

## *Original Paper*

# A Study of Anxiety and Redemption in Gerard Manley Hopkins'

## Poems

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### **Abstract**

*This paper aims to interpret the anxiety caused by the Industrial Revolution and how people sought redemption from religion and nature to alleviate spiritual suffering, from the perspective of Gerard Manley Hopkins. The author analyzed the feelings of anxiety generated by the overall social context, due to the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the environment, human beliefs, and the human body. Meanwhile, the author endeavors to explain that in the process of seeking redemption, it is necessary to affirm the existence of God, pay high respect to Jesus Christ's selfless dedication, and still maintain trust in God, even though faith may be impacted. Ultimately, this benefits individuals and society as a whole. Essentially, Hopkins calls for people to return to nature, restore their connection with nature, and renew their spirit in order to redeem humanity.*

### **Keywords**

*Gerard Manley Hopkin, The Industrial Revolution, Anxiety, Redemption*

### **1. Introduction**

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) is one of the most prominent poets of the Victorian Era in England. His poetry is filled with beautiful sounds, vibrant imagery, and his unique perception of God, nature, and the pains of life. Hopkins was highly sensitive to natural scenes, always sensing the subtle differences among various natural landscapes and what makes them special and particular. In his nature poems, he expresses his feelings through common but unique natural objects such as the soaring

Windhover, vibrant spring, tall binsey poplars, caged skylark, etc. Among these, he could feel the power of nature and gain insight into the omnipresence and glory of God. Thus, Hopkins's nature poems not only celebrate the beauty of nature, but also convey his in-depth devotion to God. In Hopkins's view, people can achieve the ultimate spiritual salvation only through the power of nature and God.

So far, numerous studies on Hopkins in English and American literary circles have been conducted at home and abroad, most of which primarily focus on his Christian religiosity and his description of nature. Foreign studies on Hopkins' poetry have been conducted in the long-term, with more multiple and comprehensive perspectives. The angles vary from different contexts, the paradigms are more diversified, and the results more abundant. F. R. Leavis in *New Bearings in English Poetry* in 1932 claimed that "Hopkins is likely to prove for our time and future, the only influential poet of the Victorian age, and he seems to be the greatest" (Leavis, p. 156). While whether Hopkins can be recognized as the greatest poet of the Victorian period or not may be controversial, however, undoubtedly, in the field of religious belief and nature during the Victorian period, Hopkins is probably one of the most important poets. In view of religion studies, Frederick J. Streng in *Understanding Religious Life* in 1985 pointed out that religion is a means to achieve fundamental changes (Streng, p. 2). By shifting his perspective and attributing his predicament of reality to God's punishment, Hopkins makes himself more capable of enduring the pains that the secular world brings about. As for nature, a very thoroughly discussed even debated topic makes sense here. John Parham in *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature* stated that "Hopkins was the one Victorian poet who consistently, imaginatively recreated the specific conditions of the Victorian ecosystem" (Parham, p. 170). Parham considers that Hopkins' poems "contain an imaginative seed with the essence, not just of a broader understanding of Hopkins or of Victorian ecology, or even of eco-criticism but of ecology itself" (Parham, p. 171). Similarly, Peter H. Kahn in *The Human Relationship with Nature: Development and Culture* noted the benefits of being close to nature for people (Kahn, p. 2). All of these offer a reference for Hopkins to redeem himself through nature.

Compared to foreign studies, domestic researches on Hopkins' works share certain similarity in view of academic concerns, though some variations still exist. Two of these published studies are of high reference value. Yuhui Cai in "Struggling among the Nature, God and Self—On Gerard Manley Hopkins' Dilemma" (Cai, 2017) analyzed Hopkins' dilemma in which he portrayed the doomed identity clashes, spiritual sufferings, and heart purgatory of a pious priest as well as a talented poet, unveiling the mental process of a Jesuit with a unique life experience, and reflecting the belief and ideological crisis of Victorian times full of dramatic and radical changes and upsets. Hopkins' grinding dilemma between three forces of Nature, God, and Self seems to have also provided a solution for his redemption (Cai, 2017). In 2018, Sha Xiao in "Evangelism and British Victorian Spirit" mentioned that many British humanistic intellectuals in the 19th century grew up in an environment of extremely pious,

even fanatical evangelical beliefs, including the poet Gerald Manley Hopkins (Xiao, 2018). Although the starting point of what evangelicalism advocates is for the salvation of people, the sense of moral bondage created by an overly strict and rigid way of life makes the result diametrically opposed to its intent, which precluded a wrong direction for Hopkins' way of salvation.

