

Inspiration throughout the Ages: the Striking Resemblance of Hopkins's "God's Grandeur" and Wordsworth's "The World is too Much with Us"

Despite the constant stylistic and content advancement within poetry throughout the ages, "God's Grandeur," a Victorian poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, is very comparable to the Romantic poem, "The World is too Much with Us," by William Wordsworth. These poems are similar particularly in their ideas about society and the natural world, where both Hopkins and Wordsworth discuss mankind that is too concerned with material possessions and duties (e.g., objects, money, and employment); therefore, mankind does not relish God and the beauty of nature that is expressed by each poet. The most notable difference between the poems is the tone they seem to end with—Hopkins's poem goes from cynical to a more positive stance towards nature and God by identifying a renewal within God's power; Wordsworth's poem, on the other hand, remains cynical throughout and the speaker finally wishes in the end for his individual "renewal" by desiring to go to a mythological past. These differences can very well reflect the changes that occurred within the leap from the Romantic period to the Victorian.

"God's Grandeur" starts out by stressing the statement, "The world is charged with the grandeur of God. / It will flame out, like shining from shook foil; / It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil / Crushed" (1-4). This assertion expresses to the reader how the speaker feels about God, which is that God's divine control over the world is like that of an electrical current: it builds up over time. The "shook foil" (foil that has been shaken/moved) reflects light when it is in a certain position, such as "the ooze of oil crushed" (as coming from an olive stated in the footnote) reflects the instant of a second in which it can occur. These concrete images describe the power of God that intensifies, peaks,

and recycles within the world. The speaker in “The World is too Much with Us” does not elaborate on these feelings of God’s rebirth in the world per se; however, he does describe how he’d rather be “a Pagan suckled in a creed outworn” (10), which can imply a different form of rebirth and renewal within the self. The sense of beauty in nature is also seen in this poem as the speaker says, “So might I, standing on this pleasant lea, / Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn; / Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea; / Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn” (11-14). Though this poem’s imagery is more abstract than that of “God’s Grandeur,” each poem is nevertheless trying to convey a sense of God and his beauty that echoes in the natural world. Hopkins does this by expressing elements in nature as a metaphor for God’s revival and Wordsworth does the same, except focuses more on his own revival by wishing to be in an ancient place where God is. This is perhaps the main difference executed in the two poems, though connections can still be drawn out.

What makes the poems seem almost identical in their nature are the lines from “God’s Grandeur,” that state “Generations have trod, have trod, trod; / And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil” (5-6), in comparison with the lines from “The World is too Much with Us,” that state “The world is too much with us; late and soon, / Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: / Little we see in Nature that is ours” (1-3). Though Hopkins’s language is more complex in comparison to Wordsworth’s, both poets seem to be articulating the material world as an issue. “All is seared with trade” (6) is the equivalent to “Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers” (2), which is stating that society is too concerned with marketing, industry, and employment, which in turn weakens the relationship with nature and God himself. The speaker in “The World is too Much with Us” says in line 4, “We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon,” which can be likened to lines 7-8 in “God’s Grandeur”, stating, “And wears man’s smudge, and shares man’s smell: the soil / Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.” Hopkins describes man’s connection with the Earth being physically weakened by separating the foot from the soil with a shoe, which in itself is very figurative like the speaker in Wordsworth’s poem who claims that man is giving his heart away to these superficial desires. Both describe the condition of mankind and use bodily features to describe the spiritual loss in nature and with God.

Another striking resemblance between these two poems is the impression that nature—and everything within nature—always waits for society to bring their minds back to it. For example, in “The World is too Much with Us,” it says, “The sea that bares her bosom to the moon; / The winds that will be howling at all hours, / And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers” (5-7), implying that these elements in nature are pressing on in their beauty despite the fact that no one is attentive to it. To “bare a bosom to the moon” is a suggestive image that expresses not only the attractiveness within it, but the excitement that builds within nature as the elements seem to play around. The “howling winds” can be seen personified as trying to call out and acquire someone’s attention, preferably those in society that are disregarding them. The wind that then becomes “up-gathered like flowers” shows that nature is not only building up, but resting as well, which can very well lead into Hopkins’s expressed idea that nature/God renews itself by having a “rested position” and a “peaking point”. Wordsworth expresses a sense of God that can be found in everything, creating the beauty within nature that he holds dear, and this can certainly be seen in Hopkins’s poem as well.

