

# The fall of innocence in hopkins's "spring and fall"



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Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem, "Spring and Fall: To a Young Child," is a beautiful poem written to a young girl. The narrator of the poem notices the girl's youthful innocence, and cannot help but think of the future pains and heartaches she will face. Hopkins uses imagery of the spring and fall seasons to illustrate these themes of life and loss. The poem addresses a child's impending loss of innocence, as she will one day understand the pain that comes with being human.

"Spring and Fall" is a short lyric poem of one stanza and fifteen lines. Hopkins uses a rhyme scheme that forms seven pairs of couplets, with the exception of lines seven through nine, which all rhyme. Therefore, the exact rhyme scheme is AABBCDDDEEFFGG. One will notice that the three rhyming lines fall exactly in the middle of the poem, making it symmetrical. These three lines also contain the climax of the poem, "And yet you will weep and know why" (l. 9). Breaking the otherwise steady rhyme scheme with these lines helps to emphasize the climax. Unlike the rhyme scheme, the poem's meter is not as predictable. Each line has between six and eight syllables with four stresses per line, except for line fifteen, which has only three stresses. Hopkins uses a meter called sprung rhythm, where each metrical foot begins with a stressed syllable that may either stand alone or be followed by up to three light syllables (Abrams 222). Most of the metrical feet in "Spring and Fall" are composed of one light syllable following a stressed syllable, but there are several instances of stressed clusters, like "fresh thoughts" (l. 4) and "heart heard" (l. 13).

What is especially interesting about Hopkins's use of meter is where he writes in the exact stresses. Most notably, the "Márgarét" of line one is

given two stresses, whereas “ Margaret” in line fifteen does not have any stresses. Because the poem is addressed to Margaret, the first mention of her name speaks directly to her. When her name appears again, she is not being spoken to; Hopkins speaks of Margaret as a separate entity, something that no longer exists. Perhaps the discrepancy in stressed syllables is supposed to highlight the differences between the Margaret of the present and the Margaret of the past.

The poem opens as Margaret, a little girl who may be the narrator's daughter or young relative, is “ grieving over Goldengrove unleaving” (1. 1-2). Taken literally, she is crying as the leaves are falling off of the trees in autumn (“ unleaving”). In a more figurative manner, the first two lines can be seen as the beginning of Margaret growing up and losing her innocence. The fictional name “ Goldengrove” calls to mind a childhood fantasy land, with images of sun shining through golden leaves. Unfortunately, Goldengrove is dying as is unleaves; it is becoming darker and less colorful, which breaks Margaret's heart. To the reader's knowledge, this is the first real pain she has known. Because she is young with “ fresh thoughts,” Margaret cares about the leaves “ like the things of man” (1. 3)–she treats leaves and nature as she would treat people. To Margaret, a forest dying is no different than a loved one dying.

The narrator sees Margaret's sadness, and knows that as she grows up, she will have to face things more painful than falling leaves: “ As the heart grows older, it will come to such sights colder” (1. 5-6). Here the poem is nearing its climax at lines eight and nine: “ Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie: and yet you will weep and know why” (1. 8-9). “ Wanwood leafmeal,” also a

made-up term, literally means the wet leaf remains lying on the ground. In relation to the theme of future suffering, the wanwood leafmeal can also represent a darker, sadder world that Margaret will soon be part of. Currently, she is crying only for these dead leaves. In the poem, “ will” is italicized, guaranteeing the onset of future sadness for Margaret. Although the narrator assures Margaret she will know worse pain in her life than falling leaves, he at least tells her that she will understand her sadness.

The narrator goes on to say that no matter what the sources of Margaret's sorrows may be, they will all hurt in the same way. However, no one other than Margaret can truly understand what she is going through, he or she can only guess: “ nor mouth had, no nor mind expressed, what heart heard of, ghost guessed” (l. 12-13). In other words, no person could be capable of articulating Margaret's inner torment, as it is personal and unique to her. Finally, just as the unleaving trees in autumn are unavoidable, so too is the human struggle, “ the blight man was born for” (l. 14). The poem closes as the narrator tells Margaret that it is really her childhood self she is mourning for—the young girl who sees so much beauty in the world that she cannot handle a tree losing its leaves. Someday, such a sight will not affect her.

Beginning even in the title, “ Spring and Fall” foretells the coming of a darker time in not just Margaret's, but every child's life. Readers will notice the subtitle, “ To A Young Child,” specifically addresses a child and excludes adults. Hopkins makes this distinction because children like Margaret are blissfully unaware of what sorrow awaits them as they grow older. Adults, on the other hand, have grown up, and therefore have already experienced

some form of suffering. They don't need to be given a lesson on what they understand all too well.

## **Works Cited**

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Hopkins, Gerard M. "Spring and Fall." Selected Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Dover, 2011. 43. Print