To sum up, presently both domestic and foreign studies have concentrated on Hopkins's religious beliefs and his description of nature to a great extent. However, so far their studies have involved little internal connections between religion, nature, and human beings. In others words, among the three factors including God, nature and self, which on earth actually plays a more essential and crucial role in view of redemption? Therefore, this paper will pay close attention to the impact of religion and nature on human beings, and the divinity and humanity that permeate into nature.

## **2. The Impact of Industrial Revolution**

### *2.1 The glimpse of industrialization and typical writing of reflection*

From 18th to 19th centuries, the Industrial Revolution cultivated the capitalism that eventually contributed to the formation of the British Empire. This period is featured with the shift and transition from labor to machine-based mass production and manufacturing, which leads to the rapid development of productivity and economic growth. One of influential consequences was the rise of capitalism and its subsequent transformation of social structure. This system allows entrepreneurs to invest into new technologies and businesses, which led to the creation of new jobs and increased wealth.

The growth of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution plays a significant role in the formation of the British Empire. As one of the first countries that experiences the benefits of the Industrial Revolution, and as a result its economy grew rapidly. The country's vast network of colonies provided a ready market for its goods, and its navy ensured the safe passage of goods and raw materials. The British Empire reached its peak in the 19th century, with colonies and territories spanning around the globe. The empire was fueled by the profits generated out of British industries, which were able to produce goods more efficiently and cheaply than their competitors.

Simultaneously, it also did inevitably lay the hidden dangers for the environmental destruction, human beliefs, and human morality which caused attention of British writers as well. It is just as what Dickens commented in his works: "It was the best of times and it was the worst of times" (Dickens, p. 1). For example, in Dickens's writing of fog in *Bleak House*, readers can gain a good glimpse into the devastated environment caused by the prosperous development of Industry. He emphasizes the overwhelming existence of fog everywhere. Also, in his *Oliver Twist*, he depicts the moral degradation that results from living in a capitalist society. The novels highlight the stark class division between the rich and poor, and the exploitation and oppression faced by the working class. As a Marxist critique of Victorian society, "Oliver Twist" raises important questions about the nature of morality in a capitalist

system, and the need for social change to address these issues.

## 2.2 *The writing of environment anxiety*

Actually, the Industrial Revolution has caused serious problems to the surrounding environments and aggravated the local situations as well. The development of the iron making industry directly led to massive deforestation. As Paul Mantoux said, “every smelting plant was surrounded by massive falling of trees, and the development of the iron and steel industry resulted in excessive deforestation and eventual destruction of forests” (Mantoux, p. 224). The birch forest that Hopkins and his friends usually walked through during their daily life was inevitably cut down to make sleepers for the railroad tracks. In *Binsey Poplars*, in order to commemorate the birch forest in his heart and to express his strong sense of regret and condemnation of the destruction of natural beauty, Hopkins wrote:

“My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled,  
Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,  
All felled, felled, are all felled;  
Of a fresh and following folded rank  
Not spared, not one  
That dandled a sandalled  
Shadow that swam or sank  
On meadow & river & wind-wandering weed-winding bank.”

O if we but knew what we do  
When we delve or hew—  
Hack and rack the growing green!  
Since country is so tender  
To touch, her being só slender,  
That, like this sleek and seeing ball  
But a prick will make no eye at all,  
Where we, even where we mean  
To mend her we end her,  
When we hew or delve:  
After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.  
Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve  
Strokes of havoc únselve  
The sweet especial scene,  
Rural scene, a rural scene,  
Sweet especial rural scene

(Hopkins, p. 14).

