# The Caged Skylark

## POEM TEXT

As a dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage,
Man's mounting spirit in his bone-house, mean house, dwells
That bird beyond the remembering his free fells
This in drudgery, day-labouring-out life's age.
Though aloft on turf or perch or poor low stage
Both sing sometímes the sweetest, sweetest spells,
Yet both droop deadly sómetimes in their cells
Or wring their barriers in bursts of fear or rage.

Not that the sweet-fowl, song-fowl, needs no rest —
Why, hear him, hear him babble & drop down to his nest,
But his own nest, wild nest, no prison.

Man's spirit will be flesh-bound, when found at best,
But uncumberèd: meadow-down is not distressed
For a rainbow footing it nor he for his bónes rísen.

## SUMMARY

The speaker compares a skylark (a bird known for flying in strong winds) that has been caged, to a human soul, which also strives to climb to great heights but is imprisoned in a body. Neither the skylark nor the soul can remember the time when they could fly freely. Instead, their time is spent in hard, life-draining work. Despite their difficult conditions in a cage or on the earth, the skylark and the soul may still find moments of joy or relief in singing. This joy, though, will eventually fade as they remain stuck in their prisons, and the soul, like the skylark, will experience the oppressive sorrow of despair or the aggressive outbursts of fear and anger.

Though the skylark seems born for flight, it also must rest occasionally and can be heard chirping as it comes to settle in its nest. But unlike the cage, the wild nest belongs to the skylark, and is no prison.

The human soul, the speaker now reflects, will remain within the body when in heaven; but the soul will not be burdened by its returned-to-life bones, just as the delicate plants that surround a meadow are not burdened by a rainbow whose base comes to rest over the meadow.

## THEMES

### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE BODY AND THE SOUL

"The Caged Skylark" offers an extended meditation on the tension between the soul and the body, or, more specifically the way that the body limits and imprisons the soul. The soul is compared to a skylark, seemingly created to sing and soar, whereas the body is like a cage that constrains the soul. However, the poem also suggests that this contentious relationship between body and soul can be resolved through the Christian concept of the Resurrection. Body and soul, the poem argues, have the potential to exist in harmony after death, even though they are in conflict during life.

The poem begins by comparing the condition of a skylark in its cage to the condition of a human soul in a body. The skylark is described as "dare-gale." In other words, the defining characteristic of the skylark is that it is a bird that daringly flies even in gale-force winds. It is meant for spectacular flight. This skylark, however, is "scanted in a dull cage." It is constrained and cannot fly. The cage is a direct contradiction to the skylark's natural flight. As the cage contradicts the skylark, so the body contradicts the soul. The speaker describes the soul as a "mounting spirit." It too is meant to rise, to soar as the skylark does, but it too is caged. The spirit's cage is the body, a "bone-house." The caged experience is so complete, in fact, that the poem says in line 3 that the "bird" (meaning both the skylark and the soul) cannot even remember the freedom it had before it was caged.

The speaker then reflects on the way that, stuck in this state of being caged, one's feelings towards life may fluctuate. The skylark, like the human spirit, will live with a range of responses to its imprisonment. The spirit, like the skylark, finds another way to express itself: singing. Its voice, its artistry, still give it a chance to soar. In this way, both soul and skylark may be able to realize their true nature and "sing sometimes the sweetest, sweetest spells." But in both cases, the reality of being caged reasserts itself, and the soaring eventually ends and gives way to the "droop" of despair or "bursts" of anger. At the end of the first stanza, the speaker seems resigned to the permanent cage that the body will always be to the soul, despite occasional bright moments.

However, sonnets often involve a "turn", or volta, in line 9, and "The Caged Skylark" follows this pattern. The speaker notes that in the wild, the skylark has not only the freedom to fly but also a nest to return home to. In this nest, as in a cage, the skylark does not fly and is still. Yet the poem notes that the

experience of being in the nest is totally different from being in a cage, as the nest is both "wild" and "his." In other words, the nest offers a place to not fly, but in a way that is not at odds with the skylark's essential being.

By adding the nest to the extended metaphor of the skylark, the speaker indicates that the human soul will *also* find freedom and rest. Specifically, the soul's "wild nest" will be found in the resurrection of the body (the "bónes rísen") in the afterlife. Hopkins was a Catholic and so believed that after death, human beings receive a new body that no longer suffers from physical limitations and is instead in perfect harmony with the soul. Similarly, an uncaged skylark can fly as freely as it likes, but it does not fly endlessly. It returns to its nest to rest peacefully. The body itself, the poem suggests, is not the enemy of the soul—the *limits* of the body are. When those limits are removed in its resurrected form, it will no longer be the soul's cage but will instead be its home.

The speaker compares this new relationship between body and soul to the relationship between a rainbow and "meadow-down," the small plants around a meadow. This meadow-down experiences no weight whatsoever when a rainbow comes to rest on it. In its resurrected form, the body will no longer weigh down the soul, and the soul will not have to revolt against its limitations. This concluding image of a beautiful rainbow resting on a peaceful meadow makes it clear that body and soul can live harmoniously, if only after they've undergone the transformation of a Christian resurrection.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-3
- Lines 6-8
- Lines 9-11
- Lines 12-14

## HUMANITY'S CONNECTION TO NATURE

Through its central images of the natural world, "The Caged Skylark" implies a deep and meaningful connection between human beings and nature. This theme is common throughout most of Hopkins's poetry. Nature, as discussed in this poem, is the essential foundation of all creatures' lives. It is the skylark's true home, and it was the original home of human beings as well. By contrasting the natural world with the "drudgery" of modern human society, the poem suggests human beings are best able to understand themselves by understanding nature and by recovering their relation to it.

At the start of the poem, the skylark is in an obvious state of contradiction: it is a bird that cannot fly, because it is trapped in a cage. This is an important distinction from, say, a bird with a broken wing, because the cage represents a force that comes from outside of nature. Cages do not exist naturally but are instead made by human beings, which hints at the idea that human society and perhaps industry get in the way of nature.

What's more, the poem goes on to suggest that humans don't just hurt other creatures by interfering with nature; they hurt themselves, too. By subtly alluding to the biblical story of Adam and Eve, the poem indicates that humans suffer because they're disconnected from nature. In line 3, the speaker says that the "bird"—meaning the soul as well as the skylark—cannot remember "his free fells." But "fells" here means both "hills" and "flesh." The image thus refers not just to the land over which a skylark flies, but through the phrase "free fells" also refers to the natural state of freedom in which Christians believed human beings were originally created in the Garden of Eden. Furthermore, in the story of Adam and Eve, the two original humans "fall" from grace after eating from the Tree of Knowledge, and pain, work, and fatigue are how God punishes humans for this first sin. The line about "day-laboring-out life's age" seems to refer to this punishment. The "drudgery" of contemporary human life, the poem suggests, is unnatural; it is contrary to the free, natural condition human beings were created in. By alluding to the Garden of Eden, the poet implies both that human beings have a deep connection with nature and that they have now lost that connection. Nature was their original home, and they now live in exile from it, experiencing "fear or rage" instead of peace and harmony.

