

Spiritual Echoes: Unveiling Transcendental Ideals in Gerard Manley Hopkins' Verses: *The Starlight Night* and *Spring*

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Abstract

This intensive study embarks on an in-depth exploration of the intricate relationship between Transcendentalist philosophy and the timeless poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. This study aims to shed light on the strong relationship between Hopkins' literary work and the fundamental perceptions of Transcendentalist ideology by evaluating two of his most significant and symbolic poems - *The Starlight Night*, and *Spring*. Through a careful examination of themes such as nature, individual experience, and spiritual revelation as depicted in Hopkins' poetry, this study unveils insightful parallels with the core ideals adopted by Transcendentalist thinkers. This article contributes to a deeper understanding of Hopkins' poetic vision within the context of Transcendentalist thought.

Keywords: Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Starlight Night*, *Spring*. Transcendentalism, poetry, nature, spirituality, individualism.

"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge." Psalm 19:1-2.

Gerard Manley Hopkins is widely recognized in English literature for his unique way of writing poetry and his deep understanding of spirituality. His poetry, characterized by innovative linguistic techniques and rich symbolism, has left an unforgettable imprint on the literary scene. Hopkins' keen sensitivity to the beauty of the natural world, combined with his spiritual insight, imbues his works with eternal relevance that captivates readers even today.

The chosen poems *The Starlight Night* and *Spring* serve as poignant exemplars of Hopkins' poetic genius and his keen sensitivity to the spiritual essence of the natural world. *The Starlight Night* immerses the reader in the cosmic realm, inviting contemplation of the celestial heavens and the divine order therein. *Spring* celebrates the cyclical renewal of nature, evoking a sense of awe and reverence for the inherent beauty and vitality of the natural world.

Hopkins begins the poem *The Starlight Night* with an exclamation *Look at the stars! look, look up at the skies!* (Ln 1) – The poet urges the reader to look up at the stars and the skies. As the word “look” is repeated, it also stresses the urgency of seeing the beauty of night. It is a reflection of how Hopkins thinks of nature almost as an expression of God- more specifically, the heavens. The stars offer a prompt to seek out God's presence within the Order of Nature. The term "fire-folk" is used to describe the stars, giving them a more lively and magical quality. Hopkins gives the image of a mystical and otherworldly feel by depicting the stars as living entities. The stars are portrayed as celestial residents rather than just objects in the sky, implying that nature is alive and full of divine energy. This reflects the Transcendentalist idea that nature embodies the divine.

Ralph Waldo Emerson's work *Nature and Other Essays*, (21-23) often stress the importance of wonder in viewing nature. The stars are compared to "boroughs" and "circle-citadels," expanding on the idea of the night sky as a heavenly city. These phrases convey a

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feeling of order and grandeur, emphasizing that the stars are not randomly distributed but are being a part of the divine world. In the work of Hillis Miller *The Disappearance of God* (210-212) implies that the divine presence could be seen through nature and universe. The idea of "citadels" implies that these stars are spiritual strongholds, mirroring the Transcendentalist belief that the universe reflects divine power.

The focus shifts from the sky to the earth, suggesting that divine light is reflected even in the "dim woods." The metaphor of "elves'-eyes" introduces as an element of mysticism, implying that even in the darkest, most obscure places, the divine shines through. Nature was a source of revelation and truth, and even in its shadows, one could discover spiritual insight. The "diamond delves" stands for hidden spiritual richness and suggesting that nature has divine importance, including the unnoticed areas.

Hopkins contrasts the "grey lawns" with the "gold" of stars to demonstrate how the divine transforms the commonplace. The term "quickgold" refers to the stars' life-giving energy, serving as a metaphor for nature's vibrancy. In the perspective of transcendentalism that nature is a living force infused with divine energy, and this poem line "The grey lawns cold where gold, where quick gold lies!" exemplifies how the light of the stars can animate even the cold, grey soil, reflecting the divine's omnipresence in everything. According to the belief of transcendentalists like Emerson "The Natural elements convey spiritual energy" *Nature and Other Essays* (25) nature is connected by the divine breath of life. The poet uses the image of the trees whitebeam and abeles being moved by the wind connect nature's physical movement with spiritual powers. In transcendentalist thinking, the wind frequently represented the spirit or soul, traveling invisibly across the earth and stimulating life. The "flare" of the trees implies that they are illuminated by the spiritual energy of the stars.

The grey lawns cold where gold, where quickgold lies!

