Binsey Poplars by Gerard Manley Hopkins

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In *Binsey Poplars*, the poet mourns the loss of the aspen trees which grew along the river, a scene that he took in often, on his much-loved walks towards Binsey in Oxford. It is important to note that it is not simply the trees that he misses, but the whole scene of which they were part, where water, air and earth collided, to create a thing of wonder. Through the poem he seems to work through the emotions of grief and sadness, anger and finally wistfulness that this quietly glorious sight will never be available to future generations.

Structure and Form

The poem is set out in two stanzas and follows an innovative technique devised by Hopkins himself, known as 'sprung rhythm', a form of meter he derived from the rhythms heard in everyday speech and songs. In sprung rhythm the stress is usually on the first syllable and several unstressed syllables could follow. He also makes extensive use of internal rhyme and compound adjectives which lend the poem a certain urgency which effectively convey his sadness and shock that his beloved trees have been chopped down.

Binsey Poplars Analysis

Stanza 1

> *My aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled ,*
>
> *Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun*
>
> *All felled, felled, are all felled;*
>
> *Of a fresh and following folded rank*
>
> *Not spared, not one*

The poet's love of the aspens is instantly obvious as he addresses them as 'My aspens dear'. He immediately paints a strong visual image of the effect the aspens create as they lean over to meet each other over the width of the river. The metaphor of the 'airy cages' helps the reader to visualise the sunlight dancing through the leaves and reflecting on the water. It is impossible for the reader to rush reading or speaking these words aloud, again making us slow down and appreciate the scene.

This beautiful picture is followed by the monosyllabic line "Felled, felled, are all felled'. The meter here could be identified as spondaic, where every syllable in a line is stressed. This metrical unit is effective in showing his distress at such wanton destruction. He likens them to a line of soldiers summarily executed when he uses the word 'rank' in the line below, and the use of personification following line: 'Not spared, not one' reinforces this idea.

Hopkins was famous for his variations on meter and made-up words, and the following lines are a prime example of this:

> *That dandaled a sandalled*
>
> *Shadow that swam or sank*
>
> *On meadow and river and wind-wandering*
>
> *Weed-winding bank.*

Again, this long alliterative sentence is impossible to rush and conjures the image of one idling by the river, taking in the beauty of nature, perhaps dipping a toe in the gentle current. This is nature at its most benevolent, and thus its destruction is all the more cruel. The soft sibilance of 'shadow that swam or sank' lends a mellifluous quality which makes us imagine the reflections dancing on the water. He teases out the long 'a' sounds and the end rhyme of 'rank', 'sank' and 'bank' adding more musical sounds to complete the stanza.

Stanza Two

> *O if we but knew what we do*
>
> *When we delve or hew-*
>
> *Hack and rack the growing green!*

The second stanza begins with the apostrophe 'O' which instantly summons the readers' attention. It also mimics Christ on the cross as he calls to God his father, "Forgive them for they know not what they do'. This again shows the strength of emotion Hopkins feels at the loss of these trees, and reflects his strong religious convictions.

His tone turns to one of anger in the harsh consonance of 'Hack and rack the growing green!' The cacophonous internal rhyme of 'Hack and rack' stand out sharply from the long vowel sounds of 'growing green'. He has cleverly used the verb 'growing' to emphasise that these trees were living organisms, brutally slain. His use of the exclamation mark here highlights his disgust.

> *Since country is so tender*
>
> *To touch, her being só slender,*
>
> *That, like this sleek and seeing ball*
>
> *But a prick will make no eye at all,*

The poet has used the techniques of harsh language and repetition

He suggests that we, as humans, are incapable of seeing the bigger picture. We may think that we are making advances in technology, but if we are sacrificing the earth in the process it is all in vain. It suggests a lack of care and foresight for those in the future who will never know of this beauty. It is significant that he repeats the words 'hew and delve' from earlier in the stanza. They have an onomatopoeic quality which suggest digging into the earth and making indelible changes.

> *Where we, even when me mean*
>
> *To mend her we end her,*
>
> *When we hew or delve,*
>
> *After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.*
>
> *Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve*
>
> *Strokes of havoc únselve*

It pains the poet greatly that it takes such a short time for humans to destroy what has taken a life-time to grow and flourish. The trees have grown in accordance with nature and created this beautiful scene, but are so quickly obliterated. The word 'havoc' suggests chaos and a lack of control, for ultimately we humans diminish our own spiritual growth by these actions.

> *The sweet especial scene,*
>
> *Rural scene, rural scene,*
>
> *Sweet especial rural scene.*

The repetitive three final lines create a wistful tone, as though the poet's rage has subsided to a quiet sadness. They take on the tone of a prayer or incantation as he drifts into a reverie, remembering this 'Sweet especial rural scene.'

Ultimately the poet wants his readers to treat the earth with respect and awe. For in causing damage to nature, he feels we cause a disconnect with our own true selves.

Historical Context

Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote this poem in 1879, in response to the felling of a double row of aspen trees. During the Industrial Revolution swathes of countryside was destroyed to create railways, and Hopkins was dismayed to discover that the wood from these very trees was used to make brake pads for a local train company, whom he held responsible for carving up much local farmland.

Hopkins was a devout Jesuit, who wrote about nature as a way to show God's greatness, through the wonder of creation. His bold advances in poetry were often unappreciated by his Victorian contemporaries, and it was only in the early twentieth century that his genius was recognised. Hopkins died in 1889, aged only forty-four.

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