LC-Learn
Leaving Cert
English Notes
Prescribed Poetry - Gerard Manley Hopkins
Let’s set the record straight on spelling. When using forming a possessive with an apostrophe, it is equally acceptable to say Hopkins’ or Hopkins’s, e.g. I like Hopkins’ poetry, OR I like Hopkins’s poetry. Both are correct.

Who is Gerard Manley Hopkins?

Any poet’s biography is elaborate. Remember that there is no use in learning such an elaborate biography for the LC. It is only relevant to the extent to which it helps explain her poems. So here are some salient points:

He was quite academic and always had an interest in unusual words, making lists of them as a child. He came from an Anglican family, but converted to Catholicism - to their dismay. He then became a Jesuit. Jesuits are known for being particularly academic, isolated and structured. Jesuits talk to each other in Latin, or at least they did at the time - some of that comes up in his poetry. St. Ignatius, who founded the order, designed this yearly exercise: the Jesuits would visualise and describe episodes from Jesus’s life in great detail. He was also influenced by the philosophy of Aquinas and Scotus, both of whom focus on the senses. All of this made him more contemplative, developing his imagination and interest in detail. He spent the final years of his life as a Classics professor in UCD, unfortunately depressed and isolated. He was sick for much of his life. Some scholars believe that Hopkins suffered from Crohn’s disease (a gut disease that affects the entire body and makes the person tired and possibly malnourished). He never married. It has been suggested that he struggled with his sexuality. During his time in UCD, he was committed to making it a great college - as a Catholic who converted from the Church of England. For Hopkins, this time was also marked by seeing how bad things were in Ireland as a consequence of British rule. He was conflicted because previously he had a lot of love for his native country and respected its ways. At the same time, he wasn’t well received in Ireland. He was completely isolated.

What are some things about Hopkins’s subject matter and imagery that make her stand out?

- he was a Anglican who converted to Catholicism and became a Jesuit. Religion is a crucial theme throughout his poetry (all of his poems on the LC course)
- his poetry is contemplative. This means he describes things without trying to change them. It is full of sensuous descriptions culminating in the appreciation of the glory of God. This is unusual for the Victorian era. (Spring, Pied Beauty and Inversnaid)
- he has breakthrough moments of realisation, usually signified by an ah! (God’s Grandeur, The Windhover and Felix Randal)
- he uses a lot of new words, or neologisms [everyone on the internet knows that Shakespeare invented swag. Hopkins hasn’t gone viral yet] (Inversnaid, Pied Beauty)
- the idea of inscape. Allow for this simplified explanation. Inscape is an entity’s inner landscape that hold together everything that is unique about it and how it interacts with the surroundings. It’s a kind of harmonious framework created by God that allows to uniqueness and togetherness. (Pied Beauty, Inversnaid and As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame)
- sprung rhythm. You will quickly notice Hopkins’s poetry reads differently to what you are used to. The stressed and unstressed syllables are arranged into clusters, to create bursts and breaks in the rhythm of the poem: e.g. What is all this juice and all this joy? (Spring). Compare this to the more conventional spread out stresses: Batter my heart three-personed God (John Donne) or Thus conscience does make cowards of us all (Hamlet)
his imagery is dominated by reference to colour (Pied Beauty, Spring, The Windhover), fire and birds (God’s Grandeur, The Windhover and As Kingfishers Catch Fire)
The most recent question on Hopkins came up in 2013:

“Hopkins’ innovative style displays his struggle with what he believes to be fundamental truths.” In your opinion, is this a fair assessment of his poetry? Support your answer with suitable reference to the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins on your course.

50 marks available for this question.

In the real exam, you will spend the first 10 minutes reading the paper to pick out the questions. The first thing to do is to circle the main terms.

What are the important terms?

1. Struggle with fundamental truths (~ subject matter)

2. Innovative style (~ imagery)

3. Opinion - the question asks you for some personal input. This means you can write about your own impressions on why the statement is fair or unfair, in other words, whether you agree or disagree. I don’t see much need to disagree here.

