



Spring by Gerard Manley Hopkins

Nothing is so beautiful as Spring –

When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush;

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;

The glassy peartree leaves and blooms, they brush

The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush

With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling.



What is all this juice and all this joy?

A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning

In Eden garden. – Have, get, before it cloy,

Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning,

Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy,

Most, O maid's child, thy choice and worthy the winning.

Glossary

lush: growing luxuriantly

wring: to twist or squeeze in order to extract moisture

strain: a trace of something or the sound of a piece of music

Eden: paradise

cloy: to sicken with an excess of sweetness

Mayday: the first day of May, traditionally associated with Mary, the mother of Jesus; in this context it also means the innocence of childhood

maid's child: Jesus, who was the child of a virgin

Notes:

Seamus Heaney said of Hopkins that his poetry is 'rammed with life' but that he also believed such energy should be 'kept leashed'.¹ 'Spring' is a perfect example of Heaney's description of Hopkins' work.

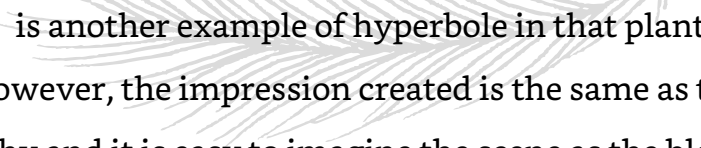


Hopkins wrote 'Spring' in May 1877, after walking in the Welsh countryside.

The poem is a Petrarchan sonnet, divided into an octet (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines). It follows the typical rhyming pattern for such a sonnet: ABBAABBA CDCDCD. The brevity of the sonnet form forces Hopkins to compress his enthusiasm and powerful emotions into a mere fourteen lines. Therefore, every line is packed with emotion and there is an abundance of what Heaney called 'the astounding richness of music and the mimetic power of his language'.

The poem opens with the powerful statement: 'Nothing is so beautiful as spring'. This is hyperbole, but it perfectly captures Hopkins' ecstasy at the beauty and energy of spring. The following lines are full of life and movement as Hopkins extols the wonder of nature coming to life. The alliteration, assonance and the broad vowel sounds in the second line - 'When **w**eeds, in **w**heels, shoot **l**ong and **l**ovely and **l**ush' – add greatly to the musical quality of the poem and emphasize the richness of nature exploding into growth.

¹ From the Hopkins Lectures 2009 -Hopkins's Influence on Heaney - the Poet as Craftsman: Brian Cosgrove, NUI Maynooth



The verb 'shoot' is another example of hyperbole in that plants do not grow at such a speed. However, the impression created is the same as that in time-lapse photography and it is easy to imagine the scene as the bleakness of winter gives way to the greenness and growth of spring.

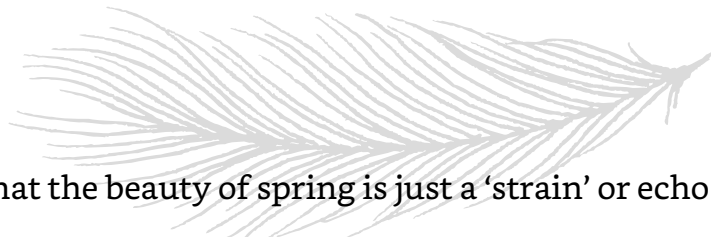
Thrush's eggs, which are speckled blue, are compared to 'little low heavens'. Hopkins connects nature to God simply but powerfully here. The blue of a sky dotted with clouds is linked to the colour of the bird's eggs and reminds us that the beauty of nature is God's creation.

The richness and intensity of the language perfectly reflects the lushness and the flurry of activity that is spring growth. The 'racing lambs' gambol in this paradise that is the countryside in spring.

At this point in the poem it is worth noting the use of dynamic, energetic verbs: 'shoot', 'rinse', 'wring', 'strikes', 'sing', 'rush' etc.

The sestet offers a change in tone and imagery. There are no more descriptions of the beauty of nature but instead a reflection on religion. Hopkins asks us to consider 'What is all this juice and all this joy?'

Hopkins uses **sprung rhythm** to great effect in this poem. Instead of using the more typical iambic pentameter, for example, Hopkins packs stressed syllables together to focus our attention on the point he is making and to add to the sense of heightened emotion at this point in the poem. An example of sprung rhythm can be seen in the ninth line, when Hopkins asks 'What is *all this juice* and *all this joy*?' (The sprung rhythm is underlined.) There is great emotional power and intensity in this seemingly simple question and the sprung rhythm emphasises that.



Hopkins feels that the beauty of spring is just a 'strain' or echo of heavenly perfection before the garden of Eden was marred by man's sin. All our lives are 'sour with sinning' and Hopkins entreats Christ to save the innocent youth from this fate. The positivity of the octet has been replaced by negativity, as can be clearly seen in the words 'cloy', 'cloud' and 'sour'. The poet's desire for the freshness and innocence of spring's perfection to be preserved is shown in the urgency of the imperatives 'Have' and 'get'. The young people are the 'Most', which in this context means the 'best' and they are 'choice' or the pick of the crop. They are worth the efforts it would take Christ to win them and preserve their innocence forever. Christ is addressed as 'maid's child' as he was born of the Virgin Mary, and the 'Mayday' in every girl and boy is a reference to Mary, as May is the month associated with her.

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