However, the poem concludes by suggesting that this vital connection to nature may not be lost forever. The image of the rainbow in the final stanza hints at the idea that someday (perhaps through the Christian concept of resurrection), humans might be able to return to a deeper connection with nature. The more humans can recover of their connection to nature, it seems, the more they can experience the harmony that exists between the rainbow and the meadow. Indeed, the poem itself is a vivid example of how examining the natural world can lead to a deeper understanding of human nature. By reflecting on the connection between human beings and the skylark, the speaker seems to come to new insights about the complex relationship between the human body and soul, and so the speaker's own exploration demonstrates to readers how contemplating nature can be a path toward wisdom and self-awareness.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 7-8
- Line 11
- Lines 12-14

## FREEDOM THROUGH ART

Though the poem considers the human spirit to be imprisoned, like a skylark in a cage, it presents art as

a way to find a degree of freedom within that confinement.

According to the poem, both the caged skylark and the human spirit are imprisoned and cannot live as they are meant to. Trapped in their respective cages, neither the skylark nor the human spirit can, literally or metaphorically, fly. Struggling against their confinement, they experience feelings of defeat and revolt. They will, therefore, alternatively "droop deadly" and "wring their barriers."

Yet the speaker also notes that both the spirit and the skylark "sing sometimes the sweetest, sweetest spells" even in the midst of their drudgery. In this way, the poem suggests the power of artistic expression to grant human beings a sense of peace and freedom. While it is specifically singing that grants a sense of freedom in the poem, song can be understood as being symbolic of artistic creation in general. The caged skylark experiences freedom by finding a way to fulfill its nature and soaring in song rather than flight. In the same way, the imprisoned poet can find freedom through writing poetry—with poetry closely related to song, a way to translate the music of the soul beyond the confines of the body. Indeed, the body, by participating in this expression, ceases to be a limitation and becomes instead part of the liberating act of art.

Of course, the poem makes clear that art only offers a temporary reprieve. Despite being able to produce the "sweetest, sweetest spells," the skylark and human will then inevitably fall sway again to the limitations imposed on them and experience anger or despair. *Complete* liberation, the speaker says, comes only in the afterlife. The freedom found in singing thus only offers a glimpse of the lasting freedom that will be found after this life, when the body and soul will no longer exist in tension.

**Where this theme appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 6-8
- Lines 12-13

## LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

### LINES 1-2

*As a dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage,*
*Man's mounting spirit in his bone-house, mean house, dwells*

The opening two lines of "The Caged Skylark" establish the simile that the remainder of the poem explores as an extended metaphor. The premise of this simile can be summed up as: two entities, the skylark and the human soul, are meant to soar to spectacular heights but are instead trapped. The remainder of the poem considers the various consequences of their confinement and the ultimate hope for freedom.

Hopkins' poetry is well known for its frequent use of repetitive syllables. In these first two lines, we find this repetition in high effect. From the start, the overlapping sounds can feel so crowded on top of one another that they feel trapped, in much the same way that the soul can feel trapped in the body. Since there is an overwhelming amount of repetition in these two lines, only the instances that contribute most prominently to the meaning of the lines will be selected. The description of the skylark as "dare-gale" includes the assonance of two long *a*'s. Meanwhile, the *k* of "skylark," is alliteratively repeated by the hard *c* in "scanted." And *both* of those two sounds—the *a* and the *k*—are repeated again in the word "cage" at the end of the line. In this way, the very sounds associated with the skylark are themselves, like the skylark, contained in the word "cage." A similar effect can be seen in the way that the *s* at the start of "spirit" reemerges in "house," which is the spirit's cage.

In another way, though, the repetition of sounds quickens the pace especially of the first line, which seems to accelerate until it crashes into the final two syllables, both of which are stressed: "dull cage." This final spondaic foot abruptly halts the speed of the line, as the cage itself stops the swift movements of the skylark.

In addition to the sounds they contribute, the words themselves convey a complex relation of meanings. While "scanted" is a verb that can mean "to provide for meagerly even to the point of neglect," it is more commonly used as an adjective and would mean "rare or in poor supply." In this way, the skylark, because it is "scanted," is made into a poor, meager version of itself, but it is also neglected and left to suffer its terrible conditions alone.

There are two prominent ways that the description of the spirit's cage connects to the description of the skylark's. First, the spirit dwells in a "mean house." Here, "mean" can be a synonym of "scant," referring to the body's impoverished state and its inability to meet the needs of the spirit it houses. Second, the typical image of a birdcage includes thin bars that run from the top of the cage to its bottom. The "bone-house" description, then, also evokes the specific image of the rib *cage*—while the skylark's cage is a metaphor for the body, the poem here suggests that the similarity in fact may be more literal than it initially appears.

### LINES 3-4

*That bird beyond the remembering his free fells*
*This in drudgery, day-labouring-out life's age.*

Lines 3 and 4 set up a painful contrast in order to intensify the condition established in lines 1 and 2. In line 3, the "bird," which is here used to refer to both the skylark and the spirit, is so accustomed to its captivity that it cannot even remember its "free fells." The meaning of "fells" here is twofold (and neither meaning is very commonly used in modern times). First, it refers to the open hills over which the skylark would fly. Its

second meaning refers to the body of an animal or living creature. In light of the comparison established between the cage and the body in lines 1-2, it is clear this second meaning of "fells" refers to the human body. Further, this reference is a biblical allusion to Genesis 1-3, the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. According to Hopkins' Catholic beliefs, physical pain and the necessity of labor were instituted by God as punishment after Adam and Eve first sinned. This means, however, that *prior* to this sin their human bodies did not experience such limitations, but rather experienced instead only freedom. The body *became* a cage as a result of that original sin.

Contrary to the state of freedom in which Adam and Eve first lived, line 4 describes how human beings now live in "drudgery" and spend their time "day-labouring-out life's age." This last phrase means that the demands of work seem to take up nearly all of life's time, but the word's precise phrasing says more. "Day-labouring-out" is structured in such a way that it evokes a feeling of running out or of draining away. The precise construction of the word shows that days are spent *in* labor as well as *by* labor. In other words, human beings work in order to meet the demands of life, but the demands of work ultimately use up all the time available in life. Such labor is the basis of the soul's captivity to the body, the enemy of freedom. Thus, the drudgery and fruitlessness of labor contrast with the freedom that was once enjoyed by humanity but can no longer be remembered.

## LINES 5-6

*Though aloft on turf or perch or poor low stage*
*Both sing sometímes the sweetest, sweetest spells,*

Though the first four lines of "The Caged Skylark" describe in detail the poor condition of the imprisoned spirit, lines 5-6 offer a glimpse of the freedom that can be found even within the cage. Line 5 sets the scene of captivity again—the "perch" of the skylark refers to its cage, while the "turf" of the human being refers to both the earth and the body. The assonance between the *er* of "perch" and the *ur* of "turf" is used to show again how alike the states of imprisonment are between the two.

And yet, such "poor" platforms can be transformed into a "stage" as the skylark and the human in line 6 "sing sometímes the sweetest, sweetest spells." The line is set up to the convey how interchangeable each platform is with the other. The word for each is a single, short, stressed syllable separated by a series of *or*'s: "on turf or perch or poor low stage." The rhythm is so established through this meter that the inclusion of "poor low" before "stage" does not disrupt the flow but instead heightens the culmination of the line in "stage." A stage is a confined area that nevertheless affords space for the expansive freedom of creativity. This freedom achieved by artistic expression is a kind of escape, a chance to fly, not as before when flying or in the Garden of Eden, but in a new way. On a stage, the body is still limited but the soul is, for a moment, free to do what it wishes.