All LC poetry question have tended to ask the student to talk about two things: imagery and subject matter, i.e. what the poems are about and how this is delivered. The way that LC questions are different from each other is that you are expected to approach these two things (imagery and subject matter) from (slightly) different angles depending on the exact question. A good way to do this is to keep coming back to the question - literally look back at the question every 5-10 minutes when you are writing - now and in the actual exam. Another important tip is to reference the terms mentioned in the question in your answer.

In the notes below you will find memorable points relating to both subject matter and imagery.

Just so that you are on the same page with the examiner as you read this, keep in mind that the marking scheme directs examiners to reward the following: vivid imagery/symbols and aural effects express deeply-held beliefs, powerful celebration of nature as compelling/overstated
evidence of God’s presence, ‘Terrible sonnets’ reveal tensions/preoccupations with personal faith, search for spiritual meaning evident in startling/dramatic language, poet’s feelings/doubts amplified by syntax, compound words, sprung rhythm and inscape
Poem 1: God's Grandeur

Summary: Hopkins appreciates God’s presence in nature and the power of renewal. He criticises the lack of connection between people and God.

The poem is structured as an Italian (or Petrarchan) sonnet. The poem is broken into an octave and a sestet. The title implies not just importance but splendour and abundance.

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

Hopkins points out that God’s presence is visible everywhere. It is literally like a light, or an electric current charging everything up. It only discharges as a flash once in a while, but it is there even if it isn’t obvious at a given moment. It is rich and generous like the oil of a plant, presumably an olive. It can be fast like a flash or slow like the ooze of oil. There opening line contains the repetition of the letter “d”, adding a certain rhythm and assertiveness to Hopkins’s statement. The second line is full of “f” and “sh” sounds reminiscent of a shorting electrical connection.

Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?

In this context, Hopkins is surprised that humans are still questioning his presence and his power. The reference to a rod is reminiscent of electricity, or a mythological ability to throw a bolt of lightning like Zeus. It also feels like Hopkins is implying that humans are hurting themselves by being disconnected, they disrespect the laws of nature and God, which ends in suffering. It is interesting to note that electricity would have been quite central to the scientific innovation of Hopkins’s day, so he is pointing at the idea that science is just another way to discover God’s mysteries. The mood changes in the latter half of the octave:

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

The repetition of have trod emphasises the thoughtless repetitive human activities.

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

Seared-bleared-smeared, there is a rhyme here further emphasising the repetitiveness of our activities. People have dirtied everything through their activities, even the soil is worn down.

And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

The language Hopkins uses emphasises the industrial dirt that we live in. He points out the disconnect between nature and men through a metaphor: people cannot feel the soil through their shoes.

The tone of the preceding octave is bleak. As is customary with sonnets, it changes up for the remaining part (the sestet):

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 —

Morning always comes after night. This appears to be a metaphor for spiritual renewal drawn from the power of nature. Despite all the things humans do that offend nature, this reinvigorating power is everywhere. Hopkins appreciates nature by seeing God in it, his warm presence and miraculous surprises:

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
   World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.
Poem 2: Spring

Summary: the speaker celebrates Spring and prays that the innocent are protected from sin so that they can enjoy it.

This is another Italian (Petrarchan) sonnet consisting of an octave and a sestet - and the sestet is split in two. It’s one of the best examples of sprung rhythm.

Nothing is so beautiful as Spring –
When weeds, in wheels, shoots long and lovely and lush;

Weeds in wheels: there is so much in that second line that explains what Hopkins stood for. A wheel is probably one of our finer inventions. Weeds aren’t uniform and contrived, like the Victorian era would want them, and being caught up in a wheel they could be a nuisance - yet Hopkins observes them lovingly. Such mindful contemplation is almost certainly rooted in the Ignatian Jesuit practice of visualising and describing. It is used to symbolise the harmony between nature and humans. Note the alliteration with the letter “w”, and also with the letter “l”: long and lovely and lush. It continues with look little low:

Thrush’s eggs look little low heavens, and thrush

The mention of heavens also echoes Hopkins’s religious approach to the world.

Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring
The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing;

There is a lot going on here: a hyperbole, a simile built into a metaphor and synecdoche. The sound of the thrush singing strikes like lightning and it also rises and wrings the ear. Of course, the ear actually represents a person - that’s synecdoche. When you use a part to represent the whole, e.g. a headcount is more of a people count - that’s synecdoche - although the reverse is also called synecdoche, e.g. Sweden won the Eurovision, it’s actually a Swedish artist, not the entire of Sweden.) To say that the sound of a bird singing strikes like lightning is an exaggeration, i.e. it is a hyperbole. Finally, strikes like lightning is a simile, but it is in a context of a metaphor where the sound of the thrush’s song has all of these profound effects.

The glassy pear tree leaves and blooms, they brush
The descending blue; that blue is all in a rush

Note the sprung rhythm in the two lines above.

With richness; the racing lambs too have fair their fling.

There are a lot of references to reproduction, something that’s usually associated with Spring. The octave celebrates Spring and nature. As it customary with sonnets, the mood changes for the second part, the sestet.

What is all this juice and all this joy?
A strain of the earth’s sweet being in the beginning
In Eden garden. – Have, get, before it cluy,

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The poet alludes to the Bible here, probably the most celebrated of all the stories - of Adam and Eve and the garden of Eden. The story always brings an uneasiness as we know it all ended in tears. This allusion serves as a certain warning for what’s to come. He addresses God, so this poem is a prayer and an apostrophe (In poetry, an apostrophe is a figure of speech in which the poet addresses an absent person, an abstract idea, or a thing, it’s a John Donne favourite too). His passion is evident through the repetition of before it (this kind of parallelism is called anaphora, if you really want to impress the examiner). He prays that the innocent are protected from sin, so that they get to happily stay in this idyllic world rather than face the fate of Adam and Eve.

Before it cloud, Christ, lord, and sour with sinning,
Innocent mind and Mayday in girl and boy,
Most, O maid’s child, thy choice and worthy the winning.
Poem 3: As Kingfishers Catch Fire, Dragonflies Draw Flame

Summary: the poet elaborates on his idea of inscape.

This is another Italian (Petrarchan) sonnet consisting of an octave and a sestet. What are all the accents about (you might call them fadas)? They are emphasising the individuality of each word in line with the idea of self-expression. This poem most directly illustrates the concept of inscape. Allow for this simplified explanation. Inscape is an entity's inner landscape that hold together everything that is unique about it and how it interacts with the surroundings. It's a kind of harmonious framework created by God that allows to uniqueness and togetherness. This poem is carefully structured in line with this framework.

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;

A kingfisher is a particularly colourful bright blue/orange bird. It lives in the UK and Ireland, though it looks like it came from a tropical island. Similarly, the oil-spill radiance of a dragonfly's wings is mesmerising in our otherwise grey and cloudy environment. Hopkins sees this as a form of self-expression. A single ray of light allows both of these creatures to be beautiful, just like God intended.

As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;

Just like that, stones also express themselves. They make noise as they fall down the well. Each tucked string tells is difficult to enunciate and emphasises the physical action involved in playing a musical instrument. Each hung bell's bow swung requires a deepening of the voice drawing attention to the bass sounds bells produce, i.e. it is onomatopoeic. The lasting sound is unique: it is a broad name. Birds, insects and inanimate objects are all hard-coded to express themselves - by the will of God as Hopkins sees it.

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;

Absolutely everything is dictated to express what's inside (indoors).

Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.

Here Hopkins speaks in his own unique language. He focuses on the character of each individual things within harmonious nature. To selve is a a new word from Hopkins. It seems as though he is trying to replace the word to be. To him, living is more than just being, it is being something very particular - yourself. And that affects the things around you (this is the idea of inscape).

I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;

Hopkins has yet another new word for us: to justice. It is the action on a just man. To do what one is meant to do by God maintains nature's order: that keeps all his goings graces.

Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
A reflection of Christ in our eyes is what makes us loved by God. The idea here is that embodying and acting on the morals imparted by Christ is the purpose of human existence. This poem is very inspirational. In a sense, it is a series of unprovable (and irrefutable) statements, but that’s just Hopkins’s view of the world. It boils down to the harmony accomplished by being one’s true self.
Poem 4: The Windhover

To Christ our Lord

It is interesting that Hopkins chose this poem to give this dedication given the role of God in so many of his poems. The title is referring to a bird that has incredible aerodynamics: it can hover, stay in one place and look around for prey. For those of us who don’t know much about birds, the closest thing to it is probably an eagle.

I caught this morning morning’s minion, king-
dom of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding

Ok, so you have noticed the alliteration with the letter “d”.

Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,

The bird is portrayed as having superb control over its flying. Note the amount of words (not just verbs) ending in -ing. In a verb, this implies continuous action (e.g. doing). Hopkins uses this clever strategy to emphasise the continuity, harmony, unity and interdependence of nature.

As a skate’s heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend; the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

The speaker is visibly impressed with the mastery that this bird has. The reference to his heart hiding is resonant with the concept of inscape. The bird is out there, being itself and is thus glorious. He felt inspired by the bird to come out of his own hiding. Hovering may be the highest for of being for a windhover, but to a human it is all about spirituality. Hence, the change of subject in the sestet:

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air; pride, plume, bere
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

The windhover is a bird of prey, hence the brute aspect. It looks regal. The term buckle is key here. It is the fact that all of these things are coming together, closing in a tight connection like a buckle. Another interpretation is that it is merely a small detail of the full glory of what God created (like the buckle in only a detail of a shoe or belt, etc). My chevalier is a reference to Christ. Whatever beauty the bird possesses, it pales in comparison to that of Christ.

No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ab my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gaud gold-vermillion.

The plough becomes shinier through wear. Similarly, a spiritual search uncovers people’s inner shine. The last few words reference Christ’s wounds and his precious blood. You would think that bleak embers are burnt out and dead - just like the body of Christ being taken down from the cross, but that’s when it all turns around into resurrection.
Poem 5: Pied Beauty

Summary: it’s a poem of praise for God for creating diversity. It is a “curtal” (shortened) sonnet.

Glory be to God for dappled things —

Glory be to God (Ad maiorem Dei gloriam, AMDG) is a kind of Jesuit motto. The poem ends in Praise him, or laus Domini - this is how Jesuits say goodbye. What lies in between is an awareness of all the small things that make the world a place Hopkins is grateful for. His imagination and observation were strengthened by Ignatian contemplation he took part in as a Jesuit.

Hopkins singles out things things that are unevenly shown up by light, or kind of blotchy (dappled). These are the pied things the title refers to. For example, there are patches of white and blue in the sky, patches of various colours on a cow’s hide, spots on a trout and it reflects light strongly due to its shiny skin. It also comes up in The Windhover: dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon.

For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;

He makes compound words: Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls. There is a similarity between chestnuts and pieces of coal: they are dark on the outside but rich on the inside. It is a praise for the hidden worth of things that don’t look that appealing at first. Most of all, this poem praises diversity.

Landscape plotted and pieced — fold, fallow, and plough;  
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.  
All things counter, original, spare, strange;

The landscape is patchy as are trades (the concept of inscape is beginning to emerge here). The syntax is very broken up, it doesn’t make it easy, but it adds clarity when reading a more detailed version.

Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: Praise Him.

This poem praises God and thanks him for creating diversity. The concept of inscape is touched upon here: all of these small things form a framework. They are more similar than they are different, however, they are all unique. Most of all, they are all a reflection of God’s grace. However, it is an unusual view to take during the Victorian era: the prevailing attitude was that things should be uniform rather than unique, or indeed covered with spots.
Poem 6: Felix Randal

Summary:

This is another Italian (Petrarchan) sonnet consisting of an octave and a sestet. Felix was 31 year old man dying of TB in a Liverpool slum. Hopkins administered his last sacraments. It seems to be a personal poem: a Catholic priest reflecting on death. He formed a bond with the dying man. Hopkins was as much out of his comfort zone through this experience.