Wind-beat whitebeam! airy abeles set on a flare! (Ln 5-6)

The floating "flake-doves" convey an ethereal lightness, highlighting the concept of nature's spiritual component. Doves are usually connected with serenity and purity, and their graceful flight here can be viewed as a mirror of the soul's ability to fly upward and connect with higher spiritual levels. Nature's symbols, according to transcendentalists like Emerson, serve as gates to discovering spiritual reality. The link between worldly turmoil and heavenly flight exemplifies the idea that minor earthly occurrences can have tremendous spiritual importance. The beauty of the stars, and the divine connection through nature, is something to be "purchased" or "prized." The poem line perfectly aligned with the transcendentalist belief that the spiritual truths found in nature are accessible to all but require an active effort to perceive it. Transcendentalism often emphasized the importance of individual effort and personal enlightenment. The poet Hopkins insists that the richness of the natural world is a spiritual treasure, has to be valued rather not to be taken for granted.

The richness of the natural world can be valued through the spiritual currency like "prayer, patience, alms, and vows," these qualities help one to properly feel and appreciate the divine presence in nature. Spirituality was deeply personal and linked to moral activity. Individual deeds and personal thought are used to connect people to the divine and this echoes transcendentalist ideas, which promote introspection and ethical conduct in order to gain deeper spiritual insight. The stars are compared to early spring blossoms specifically the "mealed-with-yellow" appearance of sallow trees and on orchard boughs in the month of May, a season of rejuvenation and abundance, which is a depiction of flourishing life, represents the transcendentalist notion of nature as a metaphor of eternal rebirth and renewal. This comparison with orchard boughs implies that the stars, like the blossoms, are symbols of beauty and spiritual richness, waiting to be admired and those who seek them will understand the manifestations of the divine process of life, death, and regeneration. Nature, for Hopkins as for transcendentalists, is a living entity that reflects the endless cycles of spiritual renewal and growth.

Hopkins connects the stars to a barn full of harvested grain, with "shocks" representing bundles of wheat, implies that the stars are spiritual nutrition, stored and ready to be consumed.

From a transcendentalist view, this might be seen as nature supplying nourishment for the soul. Just as a barn holds physical grain to support the body, the stars and nature provide spiritual nourishment to sustain the soul, relating with the concept that spending time in nature cultivates one's inner spiritual life.

Look, look: a May-mess, like on orchard boughs!

Look! March-bloom, like on mealed-with-yellow sallows!

These are indeed the barn; withindoors house

The shocks. (Ln 10-12)

In the last two lines of the poem *The Starlight Night*, Hopkins uses religious iconography to depict the stars as the boundary around the homes of Christ, Mary, and the saints. The word “Paling” referred as a separation between the divine realm and the earthly world. However, from a transcendentalist viewpoint, the divine and natural worlds are not separate but interconnected. The natural world, symbolized by the stars, acts as a gateway to divine understanding and also nature was not a barrier but a bridge to the divine. Hopkins sees the stars as the point where heaven and earth meet. The poet concludes the poem with a vision of Mary and Joseph, "vail'd and invisible," living beyond the earthly sphere.

The veil signifies the hidden nature of the divine, indicating that spiritual truth is present but often unseen. Transcendentalists believed that the material world was just a shadow of the deeper spiritual reality and that insight and intuition could reveal this hidden truth. In Hillis Miller’s interpretation, for instance, Hopkins’ poetry often transcends mere observation, presenting natural elements as windows into a divine truth—a perspective that directly reflects Transcendentalist thinking about nature as a medium for spiritual insight *The Disappearance of God* (155). Hopkins’ description reflects this duality between the visible world and the invisible, spiritual world, reinforcing the idea that nature offers access to divine truths that lie just beyond ordinary perception.

The opening line of the poem *Spring* gives a statement “nature (spring) as the highest expression of beauty”. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau believed that nature was the ultimate source of truth and beauty. The season spring represents the symbol of renewal and rebirth, which is the purest expression of the divine in the natural world. This reflects Emerson’s belief that nature is a direct manifestation of the spiritual. The weeds growing “long and lovely” exemplifies the transcendentalist belief that even the lowest aspects of nature are beautiful and valuable. Transcendentalism ignores hierarchical differences in nature, claiming that everything, including weeds, has the same divine force. Hopkins emphasizes the vibrancy and lushness of the natural environment, celebrating its inherent goodness, which is consistent with transcendentalist beliefs about the connectivity and beauty of all life forms. The eggs of the bird thrush look like “little low heaven,” the divine is present in all elements of nature, including small things.