The dominant sound of this line expresses the ease and relief that this freedom provides. Whereas the previous lines were dominated by *d*'s and harsh *c*'s, the most prominent sound in line 6 is an *s*, which is much softer and more peaceful. Furthermore, the direct repetition of the word "sweetest" slows the line down as though the speaker were savoring the sweetness of the singing. In the midst of so much drudgery and hardship, the speaker pauses to cherish this sweetness and even seems to cling to it, reluctant to let it pass. The double meaning of "spells" heightens this tension of the enchantment but also the tragic brevity of the songs. Due to the connection with magic, referring to the songs as "spells" indicates their ability to charm or captivate, but "spells" also describes shifting moods or moments of intense feeling. The delights of art are powerful, and offers a degree of freedom from the prison of cage or body, but the freedom achieved in this way is temporary and does not last.

## LINES 7-8

*Yet both droop deadly sómetimes in their cells*
*Or wring their barriers in bursts of fear or rage.*

Once the freedom of artistic creation passes, the cage imposes its limits once more. Sweetness turns to sorrow, as in line 7 the *s*'s give way once more to the dull thudding *d's* of "droop deadly." Though the *s* still appears throughout the line, it is overpowered. Its peace is shattered. Note how this sadness is described entirely through body language. The head and shoulders "droop" as the spirit expresses its defeat, and the sorrow is so powerful it is "deadly." The poem directly connects sorrow to the body. The spirit of freedom has been killed, crushed, and the poor bird (which, once again, refers to both the skylark and the soul) is forced to acknowledge once more its prison "cell."

In line 8, the poem acknowledges that another reaction to the realities of imprisonment is also possible. Rather than resignation, the spirit may choose to rebel, to lash out against the walls of its prison. The skylark may "wring" its cage. "Wring" has multiple meanings. It can first mean to subject to distress. It is perhaps easiest to think of wringing a towel. Water is wrung out of a towel because of how tightly wound and tensely strained the towel becomes. The skylark, in its distress, lashes out and subjects the cage to all the force it can muster in an attempt to break its prison bars. But given that cages are typically made of metal, the use of "wring" adds the sound of a struck bell to the image. While this could seem to offer a peaceful or harmonious feeling, the wringing of the cage is brought about by the frenzy of a bird thrashing around its cage. It is not peaceful but chaotic. The sense of distress and darkness is intensified in light of the fact that a common way to

kill a bird is to wring its neck. Especially in connection with the "deadly" sadness of the previous line, the imprisonment of the skylark—of the soul—is here shown to be a tragic matter of life and death.

## LINES 9-11

*Not that the sweet-fowl, song-fowl, needs no rest —*
*Why, hear him, hear him babble & drop down to his nest,*
*But his own nest, wild nest, no prison.*

Sonnets are typically characterized by a structure in which a problem is presented, and then, following a "turn" or *volta*, a solution or easing of that problem is identified. "The Caged Skylark" follows this pattern, with the "turn" occurring in the most common location of line 9.

In line 9, the speaker begins to shift from contemplating the problems of life to the promise of the afterlife. This turn begins as the attention of the poem shifts from the comparison of the caged skylark to a free skylark. The wild, free skylark incorporates the twofold description of the liberating singing from line 6 as it is described as both the "sweet-fowl" and "song-fowl." But even more important is the speaker's realization that this free skylark, which is not caged, does not (and, in fact, cannot) endlessly indulge its ability to fly. Rather, it needs to rest, and regularly does so in the nest it has built for itself. The speaker recognizes that in many ways the free skylark that is resting in its nest is doing essentially the same thing as the caged skylark. It is *not flying*. It is not doing the thing that the poem initially stated that skylarks were created to do. But while the skylark in the cage either droops or thrashes in despair, the free skylark sings contentedly or "babbles" as it rests in its nest. The nest and the cage are similar in some ways, but while the cage is imposed, the nest is "his own" and, therefore, "no prison." The speaker's revelation here about the fact that not flying creates no tension in the skylark so long as it occurs in "his own nest" will serve as a foundation for the speaker's thoughts about the soul and the body in the final three lines of the poem.

Though the *d* sounds are still prominent in lines 9-11, it is not so heavy. Whereas the caged skylark "drooped deadly" in line 7 because of the oppressive weight of its imprisonment, this skylark simply and happily chooses to "drop down" in its nest. In other words, the skylark's decision to stop flying and rest is an act of freedom—it is its own choice. The nest it settles in is its "own nest, wild nest, no prison." The wildness of the skylark is preserved by its nest, not violated by it. Meanwhile, the repetition of "nest" recalls the earlier repetition of "house" in line 2, but indicates again the turn that has taken place, since the nest is a symbol of the skylark's freedom. It is "wild," not "mean."

## LINES 12-13

*Man's spirit will be flesh-bound, when found at best,*
*But uncumberèd*

Lines 12-13 continue the speaker's turn and apply the new insight of the skylark's wild home to human beings as well. The speaker first notes that the difference between imprisonment and freedom is more subtle for human beings, for the "spirit will be flesh-bound"—the soul, the speaker is saying, will continue to be housed in the "flesh" or body. The use of "bound" still evokes a feeling of captivity, and yet the poem also implies that there will be a transformation of the spirit-body relation by affirming that the new condition will be the "best" form of the human being.

Given the previous allusion to Adam and Eve in line 3, this brief reference to the best state of human beings indicates the Christian belief of the resurrection in the afterlife. This resurrection is believed to involve a resurrection of the body as well as the soul and is also believed to be the highest state of existence for human beings. The intertwining of sounds in line 12 indicates this integration of the flesh and the spirit into the new form of the human being: "will be flesh-bound, when found at best." The pattern can be seen more clearly if it is separated: *w*, *b*, *f*, *b*; *w*, *f*, *b*.

The claim established in line 12 spills over into the first words of line 13 where the feeling of hesitation at regaining a connection between body and soul is again countered. This time, the speaker assures that though the body will be flesh-bound it will be "uncumberèd," which is a shortened form of the word "unencumbered." In other words, the body will still house the soul, but it will no longer be a burden to the soul.

Also note that though line 12 ends in a comma, the thought started in line 12 continues into line 13: the two lines are enjambed. As the speaker becomes comfortable with the idea of the connection between body and soul continuing in heaven, the lines of the poem also become connected through enjambment.

## LINES 13-14

*meadow-down is not distressed*
*For a rainbow footing it nor he for his bónes rísen.*

The poem ends with a final metaphorical image, which is used to demonstrate the way that a relationship can exist without restraint or limitation. The speaker suggests that, in the resurrected person in the afterlife, the spirit will be "flesh-bound" but "uncumberèd" in the same way that the "meadow-down" is "not distressed/ For a rainbow footing it." The vocabulary here is strange, so the image can be difficult to picture at first. "Meadow-down" refers to the delicate plants that grow along the edges of a meadow. "Down" is the word used to refer to the softest feathers on a bird's stomach and therefore indicates how delicate the plants are and how gentle the scene is. The base of the rainbow can be called its "foot." This term is used as a verb to describe the end of a rainbow coming to rest over, or on top of, a meadow.