Hopkins mourned the chopped-down aspen tree, sounding as if he was grieving for a dead man, “All felled, felled, are all felled”. The logging of aspen trees reveals humanity’s tendencies towards greed, selfishness, and a lack of foresight when it comes to environmental preservation. As Hopkins reflected, it took only a mere “ten or twelve” strokes by man to create “havoc” in what was once a place filled with happiness and harmony. Therefore, “After-comers cannot guess the beauty been” because when people “hew and delve”, exploiting nature for material wealth accumulation, they just left the irreparable ruins for future generation of human beings. Obviously shown is that the Industrial Revolution brought about the plight of the environment and human existence.

Similarly, Hopkins also wrote “God’s Grandeur” during second Industrial Revolution, in which he expressed despair over the destruction of the natural world by human beings. “Generations have trod, have trod, have trod” (Hopkins, p. 24). The repetition of “have trod” reflects the constant and almost unconscious destruction of nature by humanity over countless generations, thus gradually making the beauty of the earth fade away. “And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil” (Hopkins, p. 24) shows Hopkins’s disgust and grief for how “all” had been corrupted and destroyed by human’s “trade” and “toil”. “And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil” (Hopkins, p. 24). The soil that people stepped on, which used to be unspoiled and virgin, had been destroyed by “man’s smudge” and “man’s smell”, so that people could no longer feel the hardness or softness of the earth after wearing the shoes which were mass-produced during the Industrial Revolution. All of these convey Hopkins’s concern for the development of human society, fearing that within a few generations the beauty of nature would no longer exist any more.

### *2.3 The writing of spiritual health anxiety*

As for the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, Britain’s material production grew by leaps and bounds from the 1860s to the mid-1800s. Nearly during a century, the wealth created in Britain was unparalleled in any previous era. However, behind such a prosperous era, ordinary people in Britain, particularly the working class and poor farmers, who account for the largest proportion of the population, actually lived in crowded and enclosed residences, and could only work hard every day or just desperately suffered from unemployment. People’s lives seemed to be filled with nothing but endless work and a diminishing sense of happiness. It can be seen that the rapid advances in science and technology contrasted with the extreme poverty of spirituality, and the development of the Industrial Revolution failed to prevent the emptiness of people’s hearts and the collapse of social beliefs.

Paying attention to morality is an important feature of the Industrial Revolution period. “No one can escape the fate of being morally censored” (Mill, p. 112). During this period, the most famous religious and cultural movement was the prevailing Evangelism. Gerard Manley Hopkins grew up in such a pious and even fanatical evangelical belief circumstance. Evangelicals insist that Bible, which

possesses the supreme authority and dominance globally, can be applied as a criterion for judging all concrete actions and asserted truths. In the eyes of evangelicals, all the aspects of secular life are only for salvation (Xiao, p. 164). People always expect to live for eternal life instead of temporary enjoyment in this secular world (Xiao, p. 164). Therefore, people must memorize the gist of Bible in mind, and strictly abide by the prescribed rules and principles. They even need to refuse all recreational activities and just keep self-restraint.

Although the prevalence of evangelism has played a positive role in improving worsening social customs, like advocating prohibition of alcohol and opposing gambling, however in fact, such a strict and rigid way of life ignores the diverse needs of human beings, causing a considerable sense of moral bondage to people. In “The Caged Skylark”, the poet mentions “As a dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage; Man’s mounting spirit in his bone-house, mean house, dwells” (Hopkins, p. 65). Hopkins compares a caged skylark to a human soul and the symbolic meaning of the cage confining the skylark’s body can be interpreted as the shackle chain that restrain the soul. “That bird beyond the remembering his free fells; This in drudgery, day-labouring-out life’s age” (Hopkins, p. 65). Neither the skylark nor the soul bores in mind that they could have flown freely in this world. Instead, they could only be forced to restrain themselves, ban recreational activities, and devote themselves to hard work. However, if people are just busy earning and consuming, but afford no time for leisure and amusement, and properly managing love, family and friendship, thus they will set into anxiety and melancholy and the result can only be the imbalance of mind.