Felix Randal the farrier, O is he dead then? my duty all ended,
Who have watched his mould of man, big-boned and hardy-handsome
Pining, pining, till time when reason rambled in it, and some
Fatal four disorders, fleshed there, all contended?

Felix was a hardy worker - a smith who shoes horses, who couldn’t bear to be in bed - away from the horses. The four disorders is a reference to to the traditional four ‘wounds of nature’ that were consequent upon original sin (according to Tomas Aquinas humans have four cardinal virtues, and Adam and Eve damaged those). It is the poet’s way to say that death is tragic but has to be expected.

Sickness broke him. Impatient, he cursed at first, but mended
Being anointed and all; though a heavenlier heart began some

Felix was a particularly strong man: he was big-boned, hardy-handsome and handled horses. He was clearly in denial about how close he is to death: be cursed at first. There is contrast between this man’s natural strength and his susceptibility to disease. It’s Hopkins’s way of reflecting on how fragile life is, even when it seems so strong. It appears that Hopkins himself finds it difficult to come to terms with Felix’s untimely death despite his wisdom as a priest.

Months earlier, since I had our sweet reprieve and ransom
Tendered to him. Ab well, God rest him all road ever he offended!

Talking to a priest has made it easier for Felix to come to terms with his own mortality: our sweet reprieve.

This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears.

This line is very important as it described the meaning Hopkins took from the experience of tending to a dying man.

My tongue had taught thee comfort, touch had quenched thy tears,
Thy tears that touched my heart, child, Felix, poor Felix Randal;

The two men developed a real connection: the priest’s words soothed the dying man and Felix’s suffering touched the heart of the priest.

How far from then forethought of, all thy more boisterous years,
When thou at the random grim forge, powerful amidt peers,
Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal!
Poem 7: Inversnaid

Summary:

Inversnaid is a place in the Highlands of Scotland on Loch Lomond (a lake). This poem describes a stream using powerful natural imagery: the second describes the froth blown above the water in a pool; and the third the landscape which the stream passes through. The poem ends as the poet wonders what would become of the world without such wet and wild landscapes, and pleads for them to be retained. The poem has an almost perfect aabb type rhyming scheme. The idea of inscape come up again as the stream is described in its context: the waterfall, the lake, the landscape and the meaning of it all. It’s another great exemplar of sprung rhythm.

This darksome burn, horseback brown,

Darksome: a marriage between dark and handsome. It is a word Hopkins invented, i.e. a neologism.

His rollrock highroad roaring down,

The rollrock highroad is a waterfall. Rollrock is another neologism. Read the line again with its many “r” sounds - doesn’t it seem perfect for a Scottish accent? It is another subtle way to create an atmosphere.

In coop and in comb the fleece of his foam

The foaming water is likened to a sheep’s fleece through a metaphor. The reference to a flute adds another sensuous dimension to the description - that of sound.

Flutes and low to the lake falls home.

The poet described this froth being blown around:

A windpuff-bonnet of fáwn-fróth

Turns and twindles over the broth

Twindle? Probably a neologism arising from twitch and dwindle. The compound words windpuff-bonnet and fáwn-fróth are also Hopkins’ inventions. This poem doesn’t seem to carry anything new at first: a poem about a steam is about as revolutionary as a song about love. However, Hopkins challenges the usual perception by seeing connections between concepts that were previously undiscovered.

Of a pool so pitchblack, fell-frowning,

It rounds and rounds Despair to drowning.

Hopkins describes the terrain of the Highlands. Note the alliteration with the letter “d”. He uses the word dappled again, like in Pied Beauty and The Windhover. The repetition of rounds brings attention to all the other movement verbs: roaring down, falling, etc. A stream is a particularly lively, dynamic thing is nature, and Hopkins reminds us of that with his choice of words. The word Despair is given a capital letter, almost like it is a character. Clearly, Despair hasn’t got a chance in this lively stream.
Degged with dew, dappled with dew
Are the groins of the braes that the brook treads through,
Wiry heathpacks, flitches of fern,
And the beadbonny ash that sits over the burn.

