

# **Hopkins**

## **No Worst, There is None**

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# What Might You Be Asked?

## Themes

- Grandeur and magnificence of God's creation
- God's presence in nature
- The purpose of life - living as God intended
- Mental suffering, despair, separation from God
- Sin and redemption



# What Might You Be Asked?

## Style

- Unconventional language
- Imagery of nature
- Strict poetic forms



**No worst  
there is none**

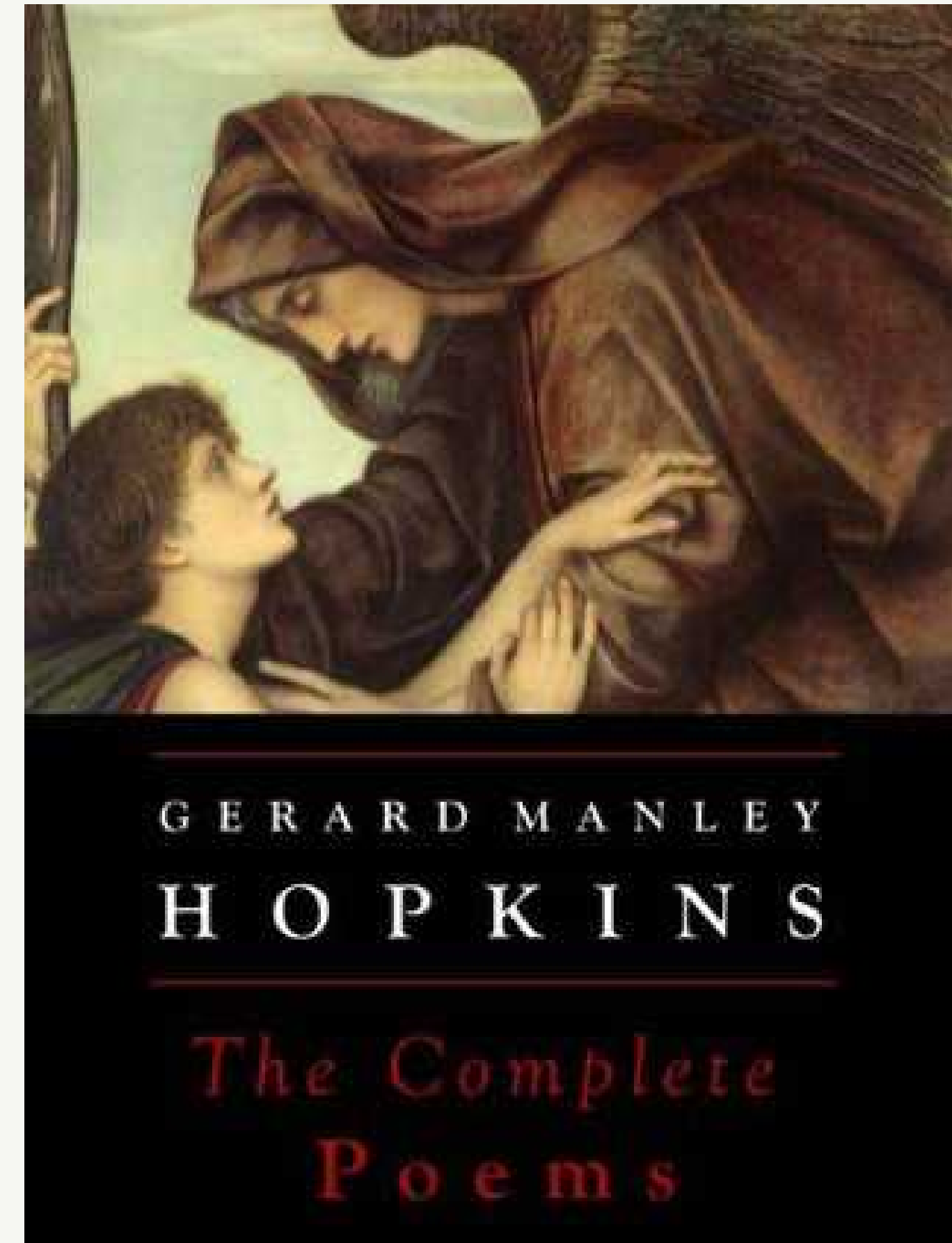
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# Background

## The Terrible Sonnets

- Hopkins wrote this particular 'terrible sonnet' in 1885 when he was living in Dublin and suffering from depression.
- Writing to his friend Robert Bridges, Hopkins described these sonnets as coming to him 'like inspirations unbidden and against my will'.
- Hopkins was uncomfortable with the terrible sonnets as he felt that depression and despair were not suitable topics for poems, unlike his earlier poems in praise of God. However, he did acknowledge that they were 'inspirations' and he did not destroy them, so on some level he must have believed them to have merit.