#### *2.4 The writing of physical illness anxiety*

Generally speaking, throughout the 19th century, Europe was set in the midst of the Industrial Revolution, with rapid urban development and a series of sanitary problems that provides a breeding ground for the spread of tuberculosis; the declining air quality due to industrial development also caused some damage to the human lungs, and tuberculosis bacteria invaded unchecked. Hopkins had commemorated Felix Randal, who died of tuberculosis, in his poem: “Who have watched his mould of man, big-boned and hardy-handsome” (Hopkins, p. 22). Hopkins couldn’t help but marveled at how strong his figure was and how handsome his face used to look like. “Pining, pining, till time when reason rambled in it, and some” (Hopkins, p. 22). The repetition of “pining” suggests that Felix Randal’s illness had had a serious impact on his mental state. “Fatal four disorders, fleshed there, all contended? Sickness broke him” (Hopkins, p. 22). Although he seemed so healthy, he was still defeated by illness after such intense and arduous labor, namely making and fitting horseshoes. Like a broken horseshoe, he needed mending, but his body was beyond repair. Felix Randal broke down mentally and physically, and he couldn’t come back anymore. How life-threatening tuberculosis is.

However, in the face of the raging tuberculosis epidemic, many populace demonstrated a perverse attitude towards tuberculosis, even to the point of intentionally contracting tuberculosis to gain beauty. This was because the appearance of tuberculosis patients inspired the aesthetic resonance of Europeans

at that time. Especially European women, they racked their brains to make themselves suffer from the terminal disease of the time, namely tuberculosis, in exchange for a pale, frail, attractive face to win the pity and favor of elegant gentle men. At that time, the most ideal beauty seemed to be embodied in the tuberculosis patients. It can be said that they put their lives on the line to become beautiful and attractive. However, tuberculosis must never be equalized with beauty. After all, this disease is so relentless that it grabbed the life of the infected people. Due to its strongly infectious attribute, complex immunological response, chronic progression and the need for long-term treatment, tuberculosis has always been a prevailing burden for health, associating with a high mortality rate over the centuries.

### 3. The writing of redemption

The Industrial Revolution not only plays the dominant role in the golden age of British Empire, but also the darkest age of British public. The increasingly acute social contradictions had made society unstable and deconstructed. The development of science and technology had exerted a violent impact on traditional beliefs. People had gradually lost their faith and the spiritual pillar had collapsed. However, in terms of religion, Hopkins still maintained his respect and affirmation for God. Even though he began to doubt God in his later years due to the misfortunes he encountered, he still chose to believe in God and sought shelter from God to get salvation. With regard to nature, Hopkins advocated that only through returning to nature, restoring human's nature and renewing their spirit, can human beings be saved and redeemed eventually.

#### 3.1 Religion redemption

##### 3.1.1 Affirmation of the existence of God

Within Hopkins's heart, God is always affirmed as the central pillar for regaining and consolidating faith, which was reflected in his writing: "the world is charged with the grandeur of God" (Hopkins, p. 24) at the beginning of "God's Grandeur". It demonstrates his strong belief in God. So he proposed: "Why do men then now not reckon his rod?" (Hopkins, p. 24) On the contrary, he realized that people didn't fear and showed a deep reverence for God, but took advantage of God blindly. "And for all this, nature is never spent; Because the Holy Ghost over the bent World broods with warm breast with ah! bright wings" (Hopkins, p. 24). Nevertheless, God still bestows his warm embrace to heal the pain of people who were experiencing suffering in the world. Just like the sun always fades into the darkness of the west, and rises at the edge of the horizon in the east in the morning. This cycle of nature originates from the grace of God, who guards this cruel world, like a mother bird using its own body to protect and warm its young. Therefore, people didn't need to doubt God, because God's love is selfless and sincere. What Hopkins strongly believes is when you are lost and displaced, God is always by your side and he never disappears and never leaves any believer at all. Therefore, there is nothing wrong with salvation through God.