Rainbows are massive but also weightless. The presence of one over a meadow enhances the beauty of the scene but has no direct effect on the "meadow-down." It is not a burden, and the speaker ends with the affirmation that the experience will be the same when human beings are resurrected and their "bónes rísen." The body will not weigh down the soul but will contribute to its elevation. The body, in other words, will be like the wild skylark's nest. It will contain the soul, but as a support and a home, not as a prison.

The use of "bones" in the final line connects this description of the resurrected body with the first description of the earthly body as a "bone-house" in line 2 of the poem. This repetition represents the continuity between the two bodies according to the Christian belief that it will be the same body in a transformed state. In another way, however, it also represents the final completion of the sonnet's turn from lament to hope. The bones that right now act as a cage will not need to be discarded for human beings to be "at best."

## SYMBOLS

### CAGED SKYLARK

Simply put, the caged skylark is a symbol of the oppressive limitations of the body. In line 3, "free fells" can refer to the free flesh that human beings used to enjoy in the Garden of Eden. The reference is ultimately an allusion to the biblical story of Adam and Eve who lived in the Garden of Eden in harmony with nature and themselves. That state, according to the story, was lost when Adam and Eve were punished with work, suffering, and death after committing the first sin. The cage, therefore, is the symbol of the body as the soul's limitations.

The caged skylark is, however, also a symbol of modern life. Because of its cage, the skylark cannot live as it is meant, nor can the spirit in its body. Around the time Hopkins wrote "The Caged Skylark," a new emphasis on the problematic nature of modern work had arisen in response to the Industrial Revolution. Work was still as difficult as before, but it now removed people from nature and put them in factories. The cage's metallic bars indicate as well the industrial association of the skylark's imprisonment. The poem's reflection on the problem of "day-labouring-out life's age" can thus be read as referring specifically to the demands of industrial or contemporary work.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 1-4:** "As a dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage, / Man's mounting spirit in his bone-house, mean house, dwells / That bird beyond the remembering his free fells / This in drudgery, day-labouring-out life's age."

### FREE SKYLARK

Though the title of the poem focuses on the problem of the skylark in its cage, lines 9-11 explore the symbol of a free skylark. As the caged skylark symbolized human beings trapped by both their own limited bodies and the demands of modern life, the free skylark symbolizes human beings free from those limits and demands in the afterlife. According to the Christian understanding of the resurrection that takes place after death, human beings will have bodies, but those bodies will be perfect and without limits. The freedom found in such a transformation will be twofold. First, the body will no longer hold the soul back from all that it was meant to do and be. Second, because the body will have no needs, human beings will have no reason to work to meet the needs they do not have. Consequently, they will be doubly free to do what their spirits choose.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 9-13:** "Not that the sweet-fowl, song-fowl, needs no rest — / Why, hear him, hear him babble & drop down to his nest, / But his own nest, wild nest, no prison. / Man's spirit will be flesh-bound, when found at best, / But uncumberèd"

### STAGE

The "stage," referenced in line 5, symbolizes the freedom of artistic creativity and its ability to transform even the limits of being human into the deep and powerful expressions of a person's soul. Being stuck on "turf" like human beings are, or on a "perch" like a caged skylark, does not impede the possibility of performing. The nature of captivity means that freedom is limited, but it does not mean that freedom is completely inaccessible. Instead, the poem suggests, freedom can be achieved momentarily through art, like when the skylark and the soul "sing sometímes the sweetest, sweetest spells." Art always works within certain limitations and, in fact, is capable of incorporating those limitations into the act of artistic expression. For instance, even in this poem, the strict standards of a sonnet's form, meter, and rhyme scheme are used in its creation.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 5-6:** "Though aloft on turf or perch or poor low stage / Both sing sometímes the sweetest, sweetest spells,"

### NEST

The skylark's nest symbolizes the concept of true and free nature. The skylark in its nest is free and at home. It can stay and leave as it chooses, and it even built the

nest for itself. The nest and the conditions it creates are, to put it simply, natural. It is made *of* nature with sticks and leaves. It is made *in* nature in a tree or a crack in a rock. It is even made *by* nature, since the skylark is a wild bird. The nest offers support without restriction, comfort without demand. It therefore strongly contrasts with the harsh metal bars of the cage and the life-exhausting requirements of industrial labor. The purpose of the nest as a symbol, then, is to show how good the natural order is and how wrong and violent the violation of it can be.

**Where this symbol appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 10-11:** "Why, hear him, hear him babble & drop down to his nest, / But his own nest, wild nest, no prison."

## POETIC DEVICES

### ALLITERATION

"The Caged Skylark" overflows with alliteration, but it is used to different effect in different moments. Primarily, the specific sound being alliterated determines the effect it has. In the first line of the poem, the first instance of alliteration occurs with "skylark scanted." The *sk* sound is fast and harsh and creates the impression that the skylark is skittering around its cage. In line 6, the same *s* sound occurs but without the harsh *k*, and the effect is remarkably different. Because the sounds surrounding the *s*'s are much softer, the overwhelming feeling is one of peace, and the line as a whole feels reflective and beautiful. In line 3, "free fells" is light and swift and creates the sense of airy freedom that the skylark seems to enjoy in its flight.

In tension with the softness of line 6 and swiftness of line 3, however, is the recurring alliteration of a heavy *d* in the poem. The best example of this alliteration is the phrase "droop deadly" in line 7. The *d*'s strike each time like a dull thud. They create feelings of tedious boredom, an air of oppressive sadness or the sense of a spirit broken by endless work and despair. In "The Caged Skylark" alliteration is used to enhance the feeling that the meaning of the line or phrase is already attempting to create.

**Where Alliteration appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "skylark scanted"
- **Line 2:** "Man's mounting"
- **Line 3:** "bird beyond," "free fells"
- **Line 4:** "drudgery, day-labouring-out"
- **Line 6:** "sing sometímes the sweetest, sweetest spells,"
- **Line 7:** "droop deadly"
- **Line 9:** "needs no"
- **Line 10:** "hear him, hear him," "drop down"

### ALLUSION

The allusion to the biblical story of Adam and Even in line 3 comes from the double meaning of "free fells." In one respect, the phrase refers to the open hills over which the skylark flies. In another, "fells" can refer to the body of human beings. The free body, especially so intimately connected with nature, recalls the state of harmonious existence enjoyed by Adam and Eve as the story is told in Genesis 1-3. According to this story, Adam and Eve existed in a state of freedom even from bodily pain. They disobeyed a command from God, however, and were subsequently kicked out of the Garden of Eden, and work, pain, and death were instituted as their punishment.

Yet just as the origin of life's hardship is described by a biblical story, the solution to this hardship is biblical as well. In line 12, the claim that "Man's spirit will be flesh-bound, when found at best" refers to the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ explained in the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. From the accounts of Jesus' appearances after his resurrection, an understanding of a body that no longer suffers the limitations of the current body was developed. With the hope of such resurrection, the speaker is confident that the body and soul will eventually come to find harmony and freedom together.

**Where Allusion appears in the poem:**

- **Line 3:** "beyond the remembering his free fells"
- **Line 12:** "Man's spirit will be flesh-bound, when found at best,"
- **Line 14:** "bónes rísen"

### ASSONANCE

Just as there is considerable alliteration in "The Caged Skylark," so there is considerable assonance. In line 1, a long *a* occurs twice in "dare-gale" and then again in "cage." The close connection between these two words offers a heightened sense of the contradiction they represent. Whereas the first word, "dare-gale," describes the natural state of the skylark flying boldly in impossibly strong winds, the cage represents its current state of captivity and confinement. The cage cancels the dare-gale.

