter. It does this particularly in the first octave of the poem, as in the second line:

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

In that line, the meter is iambic pentameter, but the comma creates a pause that interrupts the meter's rhythm. In the poem, then, the speaker is both creating the rhythm of iambic pentameter and layering other rhythms against it, similar to the concept of counterpoint in music. It is interesting that the



## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"God's Grandeur" is an Italian sonnet (also called a Petrarchan

speaker uses this technique more in the octave, when the poem is following the traditional Italian sonnet practice of laying out the problem, than it does in the sestet when the poem offers a resolution. Put another way: the poem's flow is more interrupted in the part where it presents a distressing problem than it is in the part that offers a more hopeful solution.

Overall, the poem's meter could be described as mostly iambic pentameter with a bit of a different meter, called sprung rhythm, mixed in. Hopkins himself actually invented sprung rhythm, and explanations of sprung rhythm can get quite technical. At the big picture level what's important to understand is that sprung rhythm has more varied stresses and patterns than other traditional meters (and is a precursor to modern [free verse](#)). Hopkins used looser and more varied meter because he felt that it was critical for poetry to capture the more complex and varied rhythms of common speech. As Hopkins put it, "Poetical language should be the current language heightened." In "God's Grandeur" specifically, he subverts the general flow of iambic pentameter in the poem also to emphasize specific words and ideas, and, perhaps, to embody in the stuttering rhythm of the poem the way that he describes humanity as interfering with the flow of nature and God's "charge."

## RHYME SCHEME

One area in which "God's Grandeur" precisely follows the conventions of an Italian [sonnet](#) is in its rhyme scheme. The poem follows a standard Italian sonnet rhyme scheme of:

ABBAABBA CDCDCD

It is worth noting that even as the poem follows this traditional rhyme scheme, it also uses various techniques—such as [caesura](#), [enjambment](#), and instances of [internal rhyme](#), such as the repeated long "e" sounds in line 6—to sometimes draw attention away from the rhyme scheme.

Just as he plays with and subverts the rhythm of the traditional iambic meter of a sonnet, Hopkins plays with and subverts the rhythm that would normally be established by following a regular rhyme scheme. By *breaking* this expected flow, Hopkins is able to sometimes focus intense pressure on individual words or phrases ("crushed"; "the soil"), and to layer multiple rhythms over and against each other in a way that mirrors the layered complexity and antagonisms of the world of man, God, and nature that the poem describes.



## SPEAKER

The speaker of "God's Grandeur" is anonymous and genderless. While it's possible to argue that Hopkins himself is the speaker, there isn't definitive evidence in the poem that this is the case. Regardless, the speaker is suffering. This suffering stems from what the speaker experiences as a disconnect: his or her own

profound sense of the connection between nature and God—that God, essentially, can be experienced through nature—in contrast to the way that the rest of humanity not only don't seem to feel that connection but is in fact heedlessly destroying nature. The speaker's despair about what humanity has done is so powerful that, in lines 7-8, the speaker might even be described as being misanthropic (a hater of humankind).

In the second stanza, the speaker's suffering eases as he or she realizes that, despite humanity's destruction of nature, nature (and God) is too strong and will endure and, like a rising sun, re-emerge. The poem never makes clear, though, whether the speaker's misanthropy eases along with his or her torment. After all, when the speaker describes the renewed world through the metaphor of God as a kind of mother bird and the broken world as an egg from which a new future will emerge, humanity is unmentioned. While the speaker's faith in God and nature is clear, whether humanity is a part of the speaker's vision of a renewed world is up for debate.



## SETTING

The setting of "God's Grandeur" is, to put it broadly, the Earth. While the poem could be seen as being specifically set in the time period of the Second Industrial Revolution of the late 19th century, when it was written, it can describe any time in which nature is under threat and mankind seems disconnected from God.

The poem also looks deeper into nature (some might argue it even looks underground, though that's probably too literal a reading) in order to capture the way that nature endures, tended by God, always ready to spring forth again.



## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Hopkins wrote "God's Grandeur" in 1877, at around the same time as he wrote a number of sonnets, including "[Spring](#)" (1877), "[In the Valley of the Elwy](#)" (1877), and "[The Sea and the Skylark](#)" (1877). All of these poems share similar characteristics, both thematically and stylistically. Thematically, they focus on nature and God—on Hopkins's sense that God is suffused and accessible through nature—and his resulting concern about the destruction of nature by people and the forces of industrialization. Stylistically, "God's Grandeur" contains some of the metrical complexity often found in Hopkins's work— including examples of Hopkins's own invented meter of sprung rhythm— though "God's Grandeur" is perhaps a bit less extreme in its metrical experimentation than other Hopkins poems are.

In some ways, Hopkins's poetry is of his time. His concerns about the dirtiness and corruption of industrialization are also evident in the work of other Victorian poets such as Christina Rossetti and Alfred Lord Tennyson, as well as in the work of fiction writers like Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens. But in other ways, Hopkins's poetry, including "God's Grandeur," seems to both anticipate the future and connect to the deeper past. Hopkins's style, with its meter loosed from the strict rhythms of the Romantic poets of the early 19th century or of most other Victorian poets, is often seen as anticipating the rise of free verse in the early 20th century. Meanwhile, Hopkins's sense of the connection between God and nature—so powerfully evoked in "God's Grandeur"—is more reminiscent of the work of George Herbert (1593-1633) and other Metaphysical poets than it is of most of his Victorian contemporaries (though certainly some poets of Hopkins's time, including Christina Rossetti, shared Hopkins's religious concerns).

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1877, England was in the midst of the [Second Industrial Revolution](#), a period of rapid technological advancement in both manufacturing and transportation that was dramatically transforming English society. Most crucial for Hopkins, the Second Industrial Revolution led to widespread degradation of nature from the exploitative mining and harvesting of natural resources, pollution emitted by factories, and the expansion of urban and suburban spaces into what was formerly wilderness.

Many artists and writers (and people from all walks of life) viewed this destruction of nature with alarm and despair. For Hopkins, who saw nature as an expression of God, the impact of industrialization on nature was particularly painful. This impact certainly helped shape his misanthropic sense—expressed at times in "God's Grandeur"—that, in comparison to nature, mankind is, as Hopkins once put it, "backward."



## MORE RESOURCES

### EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- ["God's Grandeur" Read Aloud](#) — Listen to a reading of the entire poem. (<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/play/76201>)
- [An explanation of sprung rhythm](#) — A short Encyclopaedia Britannica entry about sprung rhythm, which is the meter that Hopkins invented. (<https://www.britannica.com/art/sprung-rhythm>)
- [Wikipedia Entry on Hopkins](#) — A relatively brief biography of Hopkins's life, along with an overview of his body of poetry. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerard\\_Manley\\_Hopkins](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerard_Manley_Hopkins))

### LITCHARTS ON OTHER GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS POEMS

- [Pied Beauty](#)
- [The Caged Skylark](#)



## HOW TO CITE

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