### 3.1.2 *Respect for Jesus Christ's selfless dedication*

Hopkins pays tribute to God in "The Windhover". Windhover is depicted to represent the embodiment of Jesus. "Brute beauty and valor and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here; Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion" (Hopkins, p. 88). Hopkins was deeply moved by the poise of the Windhover soaring in the sky against the wind, because even fire could not resist its advance. Its vigorous posture, mighty force, and the beauty of its body and spirit reminded the poet of the power, glory, and beauty of Jesus. Therefore, Windhover embodies the strong and the acute. Meanwhile, it was arduous. But it could "rebuffed the big wind" (Hopkins, p. 88) because it had a strong body to withstand the hurricane, it would not be afraid of any hardship. This is just like Jesus who could have enjoyed power and wealth, but dared to give up all temptations and redeemed the suffering people in the world at the expense of himself. So here, Hopkins paid his highest respect to Windhover and Jesus, "O my Chevalier!" (Hopkins, p. 88). The last paragraph "shéerplód makes plough down sillion; shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear; Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion" (Hopkins, p. 88). When "blue-bleak embers" fell out of the fire, they broke open and "gash gold-vermilion". They bled with the glorious red and golden color. Likewise, all of God's creation contains the majesty and divinity. Therefore, the gold-vermilion under the blue-bleak embers seems to imply not only the majesty and magnificence of Christ Jesus, but also the blood and pain of Jesus' s crucifixion (Zhang, p. 573).

According to the inscription of Bible, when Jesus, the Christian savior, was preaching, he was hated by priests and nobles, arrested by the Jewish authorities, and eventually tried at the Roman governor Pilate's palace in Antonia Fortress, where he was sentenced to death, carrying a cross and was taken to the place of execution, where was eventually crucified on Calvary. As the only man without any original sin in this secular world, he died with indignity and pain, shedding his last drop of blood for the sake of the sinners in this secular world. Therefore, what is indicated is that everything contains its opposite. Since the humility and suffering of Christ Jesus do not damage his majesty and grandeur, people should not give up religious belief due to the danger (Zhang, p. 574), which refers to confusion in people's beliefs due to the conflict between religion and science in this era.

### 3.1.3 *Transformation from questioning God to religious salvation*

The unprecedented prosperity of Europe, based on the foundations laid by the Industrial Revolution, was accompanied by the permeation of scientific reason into all aspects of social life. The development of science greatly promoted the progress of society, but it also destroyed the natural environment, posed a great threat to human health, and even led to the degradation of the human psyche, the lack of survival values, and the confusion of faith.

When Hopkins was teaching in Ireland for the last few years of his life, he wrote "Carrion Comfort" that represented his experience during those days. He was always desperately depressed due to his heavy workload, his disagreement with Irish politics of the time, his being away from Britain and his friends, his declining eyesight and his deteriorated physical health. At the beginning, he wrote "Can



something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be” (Hopkins, p. 16). He still held a little hope for life, hoping that one day, this painful feeling would gradually disappear in the light of happiness. As time went by, he wrote “But ah, but o thou terrible, why would thou rude on me” (Hopkins, p. 16) for he could no longer endure and bear it, so he began to question the reason why God was so unfair to him, along with a decline in his faith in his creator. In order to reduce his innermost pain, he turned to God for comfort through writing “I kissed the rod; Hand rather, my heart lo!” (Hopkins, p. 16) He changed from complaining about God to seeking shelter and salvation from God. “Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear” (Hopkins, p. 16). He found that all the power that God exerted on him was to make his “chaff” fly and to show his “grain” clearly. All the pain he endured in his life was to make him stronger. He thought that God’s motive for redeeming fallen mankind did not depend on anything or condition, but was derived from the goodness of God alone. God’s love, justice, holiness, glory and selflessness were projected not only to him, but also to all human beings whose psyches were gradually falling. Therefore, the despair brought to him by the painful life had not broken him down. On the contrary, it was turning him and everyone who is in an abyss of misery into a pure self and making them obtain eventual spiritual salvation.

