



PORTRAYAL OF GOD, NATURE AND HUMAN NATURE IN SELECT POEMS OF GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

S. Jerald Sagaya Nathan

Assistant Professor of English, St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli.

Abstract

The aim of this article is see how God, Nature and Human Nature are portrayed in Select poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Hopkins' conception of God, Nature and Human Nature in turn shaped and developed Christian thought both in theological and academic realm. This research paper highlights how Hopkins uses complex diction to express his spiritual anxiety, dualism and struggle between reason and sensuality, harmony and violence, happiness and suffering. The research paper also focuses on the model of the world presented by Gerard Manley Hopkins where human beings suffer because of anxiety and doubts but redeemed by the providential care of God. . Though the select poems present two contradictory facets of God, Nature and Human Nature they hint at Hopkin's holistic vision of Reality.

Key words: *Gerard Manley Hopkins, Christianity, Religion, philosophy, Theology, diction, Vision of Reality.*

In this modern world, three topics are much debated. They are Faith, religion and spirituality. In this world, human beings experience fragmentation and tension in their lives because of the strife of egos and because of their self-centered attitude and their detachment from God and doubt about His providential care. These problems have become inspiration for theologians, philosophers, artists, writers, playwrights and poets. Creative Artists irrespective of time, place, social political conditions and cultural differences and boundaries have invariably endeavoured to explore the nature of God and to improve their knowledge on the mystery of the universe and the existence of man. In Christian literary tradition, especially in Catholic writings God, man and man's relationship with God constitute dominant themes. These are often expressed by unique, innovative language. It is a well known fact that the Christian writers greatly contribute to the promulgation of faith and ecclesiastical spirit amid the reading public especially in the era of religious decline, progressive secularization and a debasement of moral and ethical values.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J. was an English poet. He was a Roman Catholic convert from Anglican faith (hopkinssociety.co.uk). He was also a Jesuit priest (poemhunter.com). He was born in England in 1844. He wrote poetry which influenced many leading poets of the 20th century. He was the compelling voice in the poetry of the Victorian Age. He won posthumous fame. He was popular for his imagery and his prosodic innovation (Carlson 5).

The poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J. exemplifies the fact that he writes with the devotion of a true theologian and the passion of an accomplished artist. His poetry communicates a comprehensive vision of life in which all forms of existence relate with a divinely ordered purpose. In his poetry, one can find how the human, the natural, and the supernatural compose an experience and how the experience affects the poet.

Gerard Manley Hopkins S.J. deserves a special attention, both as an artist and priest due to the linguistic and stylistic complexity of the poems as well as the mysterious elements of the personal life. When the poet's life and literary output is analysed, one may describe them as a streak of agony, religious zeal, spiritual disharmony and opposition. Critics have described Hopkins as anti-democrat, and being both revolutionary and reactionary. He is found to be highly individual and eccentric in his poetry and life (Armstrong 413-14).

Gerard Manley Hopkins was born and brought up in the tradition of the High Anglican Church in mid-Victorian period. He was a convert to Catholicism. He questioned the authenticity of the English Church during his studying at Oxford University. He was much influenced by Newman's *Apologia pro Vita Sua* which was published in 1864. He was torn between his Anglican roots, especially the ritualistic extremity of the High Anglican Church. His family remained in Anglican Church while Hopkins moved to Catholicism and became a Jesuit priest.

Gerard Manley Hopkins created poetry full of fierce Catholic piety but simultaneously sensual violence. He viewed faith as a source of inspiration and artistic fulfillment yet mingled with fear and internal labyrinth. He is regarded as the most controversial figure among Victorian poets who received unfavourable reviews from literary critics and dispiriting responses from the audience.

