

Sprung rhythm in the
windhover by gerard
manley hopkins



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Sprung Rhythm in "The Windhover" The "Windhover" is a beautiful sonnet by Gerard Manley Hopkins depicting the swift and smooth actions of a bird caught in the light of the dawn. The bird is imagined by the poet to be able to glide and hover in the wind, master of its kingdom, able to ride the air like a skillful rider on horseback. The quick and controlled movements of the bird are graceful and precise like a skater calculating and measuring its turns. This beauty of the bird's actions is a smaller image of the true splendor of Christ. The sprung rhythm used by Hopkins is a superbly effective technique in capturing the hovering imagery of the bird and comparing it to the glory of Christ while giving the sonnet a beautiful, charged and creative energy. At first glance the structure can seem confusing with the sentences half finished and the verbs, adjectives, and nouns all mixed together without flow. However, this is part of Hopkins's skill by being "fully in control of the energies of his sprung rhythm" (Rumens 2011). Carol Rumens sees this rhythm as allowing the poet to set the words "soaring across the first seven lines of the octet" (2011). Also, all the "ing" endings in the first eight lines act to unify and tie together the first stanza; just like the way the bird is inseparable from itself and its action so too are the words from their lines. For example, the bird is perfectly absorbed and engrossed in its act of "riding Of the rolling level underneath him steady air" (Hopkins lines 2-3). It merges and becomes one with the wind, just like all the different words fuse together and become one with the rhythm of the sonnet. Sprung rhythm also charges the lines with verbs trying to capture the intensity of the bird's actions. It gives the sentences a controlled speed, highlighting the way the bird pauses and abruptly springs into action. For example, the poet sees it holding still, gracefully hovering and "rung upon the rein of a wimpling

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wing" (4). The bird is holding itself poised, in complete control of its movements and energy, drawing the air around it in its own kingdom of daylight. Then suddenly it dashes off again, " In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing" (5). In this same way, the rhythm slows and picks up the pace of the sonnet, giving the poem a physical movement, with the sentences sometimes hovering on the page and then swiftly riding off, charged with verbs and adjectives. The rhythm's intense actions piled into such few words, also effectively illustrates how this little passionate act of the bird is a smaller image of the beauty and grandeur of Christ. For example, the bird's hurling, gliding, and rebuffing of the world around it helps the poet's heart to come out of hiding, " Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding Stirred for a bird" (7-8). It helps him to realize how the light of Christ is " a billion Times told lovelier" (10-11). The rhythm's start and stop pace allows the reader and the poet to slowly reflect on the magnificence and splendor of Christ and how it is present inside all of us. The bird's swift and energetic movements define it and are a part of its everyday life. Similarly, the power is also there in us and is something to be worked on daily in order to reveal its light. For example, just like the plough that plods on, the intensity of its action instead of wearing it out, reveals the " blue-bleak embers" underneath (13). Therefore, the sprung rhythm is effective in reinforcing the idea that just like the charged energy of the bird, we too have a wonderful spark and glow inside us, reminding one of the sacrifice of Christ. Works Cited Hopkins, G. M. " The Windhover." Rumens, Carol. " Poem of the week: The Windhover by Gerard Manley Hopkins." Guardian News and Media Limited. 2011. Web. 18 July, 2011.