### 3.2 Nature redemption

According to Spinoza’s declaration: God is nature (Spinoza, p. 23). It is clear that God here is equalized to nature that is full of divinity. It is just like that “Windhover” delivers the incarnation of God. Simultaneously nature is full of humanity, which connects with man through the omnipresent soul, bringing man wisdom, joy and solace. Hopkins’s nature poetry celebrates not only the beauty of nature and the reverence for God, but also the greatness of man. The relationship between man and nature had been severely damaged by industrialization, resulting in the gradual degradation of human nature. The purity, passion, freedom, and kindness inherent in human nature had gradually been replaced by the individualism of capitalist industrialization and the alienation of human nature (Deng & Feng, p. 2).

Therefore, he wrote in *Spring* that “Nothing is so beautiful as Spring; when weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush” (Hopkins, p. 50). In this poem, he tried to symbolize weeds as human beings, and wheels represent the products of the Industrial Revolution. Human beings should be like weeds, possessing a strong will and vitality, and not giving up on life no matter how barren the land is, but facing the sun and growing upward to make spring come alive. It can be seen that Hopkins was calling on people to find a way to solve problems in life from nature and gain spiritual salvation by absorbing energy from it. Since human beings have a close relationship with all things in nature. In *Nature*, Ralph Waldo Emerson argues that the universe is a large whole in which everything human and natural is contained, and in which matter and spirit co-exist (Emerson, p. 1). Therefore, as we continue to know and understand nature, we also continue to comprehend and interpret the whole universe.

However, people at that time had difficulty viewing the world they lived in comprehensively and objectively due to various factors. As a result, the hearts of people with unstable minds were easily

filled with confusion and disappointment with society. Based on this, people should get closer to nature, understand nature, break the limitations of their vision and comprehend true wisdom. The seemingly insignificant weeds mentioned above keep asking nature for nutrients in order to grow, which reflects their positive and aggressive attitude, but not many people can notice it and move forward with self-improvement like it. The instinct often emerges, according to Wilson, unconsciously, in our cognition, emotions, art, and ethics (Coyle, p. 2). Even if there is only a slight connection with nature, humans can still reap unexpected benefits, such as, looking at it through a window increases productivity and health in the work place, promotes healing of patients in hospitals, and reduces the frequency of sickness in prisons (Coyle, p. 2). For this reason, people need to be closer to nature and learn from nature, so that they can break through themselves and usher in a new self. It can be said that only through returning to nature, restoring people's nature and renewing their spirit, can human beings be saved eventually.

### *3.3 The social significance of redemption*

Frederick J. Streng, the President of the American religious society, once mentioned that religion is a means to achieve fundamental change, which refers to people's complete transformation from being deeply immersed in common problems, such as sin and ignorance, to a life realm that can properly deal with these problems at the most profound level (Streng, p. 2). As for religious belief, this kind of change makes people realize the existence of God and make their own spirit full and complete (Streng, p. 3). Therefore, in order to obtain salvation, Gerard Manley Hopkins devoutly believes in God, and by changing his perspective, he attributes the plight of reality to God's punishment, then he repented and prayed, and was willing to accept the suffering brought by the world. This is the virgin thought of western writers and poets as well. For example, Wordsworth, the father of an English romantic poet, tends to believe the grace of God over human beings and naturally under his pen, nature is permeated with divinity, keeping people away from the cruelty and evilness in the secular world, finding their own spiritual paradise, and maintaining inner peace and the perfection of humanity.

As is similar to Wordsworth, actually, God in Hopkins' mind is specifically embodied in nature that empowers human beings with emotional provoking strength. As manifested in his poems, he illustrates his praise and eulogy for its vitality, and his hope that people can communicate directly with nature and feel the beauty of nature, especially the beauty of the spirit. He also hopes to awaken people to reorient their relationship with nature and their own values, so that they can discover a spiritual habitat in a materialistic society. Hopkins' concern for the destiny of mankind is reflected in so.

## **Conclusion**

The Industrial Revolution anxiety made people concerned and lost their way in life. Consequently, people who were deeply immersed in suffering had to seek spiritual sustenance to obtain liberation. Through the works of Gerald Manley Hopkins, it can be found that although he was also deeply

involved in the suffering of life, he was redeemed in the process of devout faith in God and his return to nature.

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