

Intertextuality and the context of reception:

I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark, not Day

by Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)

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Lesson plan

Resources

- ❖ **Resource A** – Copy of the poem
- ❖ **Resource B** – Copy of the poem with Bible passages
- ❖ **Resource C** – Film clip of *I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark, not Day*

Learning objectives

- To analyse the poem closely
- To consider the poem within the context of Hopkins' beliefs and output

Introduction – reading and understanding the poem

- ❖ Look at **Resource A**
- ❖ Read the poem a few times. Get a sense of it as a dramatic performance.

Form and rhythm

- ❖ Whole class discussion –
 - The poem is a sonnet. Can you identify:
 - What kind of sonnet it is?
 - The rhyme scheme?
 - How the octave and sestet are divided?
 - Many sonnets contain a volta, or turn, where the poem makes a noticeable change – for example, the tone may change dramatically, or the argument might develop, or there may be a response to issues raised in the first part of the poem.
- ❖ Divide the class into small groups –
 - Ask each to describe in their own words how the material is arranged, section by section. E.g.:
 - In the first quatrain, the poet wakes in the dark and describes the terrible night he has spent – a night which is not over, since light has not come.
 - In the second quatrain ...

- In the sestet (first tercet)...
- In the sestet (second tercet)...
- Is there a *volta* in this poem? Give reasons for your answer.
- Why might the sonnet form suit the content of this particular poem?
- ❖ In your group prepare a performed reading of the sonnet. As preparation:
 - Read the poem aloud again and mark the syllables that are stressed:
 - Where does the metre seem to be irregular?
 - Identify the lines which do not end in a punctuation mark, and where the sense runs on from one to the next (run-on or enjambement).
 - What effects does the poet achieve through these two devices of metrical irregularity and enjambement?
 - Are there any other effects that become clear when it is read aloud (for example, speeding up, slowing down, getting louder or quieter)?

Mood and tone

- ❖ Individually or in pairs, on a sheet of A4 write three words to describe the mood of the poem at the head of three columns
 - Under each heading, as appropriate, identify the words/phrases from the poem that help create that aspect of the poem's mood (leave space to add notes as you investigate further)
- ❖ Does the tone of the poem change at any point? If so, how/where?
- ❖ Does the poem give any room for hope? If so, in what way?

Questions for discussion

- In pairs or individually, think through the following. Where your explanations relate to the phrases you noted in each column on the 'mood and tone' sheet, add them in:
1. What might 'dark' and 'light' symbolise?
 2. In line 1, one sense of 'fell' is 'bitterness'.

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- ❖ What are the senses of 'bitterness'?
 - How does the poem explore this general idea?
- ❖ Another possible meaning is 'hairy skin' (Macbeth refers to 'my fell of hair').
 - How would this second sense affect our understanding of the line?
- 3. What do you imagine were the 'black hours' referred to in line 2? What kind of 'sights' (line 3) has the heart seen?
- 4. Explain the meaning of line 4.
- 5. 'With witness I speak this'. If no one else is there, what can this sentence mean?
- 6. What might the poet be lamenting? (line 6)
- 7. Who do you think is referred to as 'dearest him that lives alas! away' (8).
 - ❖ Note: dead letters are letters left undelivered or returned to the sender.
- 8. In your own words, what does the poet say is God's decree (line 9)?
- 9. What is the effect of the description of his body (*bones ... flesh ... blood*) in line 11?
- 10. Explain 'Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours' (line 12)
- 11. Who are 'the lost' (13)?
- 12. How do you interpret 'but worse' (line 14)?
- 13. So far, what impression does the poem make on you, and why? (Note: your impression does not have to be positive!)

***I wake and feel* in the context of Hopkins' beliefs and output** **The Dark Night of the Soul**

Hopkins was a Catholic Priest, familiar with the narrative of the Bible and the way in which Christians have translated it into their own experiences. *I wake and feel* can be read as his expression of his own 'Dark Night of the Soul'. This refers to a spiritual crisis experienced by a believer as they explore their faith in God.

The prime biblical example of this is the experience of Jesus just before and during his execution (a period of suffering known as the Passion).

Look at **Resource B**

- ❖ Do you think it is fair to say that there is a close correlation between what Hopkins is describing and the account of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemene?
- ❖ What does reading *I wake and feel* in the context of Jesus' 'Dark Night' add to your appreciation of the poem?
- ❖ View **Resource C**

MORE on The Dark Night of the Soul:

- ❖ The phrase 'Dark Night of the Soul' is the title of a long poem by the Spanish mystic St John of the Cross. In this poem the believer passes through a state of spiritual negation on the way to reunion with God. The darkness represents the stripping away of worldly pleasures and desires, to lead eventually to a fuller understanding of the divine.
 - Does this concept of the 'Dark Night' throw any light on your understanding of *I wake and feel*?

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The 'Terrible' Sonnets.

