

Critical analysis of The Windhover

The windhover is a bird with the rare ability to hover in the air: to fly in the same place while it scans the ground beneath for prey. The poet describes how he 'caught' sight of one of these birds in the midst of its hovering. The bird strikes the poet as a darling ('minion') of the morning; its crown-prince ('dauphin'), attracted by the dappled or freckled, variegated colours of dawn. It rides the wind as if it were on horseback; a rider with firm control on the reins. Its motion is controlled and suspended in a moment of concentrated energy. Then, in the next moment, the bird is off again: now like the ice-skater controlling the forces as it makes a turn. The bird, first balancing the wind to stay afloat: now rejects the 'big wind' as it makes a forward propulsion. At the same time, the poet feels his own heart stirring, lurch forward out of 'hiding': moved by the achieve(ment) of the mastery of the bird's performance.

The opening of the sestet serves both as the description of the bird and an injunction to the poet's own heart. The 'Brute beauty and valour and act' 'here/BUCKLE!' Buckle is a verb here: it denotes both a buckling together (like the buckling of a belt) of the parts of the creature's being; or a collapse in which all of the parts subordinate themselves upto a larger cause. At the moment of this integration, the glorious fire of "gash gold-vermilion" shines forth: of the same kind as Christ's crucifixion, though not as grand.

The confusing grammatical structure and sentence order of this sonnet makes it a typical Hopkins sonnet; contributing to its difficulty but also exhibiting Hopkins's masterful use of language. The Windhover is written in the sprung rhythm typical of Hopkins; where the number of accents in a line is counted but the number of syllables do not matter. This technique allows Hopkins to vary the speed of his lines, so as to capture the bird's pausing and racing. The poem slows abruptly at the end: pausing in awe to reflect on the glory of Christ.

This poem follows the trend of Hopkins's sonnets, in that a sensual experience gives birth to spiritual realisation. The horse-and-rider image of the windhover in the octave gives way to that of 'my chevalier' in the first tercet. This is a traditional medieval image of Christ as a Knight on horseback, to which the poem's dedication ('To Christ our Lord') gives us a clue. The transition from octave to sestet comes with the description of the bird with its 'Brute beauty' in flight which is a 'billion/Times told lovelier, more dangerous' than the glory, grandeur and spiritual power of Christ.

The first sentence of the sestet is descriptive; but it can be read as imperative too. The idea is that something happens when a being's action and body all culminate in the perfect self-expression in accordance with God's will. Hopkins, realising that his heart is not fully committed: draws inspiration from the bird's wholly self-contained, self-fulfilling action. Just as the hovering is the windhover's most distinctive action: so spiritual striving is or should be man's most important action. At moments when humans arrive at the fullness of their moral nature: they achieve something great. But that greatness necessarily pales before Christ's final act of self-sacrifice, which should stand as a model for our own behaviour and action.

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The final tercet within the last sestet declares that the outshining of the bird, and by extension a mortal creature by the glory of God is not a 'wonder': but rather an everyday phenomenon, part of what it means to be human. This striving, far from wearing down an individual, serves to bring out his/her inner glory: just as the daily use of a metal plough, far from wearing it down, increases its shine and sparkle. The suggestion is that there is a glittering, luminous core within every single person; which an intense religious life can bring out. The subsequent image is of embers breaking down to show their smouldering interiors. Hopkins words this image back to Christ's Crucifixion. They 'gall' (chafe, rub against themselves) to reveal their smouldering interiors. The verb "gash" (punning with gush) suggests the wounding of Christ's body and the shedding of His 'gold-vermilion' blood.