

Wordsworth: Victorian Influence to “God’s Grandeur”

When reading Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “God’s Grandeur,” one educated in Wordsworthian poetry realizes that Hopkins’s poetry seems oddly familiar. Despite the fact that Hopkins is well known for being a Victorian poet, Hopkins’s phrasing, language, and most of all the themes of his poetry, are all incredibly similar to the Romantic poet William Wordsworth. In William Wordsworth’s poem “The World is Too Much with Us,” Wordsworth laments the loss of humanity’s relationship with God. His poem, published in 1807, tells a story of humanity’s greed and materialism—which is also a key theme to Hopkins’s “God’s Grandeur,” published in 1918. Despite the fact that these poems were published nearly a century apart, they run on parallel lines. Time has done nothing but strengthen Wordsworth’s influence on poetry of all kinds, most of all Hopkins’s. Both of these poems lament a loss of closeness with God in strikingly similar ways and ideas and through Hopkins’s use of phrasing, imagery, and themes, his Victorian poetry becomes a shadow of Wordsworth’s Romantic poetry which was written years and years prior.

Wordsworth’s poetry is based strictly on the idea of the divine that is found in nature, and what he called the “real language of men.” Wordsworth believed that poetry was the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” (Norton, Volume D, 303) and while his poetry was simple, a simple sonnet conveyed more than just what it seemed. William Wordsworth’s poem, “The World is Too Much with Us” is indicative of Romanticism in many different ways. He begins with the idea that humanity has ruined its relationship with God due to its focus on material wants rather than spiritual needs. As a Romantic poet, Wordsworth uses several key themes: nature, imagination, and delight with the world to juxtapose the usual Romantic focus on humanity’s loss. Through his poems, Wordsworth gives his readers a

sense of delight that can be found only by walking through a field of daffodils and remembering the experience in the quiet of your home. This is akin to most Romantic poets, along with the idea that God is found in these quiet moments and in the waving fields of grass in the countryside. Nature is an instrument of God's beauty for the Romantic poets, and most Romantic poetry is indicative of this.

In a time of political, social and economic unrest, Victorian poets focused mostly on duty, overwhelming dread, and being an individual within society rather than simply an individual. Despite this, Hopkins is able to mix his Victorian agenda with the influences of Wordsworth. In "God's Grandeur," the speaker is horrified by humanity's occupation with work and duty. The poem is an overall statement on the state of humanity's relationship with God—or lack of relationship. In the beginning of the poem, the speaker describes the world as "charged with the grandeur of God" (1) and then continues by saying that men do not "reck his rod" (4) —that men fail to heed to God's divine authority, since they are so focused on their duties. In both Wordsworth and Hopkins's poetry, they focus on mankind's inability to make a spiritual connection with God. They remind the readers that humanity does not last, and while we are alive, it is our duty to work, take care of our families, and dread impending death. This limited many Victorian poets, and a responsibility to one's culture caused much of Victorian poetry to be morose at the very least, and depressive at most. This is due to the fact that they are more focused on their material wants—in the case of Wordsworth—or, in Hopkins' case, they are focused more on their every day work.

In both Hopkins's and Wordsworth's poetry, they place a certain emphasis on the term "world." "The World is Too Much With Us" and "God's Grandeur" both begin with the phrase "The World"—alluding to humanity and its materialism. The "world" according to the poets wasn't simply the world humanity lives in—it meant the material world that humanity is immersed in. In "The World is Too Much with Us," the speaker starts the poem by saying "The world is too much with us; late and soon" (1), and by this, he means that we as humans have spent our entire lives focusing on consumerism. From the time we are born and through the end of life, the speaker expresses our failure to do anything but worry about money. In Hopkins's poem, he takes a slightly different start to his poem: "The world is

charged with the grandeur of God” (1). By this, the speaker of the poem says that the entire world is God’s medium. God’s glory travels through the air and underfoot, but we as humans have lost the ability to realize this.

In the second line of “The World is Too Much with Us,” the speaker quotes: “Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;” which is hinted at in the 9th line of “God’s Grandeur” which reads “And for all this, nature is never spent;” These lines, both similar in the words they use, mean completely different things. The speaker of Wordsworth’s poem is dismayed by humanity’s determination to ruin their relationship with God. As humanity “gets” money and “spends” it, they are walking further and further from God—and to Wordsworth, this is a great loss. In Hopkins’s poem, the speaker has a different outlook. The speaker tells us “nature is never spent,” meaning despite all humanity does to distance itself from nature and God, nature does not fear. God does not worry about us walking away; he will always be waiting for us. His love and nature’s beauty is never “spent” and does not run out; our consumerism and materialism does not scare him.

“God’s Grandeur” is overflowing with imagery that allows the reader to place themselves in the speaker’s shoes. In the first few lines, the speaker describes the beauty of God’s grandeur. He says “It will flame out, like shining from a shook foil; It gathers to greatness” and this description shows that the grandeur of God is not only in flowers or trees, but it is everywhere (2). In the sky, in the dirt under our feet, the beauty of God’s creation can be found anywhere. This picture is comparable to Wordsworth’s imagery in “The World is Too Much with Us.” In Wordsworth’s poem, nature is described in a similarly exhilarating and beautiful way: “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). These coinciding views of nature show that, despite being more than a hundred years apart, Wordsworth is still held in high regard to the Victorian poets.

The themes of both “The World is Too Much with Us” and “God’s Grandeur” are incredibly similar. In fact, Hopkins’s theme could be called a reflection of Wordsworth’s theme—even if it is seen through a funhouse mirror. Wordsworth believes in the divine in nature, and that is clearly seen in his poetry. However, towards the end of “The World is

“Too Much with Us” the reader begins to feel a sense of hopelessness, which is hardly a Romantic trait. The speaker of Wordsworth’s poem believes that being a pagan would help him to better appreciate the beauty of God’s creations. He believes that pantheism is an answer to his materialist problems, and that pagans are able to look past the material and focus on the beauty of the divine. This alludes to the fact that humanity has lost its ability to connect with God, and that it can possibly never return to the way it was before. Hopkins’s poetry, which should have an ending that gives the reader a sense of impending dread, gives the reader an odd sense of hope. At the end of Hopkins’s poem, the speaker quotes: “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” (12-14). This image is a hopeful one that tells the reader that there is still hope for redemption. Despite the fact that we have strayed from the path of God and are unable to connect with him, all is not lost. One must only find his way back to God, and there they will find the Holy Ghost waiting for them like a mother bird watching over her eggs. The Holy Ghost in this instance is not unattainable or out of reach like it is in Wordsworth’s poem, but it is warm, safe, pensive—waiting for humanity to find its way back home. The end of Hopkins’s poem is a shadow of Romantic poetry, delightful and calm.

“The World is Too Much with Us” is a poem that echoes through the halls of time. William Wordsworth’s influence is found in many poems and works, and in none more so than Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Victorian writer-cum-Romantic idealist. These two poets, despite being from two different literary movements, have found a rocky middle ground in which to share ideas and themes. William Wordsworth is the base of Hopkins’s poem “God’s Grandeur,” shown through beautiful imagery, akin phrases, and mirrored ideas.