In line 5, the assonance that connects "turf" and "perch" draws attention to the likeness between these two types of platforms and cements the similarity between the imprisonments of the skylark and the human being. Turf, which refers to the ground humans stand on, and the skylark's perch are the places the poor prisoners find themselves. And yet, the additional assonance in line 5 that runs through the *or*'s as well as "poor" sweeps the line into its final platform, the stage. The turf and perch, alike to one another, can also be a stage.

In line 12, the assonance that occurs between "flesh," "when" and "best" supports the speaker's affirmation of the resurrected body. If the flesh will still be present even in the highest state of existence that human beings will find after death, then the body must ultimately be good.

Throughout "The Caged Skylark," assonance is used to draw particular words into deeper connections and can alternatively reveal the tension or harmony between them.

**Where Assonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "dare-gale," "cage"
- **Line 4:** "This in"
- **Line 5:** "turf or perch or poor low stage"
- **Line 12:** "be flesh-bound,," "found," " ," "at best,"
- **Line 13:** "is," "distressed"
- **Line 14:** "his," "rísen"

## CAESURA

"The Caged Skylark" employs caesurae in a number of ways. Caesurae occur first to compound the importance of the word that precedes its pause. Many of these caesurae occur in relation to appositives, in which a word or phrase is used to rename a word or phrase occurring just previously. In line 2, "bone-house, mean house" disrupts the momentum created by the swift phrase "Man's mounting spirit" and also allows the second description of the human body as a "mean house" to stand out since it is surrounded by pauses. The terrible truth of the "mean house" breaks the movement of the "mounting spirit." The opposite effect occurs, however, in line 9 when the appositive is used to describe the wild skylark as a "sweet-fowl, song fowl." In this instance, the slow pace brought about by the caesura creates a sense of peace, an absence of hurry and an ability to linger and cherish the pleasant sights and sounds of the skylark.

The caesurae in lines 4 and 6 are also used to opposite effects. "[D]rudgery, day-laboring-out" creates a feeling of dread and tedium. The caesura is early in the line and separates an alliteration of two heavy *d*'s. The effect is slow and dull and gives the sense of a reluctant trudge. The "sweetest, sweetest spells" in line 6, however, is soft and satisfied. Again, the slowness it creates feels like savoring the beauty of a song and relishing the freedom and power of art.

In line 10, a caesura falls between the repetitions of the command to "hear him, hear him." In this case the "him" is the skylark, and the caesura as well as the repetition it splits is used to emphasize the importance of this command. It is authoritative and weighty and yet also has the air of a plea. It is not desperate but it knows that important insights lie in hearing the skylark, and it wants those insights to be had by all.

These caesurae are not the only ones in this poem but they are emblematic of the different ways that caesura are used in the poem to created and amplify effects.

**Where Caesura appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "bone-house, mean house, dwells"
- **Line 4:** "drudgery, day-labouring-out"
- **Line 6:** "sweetest, sweetest spells,"
- **Line 9:** "sweet-fowl, song-fowl, needs no rest"
- **Line 10:** "Why, hear him, hear him"
- **Line 11:** "own nest, wild nest, no prison"
- **Line 13:** "uncumberèd: meadow-down"

## CONSONANCE

Consonance in "The Caged Skylark" functions much like the alliteration and assonance do. In the consonance in line 1, the effect of the *k* or hard *c* in "skylark scanted" is sharp and fast and can give the sense of the potentially erratic movement of a skylark trapped in a cage. In line 2, the *s*'s found in the repetition of "house" and at the end of "dwells" tie the *s* in "spirit" into them, mirroring the poem's description of the way that the human spirit in life is entangled in the body. An *r* sound runs throughout all of line 8 and gives a sense of the energy being expended in the skylark's outburst. The *r*'s are not harsh, but they are strong, and indicate the power, even the panic, of the spirit's revolt. In line 9, however, the consonance turns to repeating a much softer *s*. This line is where the sonnet begins to turn from its problem to the solution, and the switch to a peaceful *s* allows a sense of calm to replace the panic of line 8. This same *s* occurs at the end of line 10 and throughout line 11, allowing the peace to continue to grow. Since this feeling is primarily associated with the skylark's nest it adds to the feeling of being settled like the skylark.

Consonance, therefore, is used to emphasize the connections between words and ideas or to create feelings of urgency and panic or feelings of peace and contentment.

**Where Consonance appears in the poem:**

- **Line 1:** "skylark scanted"
- **Line 2:** "spirit," "bone," "house," "mean," "house,," "dwells"
- **Line 5:** "aloft on turf"
- **Line 7:** "sómetimes," "cells"
- **Line 8:** "Or ," "wring their barriers in bursts of fear or rage"
- **Line 9:** "sweet-fowl, song-fowl, needs no rest "
- **Line 10:** "his nest"
- **Line 11:** "his own nest, wild nest," ", no prison"
- **Line 12:** "bound, when found"
- **Line 13:** "uncumberèd: meadow-down"
- **Line 14:** "footing it," "nor," "for," "his bónes rísen"

## DIACOPE

Diacope occurs throughout "The Caged Skylark" in appositives.

Grammatically, appositives are used to restate the noun that comes before them. Poetically, this act of restating is also a way to slow down the pace of a line and stack up the description of a particular object in order to heighten the intensity of its effect. Each description, however, does not simply repeat the object; rather, it adds a new element to the description in order to create a more complete picture of the object. In line 2, "bone-house, mean house" describes the human body. Describing the body as a "bone-house" already emphasizes a feeling of barrenness, and "mean house" adds to this the meaning of being ultimately impoverished, having barely enough to survive. A mean house is one in which supplies are scarce and conditions are harsh. By offering two compounding descriptions of the body, the speaker intensifies the feeling of the poverty of the body.

In line 9, however, diacope is used to expand the image of a free skylark. The description "sweet-fowl, song-fowl" is slow and peaceful. More than that, however, it incorporates the elements used in line 6 to describe a moment of peace and freedom when "[b]oth sing sometímes the sweetest, sweetest spells." By combining these terms to describe the skylark in the wild, the speaker shows that the free skylark enjoys the full freedom of flight and song. It also shows that the singing in line 6 is true freedom.

Finally, in line 11, diacope is used to describe the skylark's home as "his own nest, wild nest, no prison." This use of diacope emphasizes not only the importance of the nest to the skylark but also the connection between the skylark and nature. What is most important to the skylark is its wildness, its ability to fly, rest, and sing as it chooses.

In all of these instances, therefore, diacope is used to provide a more complete description of an object, but it is also used to emphasize the importance of what it describes. If it were not so important, it would not be worth describing so attentively.

**Where Diacope appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** “bone-house, mean house,”
- **Line 9:** “sweet-fowl, song-fowl,”
- **Line 10:** “ hear him, hear him”
- **Line 11:** “ own nest, wild nest”

## ENJAMBMENT

Though enjambment occurs a number of times in "The Caged Skylark," most of the lines of the poem coincide with the end of a phrase and so come to a natural pause despite there being no punctuation. This pause tends to diminish the effect of the enjambment. Perhaps the most effective use of enjambment in "The Caged Skylark," however, occurs across lines 7 and 8. These lines describe two possible reactions the skylark or the spirit may have to its prison. The first reaction described is a "deadly" sadness, a despair at being so deprived of freedom, but because of the enjambment at the end of the line, this first lethargic reaction gives way quickly to the frantic activity of the second. Contrary to the first response, which involves a loss of energy and action, the second response is a frenzy of rebellion against the bars of the cage. Without any pause or punctuation to separate the two lines, the speaker shows how quickly the two reactions can give way to one another. Sadness abruptly becomes desperation, and neither offer change or comfort.