Gerard Manley Hopkins's works underlined the uniqueness of experience and exceptionality of the transitory aspect of everyday experience. His religious beliefs were modeled on the philosophy of Duns Scotus (1266-1308), a mediaeval Scottish



philosopher who upheld the concepts of individualism and introspective attitude. He was popularly known as the subtle doctor, doctor subtilis (Llewelyn 3). It is to this philosopher, Hopkins dedicated his poem “Duns Scotus’s Oxford” (1972). Scotus contributed to Hopkins’ shaping and developing both the religious and artistic facet of his output. He helped Hopkins to look profoundly for the moment of vision, of interior perception into an object’s being, as contrary to the automatic, confused knowledge with which the majority of people are satisfied (Mariani 3-4)

Gerard Manley Hopkins was much inspired by the 17th century metaphysical poets, particularly by George Herbert. Hopkins like George Herbert displayed the intense struggles of a deeply-religious man who had doubts, hesitations and abandonment in the hands of God, endeavouring to release himself from bonds and yet realizing that he is incapable of renouncing God’s protection.

The poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins such as “The Wreck of the Deutschland” subtitled “to the memory of five Franciscan nuns exiled by the Falk Laws drowned between midnight and morning of Dec.7th, 1875, “God’s Grandeur, “The Starlight Night”, “Pied Beauty”, “Duns Scotus’s Oxford” and “Spring and Fall”, remain complex, demanding and highly problematic. These poems appeal more to contemporary readers than to the 19th century public who were accustomed predominantly to didactic, more direct and unambiguous literature.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, the profoundly religious poet, under the influence of Metaphysical poetry was filled with spirituality, mannerism, philosophy and the elements of sensual violence and intensity of feelings. He used all these features and constituents and paid homage to God and strived to comprehend his magnitude and to explore the mystery of creation, nature and its relation with man. Dualism and contradiction constitute the essence of his poetry and they are reflected in every subject-matter and linguistic pattern.

God was a central figure of almost all poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins. He is portrayed on the one hand as a creator, life-giver and provider, and on the other hand, as a severe final judge who reprimands, punishes and takes human life. This is presented in the poem “The Wreck of the Deutschland” subtitled To the happy memory of five Franciscan Nuns, exiles by the Falk Laws, drowned between midnight and morning of Dec. 7th, 1875 in the following stanza:

Thou master my
God! giver of breath and bread;
World’s strand, sway of the sea;
Lord of living and dead;
Thou hast bound bones & veins in me, fastened me flesh,
And after it almost unmade, what with dread,
Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?
Over again I feel thy finger and find thee. (Bridges 13)

The first stanza of the poem presents two aspects of God. The first aspect is that God is peaceful and life-giving. The second aspect is that God is fiery, severe and life-taking. God is presented by Hopkins as an omnipotent, spiritual phenomenon who even when severely punishes people, stands as the one to be admired and praised, which becomes visible in the subsequent stanzas of the poem.

“The Wreck of the Deutschland” uses dualism and opposition in as a central theme as well as linguistic and stylistic complexity. On the one hand, the author depicts God as well as the nature and man, created in his own image, and their relationship, in a highly emotional ecstatic, all the more violent way in order to manifest not only his religious zeal and unshakable faith but also to demonstrate how difficult, painful and even distressing the act of faith and the process of searching for God can be.

Hopkins intensifies such a complex perception of religion and attitude to life via his knotty language and style, especially through his intricate metrical system called sprung rhythm which relies on a tangled use of accentuated feet and non-accentuated syllables. Only thanks to such discordant, irregular rhythm, being his own invention, the artist could thoroughly display the internal chaos of a Christian.

Gerard Manley Hopkins presents the pessimistic and gloomy vision of life and Christian agony in his “Dark Sonnets”. “Dark Sonnets” was written between 1885 and 1886. It was written at the end of the author’s life. It best illustrates a human soul which is desperately in search of Christ and which longs for religious grace which appears to have vanished from the world (Stephen 1986).