He contemplates nature and fears that it has its own mortality: what if it is gone someday? Knowing that this poem is written by Hopkins, it is only reasonable to assume a religious undertone. Just like the strongman Felix Randal, the stream has its own mortality.

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.
Poem 8: I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day

Summary: this is one of the Terrible sonnets.

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.

The speaker can’t sleep at night: it seems like he’s in hell and can’t wait for morning light.

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.

It’s not just tonight, it’s his whole life. It’s like a series of unanswered letters written to a dead friend. This could be Hopkins’s way of saying that his prayers have gone unanswered. He would never say this directly because of his intense faith. Note the repetition: what hours, what black hours; mean years, mean life; cries countless, cries like… This is used to emphasise how all these tormenting thoughts are playing on repeat in his tired mind. He uses a variety of metaphors to communicate his pain:

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 sour. I see
The lost are like this, and their scourge to be
As I am mine, their sweating selves, but worse.

Here’s the volta (a new idea introduced towards the end of the sonnet). Hopkins goes from self-hatred and complaining to finding relief in the thought that despite all his pain, he still has faith. It is much worse for those who are lost, i.e. don’t have God in their lives.
Poem 9: No worst there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief

Summary: this is one of the Terrible sonnets.

This poem was written in Dublin.

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief, 
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.

Hopkins suggests that grief spirals: the more you grieve, the more you learn to grieve.

Comforter, where, where is your comforting? 
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?

Hopkins is praying for relief from depression. He gets the occasional moment of relief from these, but then it comes back with a vengeance:

My cries heave, herd-long; huddle in a main, a chief 
Woe, world-sorrows on an age-old anvil wince and sing — 
Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked ‘No lingering! Let me be fell; force I must be brief.’

Fury is personified (it is like a character who can speak).

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall 
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap 
May who ne’er hung there. Nor does long our small 
Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! creep, 
Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all 
Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.

Note the language: sheer, cliff, steep, deep, whirlwind. It is like the poet is falling, spiralling into nothingness.

Hopkins studied philosophy. His last line is reminiscent of stoic philosophy that was preoccupied with death (equivalently it was preoccupied with the transience of life). This especially resonates with one of the key stoic philosophers, Seneca: death isn’t something that happens at one point. It happens at every moment because nothing is the same once a moment is gone, hence each day dies with sleep. (It was a way of coming to terms with death rather than scaring people.)
Poem 10: Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend

Summary: this is one of the terrible sonnets. The speaker is likely the poet - and he longs for inspiration.

Pour quidem tu es, Domine, si disputem tecum; verumtamen justa loquar ad te: Quare via impiorum prosperatur? &c.

[Righteous art thou, O Lord, when I plead with thee; However, speak what is just to thee: Why doth the way of the wicked prosper? & C.

This comes from Jeremiah 12, a book of the Old Testament.

The following is not really relevant to the LC and only interesting if you are really into poetry: John Donne used the same passage for one of the Holy Sonnets not on the course. Hopkins - for one of his terrible sonnets. Donne converted from Catholicism to the Church of England, while Hopkins did the opposite. It is difficult to imagine that Hopkins wasn't familiar with Donne's work. What does this mean though? Donne is negotiating his sins with God in that particular sonnet, whereas Hopkins emphasises his commitment and begs for inspiration. It could be Hopkins slighting Donne's religion. At least we know that despite his misery, Hopkins was happy with his religion.

Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend
With thee, but, sir, so what I plead is just.
Why do sinners' ways prosper? and why must
Disappointment all I endeavour end?
Wert thou my enemy, O thou my friend,
How wouldst thou worse, I wonder, than thou dost
Defeat, thwart me? Oh, the sots and thralls of lust
Do in spare hours more thrive than I that spend,
Sir, life upon thy cause. See, banks and brakes

It may seem like Hopkins is challenging God's justice. He asks God: “I know you are my friend, but had you been my enemy - in what way could you possibly make my life any worse?” However, he takes responsibility for his own failures:

Now, leavèd how thick! lacèd they are again
With fretty chervil, look, and fresh wind obakes
Them; birds build – but not I build; no, but strain,
Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.