**Where Enjambment appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 2-3:** “dwells / That”
- **Lines 3-4:** “fells / This”
- **Lines 5-6:** “stage / Both”
- **Lines 7-8:** “cells / Or ”
- **Lines 13-14:** “distressed / For”

## EPIZEUXIS

There is a single occurrence of epizeuxis in "The Caged Skylark." Line 6 describes the moment in which the poor prisoners may "sing sometímes the sweetest, sweetest spells." The repetition of "sweetest" contributes a number of effects to the moment the line describes. Doubling the description serves most directly to double the sweetness of the experience. It also heightens the contrast, however, with the descriptions of drudgery that precede line 6. These moments of song are all the sweeter for the way they provide a brief escape from the harsh reality of oppressive work. The repetition of "sweetest" also naturally slows down the speed of the line, which again contrasts with the previous occasions in the poem when a line's pace has been disrupted. In earlier instances, pauses were created for the sake of conveying the heavy weight of the work being borne or the overwhelming dullness of captivity—and the crushing captivity of dullness. The double "sweetest" here, however, opens the space to appreciate the song and the freedom it creates.

On the other hand, because the sweetness of this line is both preceded and followed by descriptions of pain and suffering, the slowness created by the epizeuxis also hints at a desire to make the enjoyment of the song last as long as possible. Describing the songs as "spells" acknowledges how fleeting they are. They can leave as quickly as a moment of intense emotion passes. To slow down the line, then, is to wish it not to leave, to wish to stay in that moment and not return to the harsh reality that returns once it is gone.

**Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:**

- **Line 6:** “sweetest, sweetest”

## EXTENDED METAPHOR

The first 8 lines of "The Caged Skylark" are one long extended metaphor comparing a caged skylark and the soul's

imprisonment in the body. The opening connection is the caged experience. Just as the skylark cannot fly as freely as it is meant to because of its cage, so the human spirit cannot rise at is meant to because of the body. The metaphor continues to include the various responses that the soul and the skylark would share in their respective prisons. Both, for instance, would be able to find a new form of freedom in artistic creation. This is the singing referred to in Line 6. And yet, both would come down from such liberating heights to find their cage intact and experience both crushing sadness and panic-inducing fear and anger.

Lines 9-11, however, offer an addition to this metaphor by considering the human spirit in light of a free skylark. With this new condition in mind, the speaker sees the freedom that human beings will some day be able to enjoy. Because there is no escaping the limits of the body in this life, however, the speaker looks forward to the new state that will be enjoyed in the life after death. According to the Christian hope of the resurrection of the body, the spirit will remain connected to the body, but the body will no longer suffer the limits it does in this life. The two, therefore, will exist in perfect freedom, like the skylark in the wild.

**Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-8
- Lines 9-11
- Lines 12-13

## KENNING

In kenning, an object becomes known not by its own name but by a distinguishing feature that the speaker wishes to emphasize. In line 2, the use of "bone-house" in place of "body" prioritizes a morbid image of the body. Bones are strong and make up the core structure of the body, but skeletons are associated more closely with death than life. Furthermore, they represent only the barest picture of a living being. "Bare bones" is even a phrase that means "the least amount possible." It is not an image of flourishing.

"Sweet-fowl" and "song-fowl," on the other hand, describe the skylark according to some of its most charming aspects. In addition, the sweetness of the skylark and its singing are connected in line 6 to describe a beautiful moment of freedom, in which the skylark, though caged, is able to transcend its captivity for a moment in song. By describing the skylark, then, as "sweet-fowl" and "song-fowl," the speaker shows that the skylark in the wild is free.

Finally, in line 13, the reeds and small plants that grow around a meadow are described by the phrase "meadow-down." This description evokes the full scene of the meadow and describes the delicate serenity of it as well. The down of the meadow is like a bird's downy feathers, which are so soft and comforting they can be used to stuff pillows. The use of "meadow-down," therefore, encapsulates both an image and a feeling through the use of kenning.

**Where Kenning appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "bone-house"
- **Line 9:** "sweet-fowl, song-fowl"
- **Line 13:** "meadow-down"

## PERSONIFICATION

The comparison between the caged skylark and the embodied spirit focuses so closely on the similarities between the two that it ultimately blurs their differences. As a result, the two are brought so closely together that the skylark seems to exhibit human characteristics. Primarily, in the second stanza, lines 5-8, the skylark and the human both exhibit feelings of intense of emotion, such as in lines 7 and 8, where the description of a deadly drooping implies a feeling of despair and the outburst that leads to the "wring[ing]" of "their barriers" is an act of "fear or rage."

It is not unusual for birds to exhibit the behavior described in this stanza, but the direct attribution of human emotion to the skylark steps into the realm of personification. By subtly blurring the distinction between the interior lives of human beings and skylarks, the speaker is able to show more profoundly and effectively the predicament that the two have in common. Their experience is shared so perfectly that their responses to it are identical.

**Where Personification appears in the poem:**

- **Lines 5-8:** "Though aloft on turf or perch or poor low stage / Both sing sometímes the sweetest, sweetest spells, / Yet both droop deadly sómetimes in their cells / Or wring their barriers in bursts of fear or rage."

## POLYSYNDETON

The single instance of polysyndeton in "The Caged Skylark" occurs in line 5 with the repetition of the word "or." This repetition quickens the pace of the line. Also, by nature of its meaning, "or" suggests that the items it connects can stand in for one another. In this instance, then, its repetition makes those items feel monotonous and unimportant. In particular, the assonance between "turf" and "perch" already makes them feel like they are describing the same thing, and the simple, insignificant "or" that separates them only confirms this feeling. The sameness of the turf and the perch serves to continue the comparison between the skylark's and the human being's situations. The turf belongs to the human, the perch belongs to the skylark. Both of them, however, can turn their respective places into a "poor low stage." In this way, the final "or" affirms again the convertibility between the words it connects. Just as

the turf and perch could be taken for one another, so either of them could be taken for a stage. In the end, this final exchange affirms the possibility of transformation, for it shows that the cage can be transformed—at least briefly—by the achievement of artistic freedom.

**Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:**

- **Line 5:** "turf or perch or poor low stage"

## SIMILE

There is a single occurrence of simile in "The Caged Skylark," which establishes the comparison between the skylark and the human soul that serves as the premise of the entire poem. This initial simile, then, over the course of the poem becomes more of an extended metaphor.

**Where Simile appears in the poem:**

- Lines 1-13

## SYNECDOCHE

Synecdoche occurs two times in the "The Caged Skylark." In each case, bones are used to refer to the whole body. In its first occurrence, it is part of the hyphenated word "bone-house." The use of "bone" to refer to the body offers an early sense of the poor power of the body to sustain the soul. At the start of the poem, the body is seen as the spirit's prison, and referring to bones in order to talk about the whole body is a way of presenting an image which is simply and dramatically lacking. In addition, because the skeleton is being compared to a bird cage, the reference to bone evokes the image of the rib cage. This offers the chance for the reader to see an even more physical connection between the caged skylark and the "caged" soul.

