

Gerard Manley Hopkins  
The windhover  
Inscape & Instress -- and more  
challenging questions!

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A falcon catches the poet's eye as it rides the air at dawn. The poet, however, is then given to reflect on his Lord, Jesus Christ. The falcon becomes the image of a knight upon his horse, and of Jesus as he carries his cross and is crucified upon the hill outside Jerusalem.

#### INSCAPE & INSTRESS

At the heart of understanding Hopkins' poetry are two fundamental principles which the poet called inscape and instress.

Hopkins, in his search for an aesthetic understanding of nature, found value in the writings of the great medieval theologian-philosopher, Duns Scotus, who attempted to distinguish the difference between the individual and the species. What makes Peter different from other men? What makes Angela different from other girls? What makes my cat different from other cats?

Duns Scotus claimed that Peter and Angela each have an essence, a "this-ness", which is what marks them apart from others. My cat too has a "this-ness". Hopkins would expand on the concept of "this-ness" and call it inscape.

Inscape then is that unique property in things which makes them distinctive. It is the inner essence of the thing. This uniqueness represents the beauty of the thing. Even more: it represents the beauty of God that is reflected in the thing.

When the poet looks into the sky in the morning and sees a falcon floating on the wind, he sees more than just a bird. He sees the inner beauty of the bird. But within this inner beauty, he also sees the beauty that is God. The falcon's inscape is therefore the beautifying principle of God himself.

Not everybody, however, can see this inscape, this inner manifestation of beauty and the presence of God. Only the true artist can see it. And Hopkins gave the name instress to this ability to witness the inscape in something.

Instress is therefore the feeling that one has for the inner quality in something. This is what characterises the artist. Instress is the mystical ability that enables the artist to perceive the inner beautifying principle or inscape. Instress is the sensation of inscape, where the artist becomes aware of the inscape of the thing of beauty.

Most living people, Hopkins said, are fundamentally dead to this world of inscape, i.e. most people just cannot see this inner beauty in something else. Artistic creation, on the other hand, happens when the artist becomes instressed with the personal inscape of the other.

The work of art that then follows -- e.g. a poem or painting -- is what Hopkins called a new inscape. The poem or painting thereupon has its own inscape -- i.e. it too becomes a thing of beauty which reflects the beauty of God. When the reader's inscape becomes aware of the beauty of the poem, then the reader has become instressed.

But once again, not everybody has this ability. The kid in the classroom who bleats, "Ma'am, why do we have to do poetry?" says this because he lacks instress. He's the type of being who looks at the sunset and is reminded of a fried egg, soft side up.

1. Hopkins is known for creating words. Work out the possible meaning of the following two words:
  - "wimpling wing". (4)
  - "sillion". (4)
  
2. Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here  
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion  
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!
  - Comment on the alliteration in "Brute beauty". (4)
  - What is "the fire that breaks from thee"? (4)
  - Why should this fire be "a billion times told lovelier, more dangerous"? (4)
  - What is a "chevalier"? (2)
  - Why does the poet address the falcon as "O my chevalier! "? (6)
  
3. Having understood the concept of "inscape" and "instress" -- read the notes in the left column -- explain to what extent "inscape" is important in understanding the poet's vision of the falcon in this sonnet. (10)
  
4. An image is a concealed picture which the poet has hidden within his words but which he wishes the astute reader to see. In this sonnet, two images are hidden away. What are they? Here are the clues for each:
  - Minion, kingdom, chevalier, riding, striding, rein, pride, plume. (4)
  - Kingdom, dauphin, plod, plough, brute, buckle, fall, gall, breaks, gash, blue, gold-vermillion. (4)

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