He tries and tries, but unlike birds, he is unable create anything worthwhile (work that wakes) and he has no legacy (a eunuch is a man who has been castrated and so couldn't have an heir).

Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.
"Hopkins’ innovative style displays his struggle with what he believes to be fundamental truths.” In your opinion, is this a fair assessment of his poetry? Support your answer with suitable reference to the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins on your course. (2013)

Although Gerard Manley Hopkins' poetry is over one hundred years old, his expression of what he believes are fundamental truths provides it with an enduring quality which continues to enthrall readers today. In particular, it is Hopkins' innovative style - his use of compound words, sprung rhythm and a contemplative approach - allow the reader to have a greater appreciation of the trials he faced. Hopkins achieves this by combining his exploration of nature and God, together with his belief in the uniqueness of the individual in the context of diversity created by God – a characteristic he referred to as 'inscape'. The essay begins by examining his nature poems in which his innovative style is evident. In these poems, Hopkins questions man's ways but still retains hope in the rejuvenation of nature. It then progresses to two of his dark sonnets, in which hope has faded.

Hopkins believes that the existence of a great God is a fundamental truth and His existence is evident in the surrounding nature of the world. In *God's Grandeur* Hopkins displays his struggle as he attempts to comprehend man's reluctance to pay heed to the power of God: 'Why do men then not now reck his rod?' Hopkins struggles with the fact that God has created a perfectly beautiful world and yet 'generations have trod, have trod, have trod' over the beauty of God's creation. However, *God's Grandeur* is not full of despair as the sestet presents a more optimistic tone. The pessimism of the octave that 'all is seared with trade' is replaced with an optimism that 'nature is never spent'. The rhythm here isn’t quite the sprung rhythm he’s famous for, but it is unusual and allows for emphasis of his struggle.
In As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame, the glory of God is reflected in the uniqueness of the individual to recognise God's creations in the surrounding natural world: 'Each mortal thing does one thing and the same'. It is even evident through the accents on the opening line that make these words unique but synergistic with the rest of the poem. This is an example of Hopkins' notion of 'inscape'. I found that the inclusion of aural imagery intensified my vision of the distinct sounds created in nature as a representation of God's presence as believed by Hopkins: 'stones ring', 'each tucked string', 'each hung bell'. In addition, I found Hopkins' innovative extension of justice: 'the just man justices', reinforced in my mind the notion of the just man mirroring the justice of God. However, as we will see in Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend, Hopkins in his final years comes to struggle with the apparent injustice of God's ways as the sinful appear to go unpunished while the devout God-fearing Christian seems to be punished as if he were an enemy of God.

Like the previous two poems, Pied Beauty is very much celebratory in tone - and contemplative. Hopkins demonstrates his fundamental belief in the existence of God being physically visible through the diversity and uniqueness of nature. His belief that God can be seen to be present in all aspects of nature is intensified by his use of vivid natural images. He begins the poem with a vivid description of 'dappled things', 'skies of couple-colour', 'a brinded cow'. I found that Hopkins' innovative style of using compound words like 'couple-colour', 'rose-moles', 'fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls' and 'fathers-forth' allowed me the opportunity to imagine more vividly the diversity and uniqueness of nature that Hopkins described. Sprung rhythm really comes out in this poem giving the emphatic quality deserving of a prayer. His appreciation for 'dappled things', rather than the idealised uniformity of the Victorian era, is another example of his innovation.