The second use of bones to refer to the body as a whole appears in line 14, and it serves to turn the early depiction of the body on its head. In the closing line of the poem, a final reference is made to the "rísen" "bónes" that the human will have "when found at best." These are the bones of the resurrected body. This body, according to Christian belief, will not lack in any of the ways the current body does. It will suffer no limitations at all. Because of this, it will be the soul's perfect partner. What was the sign of human poverty in the second line becomes the source of human hope in the last.

**Where Synecdoche appears in the poem:**

- **Line 2:** "bone-house"
- **Line 14:** "bónes"

## VOCABULARY

**dare-gale** (Line 1) - A word combination made up by Hopkins to describe having the characteristic of boldly flying in incredibly strong winds. It is a combination of the verb "to dare" and the noun "gale."

**skylark** (Line 1) - A small bird native to Europe and Asia that lives primarily in landscapes of hills and moors. In addition to its impressive flying, the skylark is known for its singing.

**scanted** (Line 1) - To confine to smaller or narrower boundaries. Also, to neglect or leave in an impoverished state.

**mounting** (Line 2) - Climbing or rising. In the poem, a "mounting spirit" is a spirit meant to ascend to ever greater heights.

**bone-house** (Line 2) - The human body. By use of the literary device synecdoche, the term "bone" is used to refer to the whole body. The word "house" refers to the fact that the body can be considered the dwelling place of the soul.

**mean** (Line 2) - Meager, lacking in proper sustenance, or existing in a poor state or inadequate conditions. A mean house is run down or broken down and cannot properly provide for those it shelters.

**fells** (Line 3) - There are two meanings for "fells." First, it refers to open hills or moorlands, where a skylark could have been seen flying. Second, it refers to the skin of an animal. In the poem, this second meaning refers specifically to the skin of human beings and the human body more generally. The phrase "free fells" is also a subtle reference to the biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 1-3. According to Hopkins' Christian beliefs, Adam and Eve's bodies in the Garden of Eden would have been free from illness, hunger, or the possibility of death (and therefore also the need to work to attain food or anything else). That state, however, has been lost and forgotten.

**drudgery** (Line 4) - A hard, oppressive, boring, and repetitive activity, especially work.

**day-laboring-out** (Line 4) - This large compound word—invented by Hopkins—describes the exhausting and discouraging process of expending all of one's life on work. It is meant to convey the way that the unrelenting necessity for humans to ceaselessly work in order to provide for themselves seems to drain time away.

**spells** (Line 6) - An enchantment. The word is used here to describe the way that the skylark's songs can enchant. It also refers, as in a "dizzy spell," to a fleeting moment of intense or overwhelming feeling.

**wring** (Line 8) - Twist or otherwise subject something to extreme distress, violence, or punishment. In the poem, the skylark wrings the barriers of its cage by thrashing against

them. In the poem, the word is also meant to include an element of the sound of ringing metal, since the skylark's frenzy could cause the metal bars of the cage to resonate.

**sweet-fowl** (Line 9) - Used to refer to the skylark. This description helps to shift the tone of the poem to one of peace and ease and to portray the endearing quality of the skylark. Also, "fowl" is another word for "bird."

**song-fowl** (Line 9) - The skylark. This description uses the fact that the skylark is known for its singing to describe it. "Fowl" is another word for "bird."

**flesh-bound** (Line 12) - Housed in the flesh; embodied. In the poem, "flesh-bound" refers to the Christian belief that human beings will still be both body and soul in the afterlife.

**uncumberèd** (Line 13) - A shortened form of "unencumbered." It means not burdened or hindered, free from weight and obstruction.

**meadow-down** (Line 13) - The small plants that surround a meadow. In the poem, "meadow-down" uses the reference of a bird's down feathers to describe a gentle, delicate, peaceful meadow scene. Down feathers are the softest feathers on a bird's body, and goose or duck down has been used in pillows.

**footing** (Line 14) - To come to rest on top of. To place one's foot upon. In this poem, the foot referred to is the base of the rainbow, which is placed over a meadow.

## FORM, METER, & RHYME

### FORM

"The Caged Skylark" is written in the form of an Italian or Petrarchan Sonnet. According to this form, the poem must be 14 lines and is divided primarily into two sections. The first section is an octave, which spans lines 1-8 while the second is a sestet that runs from line 9 to 14. The octave can be subdivided into two quatrains, lines 1-4 and 5-8, while the sestet can be subdivided into two tercets, lines 9-11, 12-14.

These divisions and subdivisions can be used to follow the course of the poem's development. Each stanza is constituted by one sentence each and presents an idea that is then built on by the one that follows.

1. The first quatrain introduces the premise of the poem: the comparison between the caged skylark and the soul "caged" in the body, and reflects on their common problem of confinement.
2. The second stanza describes the way that art can offer temporary joy, but also how the despair of imprisonment reasserts itself.
3. The first tercet of the sestet begins the sonnet's turn from problem to solution. In the first tercet, the speaker reflects on the behavior of a free skylark has a place where it can rest—its nest—which is not a prison, and which allows it to live as it is meant to.
4. In the final tercet, the speaker finds that the same is true of the human being, which will find true freedom when its body is resurrected in the afterlife.

In this way, the form of the sonnet is used to structure the course and development of the sonnet's themes.

### METER

In addition to Hopkins' often eccentric vocabulary, his experiments with meter are perhaps the most difficult aspect of his poetry to understand. Ordinarily, sonnets are supposed to follow the meter of iambic pentameter. This meter is known as an "accentual-syllabic" meter, meaning it has a specific number of accents *and* a specific number of syllables per line. Iambic pentameter has ten syllables per line, five of which are stressed, generally in the pattern of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Hopkins, however, in an effort to recover the purely accentual meter common in Old English poetry—which ignored the total number of syllables and focused solely on the number of stressed syllables in a line—developed what he called "sprung rhythm." In Hopkins' sonnets, therefore, his focus is on the number of stresses in a line and not the total number of syllables.

Hopkins' development of sprung rhythm was his attempt to align poetry more closely with the patterns of natural speech. This means, however, that he also developed a sophisticated system of major and minor stresses and what he called "outriding" syllables, which occurs when two syllables of alike sound occur side by side and so either are not counted in the meter or only count as one syllable since they would typically be blended in natural speech. Because of the intense detail of his meter, Hopkins often described at least some of the meter of his own poems.

In his own notebook regarding the meter of "The Caged Skylark," Hopkins called it "falling paeonic, sprung and outriding." Paeonic meter is an ancient Greek form that combines syllables into groups of four, one of which is accented. Hopkins is able to achieve this paeonic meter with his system of major and minor stresses. For example, the first syllables of the poem, "As a dare-gale" can be seen to start with two unstressed syllables and end with two stressed syllables, like so: As a **dare-gale**. But the stress over "gale" is not as strong as the stress over "dare." As such, it would be considered unstressed in Hopkins' paeonic foot.

Ultimately, Hopkins' experiments with meter met with varied amounts of success. His effort to conform more closely to the nuances of natural speech seems to have been his priority in places, but his attempts to justify that priority left his explanations feeling convoluted. His adoption of a more flexible

metrical pattern, however, allows him to control the pacing of his poem to the most minute of details, which allows him to accomplish a variety of effects. His use of outriding or "uncounted" syllables quickens the pace of a line, which can create a feeling of frenzy and panic or can lead to the feeling of a crashing halt when it runs up against two heavy accents. In the end, Hopkins' experiments can be seen as a forerunner of the free verse that rose to prominence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, around the time when the majority of his work was posthumously published in 1889.

