

# Spring ~ Gerard Manley Hopkins

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844 -1889) was born in Stratford, Essex (now part of Greater London). While studying at Oxford, he became a Roman Catholic and qualified as a Jesuit priest. He held a number of academic posts at schools, colleges and finally as Professor of Classics at the University College, Dublin, where he died, aged 45, of typhoid - a disease he probably contracted in the course of his priestly duties. It was not until 30 years later, in 1918, that his poetry was first published. Much of his historical importance as a poet has to do with his innovations in writing poetry. He is known for introducing 'sprung rhythm', a precursor to free verse imitating the rhythm of natural speech. He is also known for his many neologisms (new words) and the use of existing words in surprising contexts. Words that he created include 'inscapes' (the unified complex of characteristics that give each thing its uniqueness) and 'instress' (the energy in a poem which holds these characteristics together).

Hopkins' poetry is characterised by his passionate faith and an intense love of nature. Added richness comes from his extensive use of alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia and rhyme, both at the end of lines and internally. When reading his poems, look out for startling similes and imagery, and language used in new ways.



Do you love spring? Draw up a list of 20 reasons why you do (or don't) look forward to **SPRING**.



Now that you have spent some time thinking about this season, write out your own definition of both the literal and figurative meaning of spring.

1. Work out the rhyme scheme of the poem.
2. How do you know that this poem is a sonnet?  
Give two reasons.
3. What is the effect of the alliteration in the first eight lines? Refer to ONE example in your answer.
4. Which word has the poet used twice in line 3, and why?
5. With what do we normally associate the words 'rinse' and 'wring'? Why do you think the poet has used these words in this context?
6. Comment on the simile in line 5. Why is it effective?
7. How does the poet create a sense that things are happening quickly in lines 6 to 8?
8. There is a definite change in the direction of the speaker's thoughts in the last stanza. How is this achieved?
9. What is suggested by the reference to the Garden of Eden (lines 10-11)?
10. Use your own words to explain what the speaker is asking for in the last four lines of the poem.
11. Suggest why the poet has left the last two lines so loose-ended.
12. Using your own words, sum up the theme of the poem.

Hopkins' poetry is meant to be read aloud. In order to understand it better, observe the punctuation closely.



## **SUGGESTED ANSWERS: Spring**



1. The rhyme scheme is ABBAABBA CDCDCD.
2. The poem has 14 lines. The rhyme scheme is typical of an Italian (Petrarchan) sonnet / the rhyme scheme indicates that it has an octet (the first eight lines) and a sestet (the last six lines), a feature of this kind of sonnet.
3. The alliteration contributes to the lyrical quality and deepens the reader's appreciation for the visual imagery. Some examples include: 'When weeds, in wheels' – an unusual image but one that suggests rapid, uncontrolled growth and the cyclical nature of the seasons. 'long and lovely and lush' highlights the sheer abundance of nature and 'look little low' (an odd description without the word 'like') emphasises how very 'little' and 'low' the eggs are when comparing them to heaven (taking into account that thrush eggs are blue like the sky). [Consider other examples.]
4. The word 'thrush' is used as a noun and as a verb. The first example is the name of the bird, a bird known for its blue eggs and birdsong. The poet uses the second 'thrush' to fit in with the rhyme scheme. Since there is no verb for 'thrush', he creates an unusual and energetic action word.
5. We associate these words with washing. By using it to describe the birdsong, the poet suggests that the sound has a refreshing, cleansing quality – it heralds the freshness of spring and provides the listener with a sense of renewal (cleansing).
6. The birdsong is compared to not one lightning strike, but many, reinforcing the idea of new life, new energy and the sheer power of spring.
7. He uses words like 'rush' and 'racing'. Words and images are compressed: a 'peartree' has leaves and blooms that already brush the sky. The expanse of blue sky is 'descending' bringing heaven closer to earth. Lambs are plentiful and full of the joys of spring. There is an overall sense of 'richness' and abundance.
8. The question mark alerts the reader to the change in direction of the speaker's thoughts. He is starting to question all this lushness ('juice' and 'joy').
9. The speaker compares the scene to the Garden of Eden and loss of innocence. This suggests an awareness that the beauty and natural goodness of spring cannot last.
10. He is asking Christ to save the innocent from sinning. / He is praying for the young and innocent to be saved before it's too late.
11. The words are jumbled and unclear. This leaves these last two lines open to interpretation. It could also be an expression of the speaker's anguish after reflecting on the Garden of Eden and his realization that innocence, like spring, cannot last.
12. Own words. [Of course, Hopkins' poetry can be interpreted in many ways and it is recommended that you first brainstorm possible themes in the poem e.g. the temporary nature of spring and the innocence of youth / the celebration of spring as a season of regeneration both physically and spiritually / the loss of innocence after the fall of man in the Garden of Eden / the manifestation of God in nature / the struggle to balance good and evil / the poet coming to terms with his faith / the poem as a prayer of thanksgiving and / or as a cry for salvation ...]