This reflects Emerson's concept of Nature, in which even the most basic forms of life are regarded as sacred and full of spiritual significance. The melody of the thrush's song reverberates through the trees, representing the harmony of nature and spirit. Transcendentalists claimed that nature could "echo" or reflect divine truths, implying that natural sounds have spiritual value beyond their material existence. The term "rinse and wring" means a purification process, implying that nature washes and renews both the ground and the human soul, which is linked to spiritual and emotional rebirth. Hopkins employs the powerful metaphor of lightning to express the impact of the bird's song, revealing how nature can create sudden moments of spiritual enlightenment, similar to the transcendentalist concept of intuitive knowledge.

“The glassy pear tree leaves” refers to the clarity and purity of the natural world, symbolize a transparency or clarity through which one can see the divine. Nature was often considered by Transcendentalists as a transparent glass through which one could see the workings of God. The brushing of the leaves and blossoms represents the divine's delicate, almost visual presence in the world. The "descending blue" refers to the sky or heavens, evoking the sense of divine presence flowing down to meet the ground. The "rush" of the blue sky

symbolizes the rapidity and abundance of spiritual energy in the natural world, reflecting the transcendentalist belief that spiritual insight is readily available to those who are willing to accept it. Hopkins observes the lambs racing joyfully, expressing the freedom and vitality of life. In the view of transcendentalists, animals and other creatures are seen as pure expressions of life and joy, untouched by the complications of human society. The lambs' unhindered movements symbolize a direct connection to nature and divine energy. This excitement in nature is consistent with the transcendentalist appreciation of life's inherent beauty and goodness, which can lead to a sense of spiritual fulfillment.

Thrush's eggs look little low heavens, and thrush
Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring
The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing; (Ln 3-5)

Hopkins is amazed by the abundant quantities of life and energy found in nature, he is asking a question emphasizing nature's mystery and awe, which transcendentalists believe is the way to spiritual enlightenment. "Juice" and "Joy" are expressions of divine life, supporting Emerson's idea that nature is a manifestation of God's spirit. The poet's sense of amazement coincides with the transcendentalist belief that real understanding begins with amazement in the face of nature's mysteries. "The beginning" refers to the initial stage of creation of the earth by God especially shredding lights in the Garden of Eden, which is a reflection of the divine before being polluted by human civilization. Nature viewed as a direct link to a state of spiritual innocence and divine harmony. The spiritual richness is available to those who recognize it but he also warns that due to overexposure to material concern dulls the spiritual sense. The sweetness of nature can be corrupted by sin, hinting that human activities can damage nature's spiritual purity. This expresses the transcendentalist concern that civilization and materialism have harmed the individual's connection to nature and the divine. The reference to Christ means that redemption is possible, but transcendentalists believe that redemption occurs through personal spiritual experience and a return to nature, not through institutional religion.

Hopkins parallels youth's innocence with the freshness of May, a season of natural regeneration. For Transcendentalists, children's innocence was often seen as a model for the way adults should deal with the world—pure, uncorrupted, and in harmony with nature. Thoreau, in specific, regarded childhood as a period of closer relationship with the divine, free of the intellectual and moral difficulties of adulthood. Hopkins stresses innocence, stating that this state of purity is needed for experiencing the full spiritual ecstasy of nature. The term "maid's child" signifies Christ, Mary's child, and Hopkins highlights that Christ's innocence is the supreme goal. From a Transcendentalist point of view, this may be viewed as an expression of the divine standard for which all people should strive: a return to innocence, purity, and unity with the divine. Transcendentalists often viewed the divine as accessible through personal spiritual practice and introspection, and Hopkins' Christ represents the ultimate example of spiritual perfection.

In both *The Starlight Night* and *Spring*, Gerard Manley Hopkins captures the divine presence in nature, echoing transcendentalist ideas. In *The Starlight Night*, Hopkins portrays a star-filled sky as a manifestation of spiritual wonder, where nature serves as a doorway to the divine. This illustrates the transcendentalist belief in nature's ability to reveal spiritual truth. The stars show the boundless beauty of the universe and urge the readers to reconnect with this celestial force, also resonating with Transcendentalist ideals of finding spiritual truth through nature. *Spring* implies renewal and spiritual rebirth. Nature's rebirth in the springtime indicates purity and innocence. Like Transcendentalism, the poem emphasizes the harmony between humanity and nature, suggesting that through reflection on nature's beauty, one can access higher spiritual truths. Both poems illustrate Hopkins' spiritual vision through vivid natural imagery, aligning with transcendentalism's emphasis on individual intuition, nature's divinity, and the interconnectedness of all life.

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