'I wake and feel the fell of dark' is part of a group of six sonnets, described as the 'sonnets of desolation' or 'terrible sonnets' (the term used by his friend Robert Bridges, in the sense of inspiring terror in the reader).

In a letter (17 May 1885) Hopkins wrote to Bridges:

'I have after long silence written two sonnets, which I am touching: if ever anything was written in blood one of these was.' (Bridges Letters 219)

It is not known which sonnet he was referring to as being 'written in blood', but many readers have suspected it might be *I wake and feel the fell* ...

Here are the first lines of each of the 'terrible' sonnets:

- ❖ 'Not, I'll not, carrion comfort,
Despair, not feast on thee;'
 - for online text see <http://texts.crossref-it.info/text/the-poetry-of-gerard-manley-hopkins/carrion-comfort>
 - to investigate see <http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/602>
- ❖ 'No worst, there is none. Pitched
past pitch of grief'
 - for online text see <http://texts.crossref-it.info/text/the-poetry-of-gerard-manley-hopkins/no-worst-there-is-none>
 - to investigate see <http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/668>
- ❖ 'To seem the stranger lies my lot,
my life'
 - for online text see

<http://texts.crossref-it.info/text/the-poetry-of-gerard-manley-hopkins/to-seem-the-stranger>

- to investigate see <http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/729>
- ❖ 'I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.'
 - for online text see <http://texts.crossref-it.info/text/the-poetry-of-gerard-manley-hopkins/i-wake-and-feel-the-fell-of-dark>
 - to investigate see <http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/645>
- ❖ 'Patience, hard thing! the hard thing
but to pray'
 - for online text see <http://texts.crossref-it.info/text/the-poetry-of-gerard-manley-hopkins/patience-hard-thing>
 - to investigate see <http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/674>
- ❖ 'My own heart let me more have pity
on; let'
 - for online text see <http://texts.crossref-it.info/text/the-poetry-of-gerard-manley-hopkins/my-own-heart-let-me-have-pity-on>
 - to investigate see <http://www.crossref-it.info/textguide/The-poetry-of-Gerard-Manley-Hopkins/6/662>

Comparison

- ❖ Find one of the other 'terrible' sonnets and compare it to this one.
 - What are the similarities and differences?
 - How does the reading of one affect your reading of the other?
 - Read all the 'terrible' sonnets and describe the experience of reading them as a group.

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'my taste was me'

- ❖ At the same time as creating the 'Terrible Sonnets', Hopkins wrote:
 - 'To me there is no resemblance: searching nature, I taste self but at one tankard, that of my own being.'
- What do you think Hopkins means?
- How is *I wake and feel* about 'tasting self'?
- Why should that be a negative experience?

Final discussion questions

1. Why do people write and read poems about desolation and anguish?
 - a. Is it fair to describe this poem as a 'sonnet of despair'?
2. Is the poet asking for the reader's sympathy?
 - a. Do you feel any sympathy towards him?
3. Do you feel that the poem is only relevant to other Christian believers?
4. Several other Victorian poets wrote poems where the speaker is mad (for example, Browning *Porphyria's Lover*). Could it be argued that the speaker of this poem is mad?
5. Hopkins wished his poetic language to be grounded in the current spoken English of his day. In modern English, can you think of phrases or expressions where we describe our emotions by referring to the body, or parts of the body?
 - a. What does this suggest about our language?
6. '*I wake and feel the fell of dark* is about anguish, yet it also conveys a delight in language – the sounds and combinations of words.' Do you agree?
7. Of which other poems, pictures, or musical works does the poem remind you?

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Resources

Resource A – the poem

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
What hours, O what black hours we have spent
This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!
And more must, in yet longer light's delay

With witness I speak this. But where I say
Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament
Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
To dearest him that lives, alas, away.

I am gall, I am heartburn. God's most deep decree
Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;
Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.

Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours. I see
The lost are like this, and their scourge to be
As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.

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Resource B

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Psalm 22:1-2 My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? ²O my God, I cry in the day time, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent.

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.

What hours, O what black hours we have spent

This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!

And more must, in yet longer light's delay.

Mark 14:32 ³²And they came to a place which was named Gethsemane: and [Jesus] saith to his disciples, 'Sit ye here, while I shall pray.'

With witness I speak this. But where I say

Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament

Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent

To dearest him that lives alas! away.

Mark 14:33 ³³And he ... began to be sore amazed, and to be very heavy; ³⁴And saith ... 'My soul is exceeding sorrowful unto death:'

I am gall, I am heartburn. God's most deep decree

Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me;

Bones built in me, flesh filled, blood brimmed the curse.

Selfyeast of spirit a dull dough sours.

Luke 22:41-42 ⁴¹And he was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed, ⁴²Saying, 'Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.'

I see

The lost are like this, and their scourge to be

As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.

Luke 22:44 ⁴⁴And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

Resource C - <http://www.crossref-it.info/articles/489/I-wake-and-feel-the-fell>