### RHYME SCHEME

The rhyme scheme in "The Caged Skylark" follows the rhyme scheme standard to the Italian sonnet. This is especially true of the octave, which runs ABBA ABBA. The rhyme scheme for the sestet in Italian sonnets can be more variable. In this poem, it runs CCD CCD.

Though Hopkins' rhyme scheme is fairly traditional, his experiments in meter as well as his extensive use of alliteration, assonance, and consonance tend to shift attention away from the rhyming that takes place at the end of a line. Because of this, the end rhymes become simply part of an overwhelming web of repetition within the poem.

Perhaps the most important use of end rhyme in the poem occurs in the final line of each of the two tercets. All of the other rhymes involve four words: there are four A rhymes, four B rhymes, and four C rhymes. So the D rhyme that closes the two tercets is the only singular rhyming pair in the poem, which draws a direct and stronger connection between those two words. The contrast between them sums up the contrast between the octave and the sestet, between the problem and the solution. Thus, even though "The Caged Skylark" conforms to the sonnet's traditional rhyme scheme, that rhyme scheme is still used to convey the particular meanings of this sonnet.

## SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Caged Skylark" is ultimately anonymous, as the poem is presented in the form of direct speech or statement and does not offer a distanced reflection on who is speaking. What can be known about the speaker, therefore, can only come from what the poem itself implies. Thus, the speaker seems to be weary. Perhaps the best description, in fact, is "world weary." The speaker displays a feeling of bitterness and fatigue aimed at the hardship of life itself. In lines 1-8 the speaker seems to blame the body for these problems, implying that life's problems stem ultimately from the body's limitations. The brief allusion to the Garden of Eden locates those limitations as arising from the original sin of Adam and Eve, which led to their fall, expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and the punishment that meant that the human body would suffer pain and want and would therefore have to engage ceaselessly in work. While the speaker sees the promise of temporary joy through art, but does not see that joy as anything more than temporary in a life otherwise filled with draining work, anger, and despair.

The speaker, however, is not interested in giving up, and instead turns to look for hope. This hope does not offer a solution to the hardship experienced in this life. Rather, it finds hope in the promise of relief that the Christian concept of the resurrection offers. In this way, the speaker is someone who finds support in faith but nevertheless remains pessimistic about the apparent potential of this life on Earth.

## SETTING

The setting of "The Caged Skylark" is alternatively a cage or the human body. While this latter setting may seem strange, the poem is primarily an examination of the body as the dwelling place of human life. In this respect, the poem offers a bleak reflection that laments the body as a type of prison. It can further be argued that the speaker is moved by the particular situation of the human body as it is impacted by the 19th century Industrial Revolution, which Hopkins in general viewed as separating humankind from nature even as it pushed people into hard, mechanical labor.

The poem's view of the body is , however, also biblical. The speaker's understanding of the body is framed first by its reference to the Garden of Eden and the explanation that the source of life's hardship and the moment when the body became a prison is the punishment brought on by Adam and Eve as a result of their first sin. Second, it is framed by the Christian hope in the resurrection, in which it was believed that the body will still be the dwelling of the soul, but one that is transformed and without limits. Corresponding with this latter understanding of the body is the wild nest in which the skylark can live its free, fulfilled life.

## CONTEXT

### LITERARY CONTEXT

Poems about skylarks were not uncommon at the time when Hopkins was writing. Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote a poem called "To a Skylark" in 1820, 57 years before Hopkins composed "The Caged Skylark." In Shelley's poem, the speaker reflects on the skylark's flight and song and considers the connections between the skylark and the poet. It is also possible that Hopkins' phrase "day-laboring-out" was influenced by John Milton's 19th sonnet, in which the speaker asks, "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"

Hopkins himself wrote another poem about a skylark called "The Sea and the Skylark." In this poem, too, the skylark

represents the life-giving wildness of nature and is contrasted with the poor conditions of life that human beings have created for themselves. "The Caged Skylark" also connects to another of Hopkins' most famous works, "The Windhover," which is about a religious experience Hopkins had on a walk one morning when he saw a falcon flying in its early morning hunt. Through these poems it becomes clear that Hopkins felt a particular connection to nature and particularly to birds in flight. He saw in their movements and grace and freedom that evidently struck him deeply.

In terms of poetic style, Hopkins' sprung rhythm is derived from ancient Anglo-Saxon poetry, such as the Old English style used in *Beowulf*. Moreover, Hopkins' use of kenning was popular in Old English poetry as well. Finally, the paeonic meter that Hopkins uses to describe the pattern of "The Caged Skylark" was taken from ancient Greek verse and adapted to modern English.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Three historical factors can be highlighted for their influence on "The Caged Skylark."

First, Hopkins' vocation as a Roman Catholic priest clearly influenced the course of this poem, as the poem traces the problem of human hardship to Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden, and sees the end to human suffering as a function of resurrection in the after life. The problem is both understood and solved by specifically Catholic beliefs.

The second and third movements are intertwined. They are Romanticism and Industrialization. Hopkins wrote his poetry in the midst of the Romantic era, in which the concept of nature was developed in opposition to the problem of industrialization. Industry, which was rapidly changing the landscape and way of life in England in the mid 19th century, was seen by Romantic poets as cutting human beings off from nature. Nature, therefore, was thought of as the proper place for human beings. It was, ultimately, where they belonged, and it was also thought to be where they could find who they truly were. These convictions could perhaps best be summed up by the phrase: alienation from nature was alienation from the self. The problem of the caged skylark—cut off from its wild, natural home—was the problem that Romantics believed was being experienced by the modern, industrial human being.

# MORE RESOURCES

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- "Sonnet 19: When I consider how my light is spent" by John Milton — Compare Hopkins' "The Caged Skylark" with Milton's "Sonnet 19." (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44750/sonnet-19-when-i-consider-how-my-light-is-spent)
- Recitation of "The Caged Skylark" — Hear a full the poem read aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCIA3CSKVWg&t=12s)
- Gerard Manley Hopkins' Biography — Learn more about Hopkins' life and the formation and development that influenced his poetry. (https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gerard-Manley-Hopkins)
- Audio of a Skylark Singing — Hear the sound and energy of the skylark's song. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9iY_9SQz_GI)
- "To a Skylark" by Percy Bysshe Shelley — See the likenesses between Hopkins' "The Caged Skylark" and Shelley's "To a Skylark." (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45146/to-a-skylark)
- In-depth Analysis of Meter — A detailed breakdown of the complex meter in "The Caged Skylark." (https://resistingtheintelligence.wordpress.com/2016/10/15/the-caged-skylark/)

## LITCHARTS ON OTHER GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS POEMS

- God's Grandeur
- Pied Beauty

# HOW TO CITE

## MLA

James, Bradley. "*The Caged Skylark.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 1 Aug 2019. Web. 22 Apr 2020.

## CHICAGO MANUAL

James, Bradley. "*The Caged Skylark.*" LitCharts LLC, August 1, 2019. Retrieved April 22, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/gerard-manley-hopkins/the-caged-skylark.