Hopkins is often considered a nature poet, but while he was in Dublin during a period of deep despair, he wrote his 'Terrible sonnets'. It is in these sonnets that Hopkins's struggle really emerges. No worst there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief starts dramatically stating that there is
nothing worse than this. The almost monosyllabic first line with alliteration with the letter “p” gives the reader an impression of great effort being expended even to say the words. The internal rhyme and repetition of ‘pitch’ in the alliteration of ‘Pitched past pitch’ draws our attention to the word and the suggestions it relays – the suggestion of a mood of deepest pitch black darkness. The alliteration of ‘heave, herds-long; huddle’ portrays the image of his cries for mercy being forced out despite his desperation. His cries were not just singular in number but were akin to a herd of cattle; each cry exerted with the energy to heave a huge heifer. His desperation does not amount to the sorrow equating with one cry out for mercy, but his sorrow is equivalent to a huddled ‘world-sorrow’.

The internal rhyme of ‘steep’ and ‘deep’ which combines with the end-of-line rhyme of ‘cheap’, ‘creep’ and ‘sleep’ emphasises the lengthy duration of the condition which ‘our small Durance’ does not cope well with. The phrase ‘hung there’ gives us a further description of the sense of powerlessness the sufferer feels, magnified by the fact that anyone who has ‘ne’er hung there’ does not appreciate these moments and holds ‘them cheap’. In the final line, Hopkins’ use of consonance in the repetitive use of the ‘d’ sound intensifies the notion that if there is any chink of light, it is only through being unconscious of this world, either through sleep or death: ‘Life death does end and each day dies with sleep’.

I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day begins with a darkness once again. It is a darkness not only of the natural lack of light at night but ‘black hours’ that Hopkins has spent in torment through the night. The alliteration of ‘w’ and the ‘s’ sibilance in ‘what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!’ indicates to us in a way that would be elusive to mere prose, that his heart has spent the night travelling to the most tortuous of places. The magnitude of his desperation is brought forth with the explanation that when he says hours he actually means years, and years means life.

Hopkins uses the simile of ‘dead letters sent’ to describe his cries. It is a never ending spiral of depression as seen in No worst, there is none where the only respite is death. The internal repetition of ‘cries’ emphasises his despair as we saw with ‘herds-long’ in No worst, there is none. In the sestet
we see the alliteration of ‘bones built....flesh filled....blood brimmed’ which emphasised the intensity of Hopkins' suffering. Hopkins clearly struggles with the sense of abandonment he feels as the dark clouds of depression engulf his soul. In his nature poems, he praises the glory of God, but in I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day, he cannot even bring himself to address God with his customary capital letter, referring to God as 'dearest him that lives alas! away'.

Hopkins has a devout belief in the goodness of God as expressed in his nature poems. For Hopkins, God's goodness and glory is a fundamental truth. However, in Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend Hopkins struggles with the fact that his own goodness appears to have gone unrewarded while 'the sots and thralls of lust' seem to be in a better position despite their sinful ways. God's will has become a source of frustration for Hopkins. He struggles with the fact that he has not been recognised as a poet despite his devotion to God. In the final line of the poem, he returns to nature for comfort and asks to 'send my roots rain'. I think it would be wrong to say that towards the end of his life Hopkins turned away from God: 'O thou my friend'. However, he struggles intensely with his fundamental belief that a good Christian should be rewarded by God: 'Wert thou my enemy ... How wouldst thou worse...?' This struggle has certainly strained his relationship with God and intensified his melancholic state as seen in his dark sonnets.

In conclusion, it is fair to say that Hopkins displays both his fundamental truths and his struggle with these truths by means of his innovative style. Hopkins sees God in the beauty of nature. However, even this physical and immediately present beauty that surrounded Hopkins as he worked in Dublin was insufficient to drown out his depression, anger and frustration at God. The dark sonnets therefore present a concluding fundamental truth – that however great the beauty of nature and the world, it is unable to overpower the darkness of depression. It is one hundred and twenty seven years since Hopkins' death and yet the fundamental truth of a darkness invading the human body and spirit is as fundamental today as it was then. This is the definition of fundamental – that it is everlasting. Times may have changed with less nature, more
concrete, less devotion to God, but human emotions have remained as they were thousands of years before and after the death of Gerard Manley Hopkins.