Gerard Manley Hopkins used nature as one of his central themes and he always described it with reference to God. He is of the belief that nature was created in God's image and also believed that it is the language God speaks. According to him every creature that is part of the earth has the unique quality or essential "whatness". This he calls inscape. The inscape is the individual 'distinctive' form, the 'oneness' of a natural object which is put into action by instress, the divine energy that both upholds the inscape of all things, determines it and makes it alive to the senses of the observer. In the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, instress is seen as mystifying illumination or insight into the underlying order and unity of creation epitomized by God (Cuddon & Cuddon 91)

The popular poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins like "Pied Beauty", "God's Grandeur" or "The Windhover: To Christ our Lord" exemplifying his devotional bent of mind. Through the aforementioned mentioned poems, Hopkins pays homage to God's act of creation and describes nature in terms of Christ-like qualities. In the poem "Windhover" he describes the Christ-like qualities in the circling movements of a flying bird in the following lines:

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
Dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! Then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing! (Bridges 26).

Through the poem "Pied Beauty", Hopkins thanks God for the beautiful world that He designed made more colourful and abounding with variety made possible by the dappled things. The glorification of God in the universe takes place thus:

Glory be to God for dappled things –
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;
And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim. (Bridges 27)

He concludes the poem saying that God fathered the beautiful world and is beyond change and praises him for being the unmoved mover. The keen observation of Hopkins is verbalized in the following lines:

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him. (Bridges 26)

The religious belief and fervour of Gerard Manley Hopkins is well stated in his poem "God's Grandeur":

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. (Bridges 24)

"God's Grandeur" is representative poem that speaks of the God Mysticism of Gerard Manley Hopkins, his experimentation with prosody and his mastery of natural symbolisms to drive home the theme of God's presence in the world and the intimate connection that exists between the Creator and the created being. The closing lines of the poem "God's Grandeur" presents God using the image of a brooding mother bird, which patiently looks on its kitten with care.

Their lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings. (Bridges 24)



Nevertheless, Hopkins often presented two contradictory facets of nature. When set beside the afore-mentioned tranquil, peaceful and graceful features of God's creative act, nature is also the source of destruction and agony. Unlike "The Windhover", "The Caged Skylark" which was written between 1876-1889 presented the image of a bird that should be set free but is bound in prison in a figurative sense. He compares the eponymous caged skylark to the imprisoned human soul.

As a dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage,
Man's mounting spirit in his bone-house, mean house, dwells —
That bird beyond the remembering his free fells;
This in drudgery, day-labouring-out life's age. (Bridges 27)

The destructive and degenerative aspect of nature and humankind are probably most vividly depicted in "I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark, not Day" (1885) which is Hopkins' crisis sonnets full of feelings of bitterness, apprehension and disgust with his physical nature.

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
What hours, O what black hours we have spent
This night! What sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!
And more must, in yet longer light's delay.
With witness I speak this. But where I say
Hours I mean years, mean life. (Hopkins 156)

The poems taken for study, present the two sides of nature and the existence of a human being, who is peaceful and agreeable on the one hand, and violent and distressing on the other hand. The poems, "That nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection" contains both the elements of dread, bedlam and ferocity on the one hand, and consolation and solace on the other hand.

...Million-fuelèd, | nature's bonfire burns on.
But quench her bonniest, dearest | to her, her clearest-selvèd spark
Man, how fast his firedint, | his mark on mind, is gone!
Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark
Drowned. (Bridges 53)

As the title "That nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection" implies, Resurrection of Jesus Christ puts an end to the earthly suffering and brings comfort to human souls:

Manshape that shone
Sheer off, disseveral, a star, | death blots black out; nor mark
Is any of him at all so stark
But vastness blurs and time | beats level. Enough! the Resurrection,
A heart's-clarion! Away grief's gasping, | joyless days, dejection. (Bridges 53)

Thus the research article highlights how God, Nature and Human Nature are portrayed in Select poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins and how it in turn shaped and developed Christian thought both in theological and academic realm. The purpose of Hopkins in using complex diction is to express his spiritual anxiety, dualism and struggle between reason and sensuality, harmony and violence, happiness and suffering. The model of the world presented by Gerard Manley Hopkins is one where human beings suffer because of anxiety and doubts but redeemed by the providential care of God. Though the select poems present two contradictory facets of God, Nature and Human Nature they hint at Hopkin's holistic vision of Reality.

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