No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,  
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.  
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?  
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?  
My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief  
Woe, world-sorrow; on an age-old anvil wince and sing —  
Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked 'No ling-  
ering! Let me be fell: force I must be brief.'"

- In King Lear, Edgar says ‘The worst is not, / So long as we can say, “This is the worst”’.
- The first sentence is complex. At first glance, it may mean ‘There is nothing worst than this’, but the rest of the poem suggests that it means Hopkins cannot even take comfort in the fact that he has reached his lowest ebb. There will never come a stage at which he can say, ‘This is the worst’. There is no point at which that is true.
- Some critics believe Hopkins is saying that he *has* reached his lowest point and cannot imagine anything worse.
- It is up to you which you think best fits, or you could acknowledge both viewpoints.

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ering! Let me be fell: force I must be brief.'"

- Note the monosyllabic first sentence. It drives home the tension, despair and pain of Hopkins' condition.
- The word 'Pitched' means thrown with great force, but 'pitch' is also a black tar and is used as an adjective when describing deep darkness. 'Pitch' is also a musical term: to 'pitch' something is to fix it on a scale or degree. Hopkin's torment goes beyond that which can be measured.
- The suffering he is experiencing is terrible, yet in the future he will suffer even more deeply as 'More pangs' - fresh torments - will have been 'schooled' or taught by these pangs.
- Note the homophone 'wring / ring'. (A homophone is when two words sound the same but have different meanings and may be spelled differently.) It ties in with the word 'Pitched' in the first line and links sound to the poet's deep pain. One critic has observed that this perhaps 'parodies the chiming of church-bells and thus inverts the sacramental imagery'.
- The sounds implied in these lines have to serve as a substitute for articulated prayer, which the poet cannot manage at the moment.

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- The repetition of 'pitch' and 'pangs' reinforces the poet's suffering.
- In the poet's torment, he looks to the Virgin Mary and God, his 'Comforter', for help. However, the anguished questions suggest he feels isolated and cut off from these sources of consolation.
- There is no answer to the question and Hopkins turns again to an agonisingly accurate description of his pain.
- The tone in lines three and four is one of hopelessness and accusation. He wants to know why God has deserted him in his hour of need, just as Jesus cried 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' as he died on the cross.



At the ninth hour, Jesus cried out, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabacthani?' My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

This is the only quote from the Bible repeated in more than one Gospel.

If you have attended Easter ceremonies, you have probably heard this quote. Hopkins would, of course, have known it well.

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- Hopkins compares his cries of anguish to a huddled mass of animals. This image of animals crowding together suggests fear and desperation.
- His sorrow is part of a larger, 'world-sorrow'. Hopkins knows that he is not the only one to suffer a crisis of faith and to struggle with deep depression.
- The words are linked through alliteration: 'heave, herds-long, huddle' which reinforces the idea of the creatures pressed together in a claustrophobic, almost panicked desire to find help and comfort.



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- The next image is of an anvil being struck. There is a sort of music here, but it is what one critic has called 'the music of torment'. The anvil may 'sing' as it is struck, but the cry is one of pain.
- The brief pause or 'lull' between each blow is just that: there is no end to the suffering.
- A force, 'Fury' insists that the torment continue, shrieking that there must be no pause and that sinister malevolence 'Let me be **fell**' must be relentless.
- The word 'lingering' is broken into two. Although the poet can break the word and delay, for a short time, the inevitable, there is no stopping what is to come. Another way to look at the stretching of the word from the seventh to the eighth line is to say that it indicates pain and Fury will follow the poet wherever he goes. There is no escape. Hopkin's mental suffering will not allow him any reprieve.



O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall  
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap  
May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small  
Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! creep,  
Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all  
Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.

- The sestet signals a change of mood.
- The poet is reflective as he imagines the dramatic inner landscape of the mind. The opening 'O' captures the poet's torment and agony as he contemplates the way he - and all of us - can torture ourselves with the knowledge that our minds contain terrifyingly deep and dark places. He feels he is hanging on a precipice.
- Those who have never experienced the mental torment of these parts of the mind can 'Hold them cheap' because they have never clung to the edge of reason.

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- Hopkins says our 'small Durance' - our rather feeble endurance - cannot cope with the horrors of mental torment for long.
- Sleep offers a grim sort of consolation: just as death ends the torment of life, so sleep can end the torment of the day.
- The image of a wretched man seeking refuge from the 'whirlwind' of terror and mental anguish is deeply pessimistic. There can be, at best, a temporary reprieve in sleep.