Hopkins’s lines that perfectly depict his adoration for the beauty in nature are from 9 to 14, declaring,

And for all this, nature is never spent;
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
 And though the last lights off the black west went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Just as Wordsworth has implied, the natural world continues to wait until it is noticed again in Hopkins’s poem as well, though Hopkins goes into a more specific type of renewal. The speaker in “God’s Grandeur” declares that though mankind is consumed with superficial

objects and responsibility, “nature is never spent” nonetheless, and nature/God continues to wait for the moment when individuals start to realize this. The speaker implies that this understanding comes in cycles as God’s “electrical” power in the world builds over a period of time, rests, and is repeated; this can be seen specifically in lines 11-12 when it says, “And though the last lights off the black West went / Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs,” which is another way of describing the sun setting in the West and rising back in the East to begin a new day—that in itself is a cycle of its own. The speaker continues by describing the Holy Ghost (another term for the eternal God) “brooding” over the world, where the word “brood” can be taken in many different ways, such as to ponder something with great thought. It is seen in the same line (14) that the Holy Ghost has “bright wings” which refers most likely to a bird and gives another whole meaning to the word “brood,” in the sense of referring to incubation of young birds. These last few lines truly proclaim the “rebirth” notion by showing the creator “brooding”, or in other words, “birthing” a new world with the power that has been surging within. This cycle of renewal continues seeing that the poem implies the world is always “charged with the grandeur of God” (1); though not all individuals in society have remembered God’s enormous power and nature’s beauty, God is always there, seen within the elements of the natural world. In some ways, Wordsworth is expressing the same idea though he does not directly come out and say that God is always present and waiting; however, the speaker in “The World is too Much with Us” does not have any doubt in God’s belief—he actually yearns to be closer to God by being in a different world, and this is seen in lines 11-12 when he states, “So might I, standing on this pleasant lea, / Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn.”

Surely, the subtle contrasts between the style and content of “God’s Grandeur” and “The World is too Much with Us” has a lot to do with the progression of the Romantic era into the Victorian era, where Hopkins’s writing style was *already* considered “Modern” despite his writing period. Stylistically, each age of poets was experimenting with new forms and rhyme schemes, as well as making the language more complex and concrete in its imagery as it transformed. Romantic poets are known for being very individualistic; therefore when the speaker of “The World is too Much with Us” wishes to go to a new

world where God is appreciated, it is suitable that he discusses the superficial society and reveals his internal thoughts about it. Hopkins, conversely, is a Victorian poet; therefore the speaker in “God’s Grandeur” is distant from his personal actions and only discusses what he sees in society and the natural world that he believes to be true (without ever using the pronoun “I”), which is common for the time period because people tended to care more for the greater good and society as a whole. It is very common for the Romantics to be referred to as “nature poets,” therefore Hopkins’s love of God and nature—additionally the beauty he finds within it—is very “Romantic” in its concepts, and very much “Wordsworthian” when it describes God present in nature.

The lines that dissect Hopkins’s point of view from Wordsworth’s are as follows: “There lives the dearest freshness deep down things” (10), from “God’s Grandeur,” and “For this, for every thing, we are out of tune; / It moves us not” (8-9) from “The World is too Much with Us.” Hopkins directly states that “things” (i.e., nature itself, mankind, and basically everything else) are meant to be “refreshed” or “made new.” The word “freshness” can be referring to a lot of different definitions however, such as “cleanliness” and “brilliance.” Hopkins has a divine optimism in God and the natural world while Wordsworth does not elaborate on his confidence in God to make things “fresh” or simply better in his eyes.

Though slight distinctions can be made within the poems “God’s Grandeur” and “The World is too Much with Us,” there are striking parallels in the context of each poem; both poems revolve around the idea of society being too involved with trade in the superficial world, while also conveying a sense of beauty within nature and God that is everlasting.

Works Cited

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