THE WINDHOVER
Gerard Manley Hopkins

To Christ our Lord

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

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,

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!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion

The dedication to Christ is important because address Him
directly and makes him part of the poem.

This morning I saw (I caught - Hopkins doesn’t say “I saw”
but he uses a more important verb to describe how the poet
saw one of these birds in its hovering) the servant (minion:
isa term for favourites or protégés, especially those of a
monarch or prince at a royal court) of the morning, (who is)
the dauphin, or crown-prince of the Kingdom of Daylight
(king-dom....dauphin - these two words give a sense of
royalty: “dauphin” is related with the French court, literally
is the title of the eldest son of the King of France), a
falcon drawn by the dappled colors (dapple /screziato) of
dawn (dapple-dawn-drawn: letteralmente = screziato-alba-
disegnato; this is a Modernist element, an artificially made
adjective).

I CAUGHT this morning morning’s minion: this line
presents the alliteration of m/n, that gives the impression
of movement repeated (which recalls the movement of
the bird’s flight);

The Falcon is riding across the rolling level, with steady
air (aria ferma) beneath him, between him and the ground.

High up in the sky (High there/in alto nel cielo), in his
ecstasy he halted with his wings as if he were pulling back
on a horse’s reins (how...wing/come volteggiava sulla
redine dell’ala increspata - wimpling = rippling). Then, he
would launch himself again on swing (in bilico); the
exclamation mark is a Modernist element.

[In the same way that] a skater’s heel smoothly sweeps
around a curve [when skating figures] (As...bow-
bend/come la lama del pattino descrive dolcemente una
curva), the bird’s hurling itself(hurl/slanco) against the
wind and then gliding (planata) with it, rebuffed the force
of the wind (respinge il vento). My heart (the poet’s heart),
which had been in hiding (then, having described the riding
and swing of the bird in the wind, the poet returns to
himself), stirred itself - became excited for the bird’s
achievement (achieve(ment)/perfezione: here the poet
uses a verb as a noun; is an other Modernist element) and
power, for its mastery (padronanza) of natural forces.

The transition between octave and sestet comes with the
statement in lines 9-11 that the natural (“brute”) beauty of
the bird in flight is but a spark in comparison with the glory
of Christ, whose grandeur and spiritual power are “a billion
times told lovelier, more dangerous.”

Brute beauty is an assonance. It means not “brutal”,
except in the most literal sense: beauty of a creature. The
brute force of the hawk becomes brute beauty.

Buckle/si uniscono: The critics gave this verb various
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilio.

Theme: Hopkins wrote this sonnet in 1887 and he said that it was: "The best thing I ever wrote" (Letters).
The windhover is a bird (a kestrel) with the rare ability to hover in the air, head to wind. The ecstatic flying of the bird stirs the poet's heart. In the combination of beauty, strength, and glory which the poet sees in the bird, he sees an emblem of the beauty, strength, and glory of Christ. It is a poem of meeting God, Christ, in the flight of the bird. And then, at the end, reflecting on more ordinary beauties which occur in the created world (in the last sestet, the plough and the embers).

Form: This sonnet is composed by an octave and a sestet. The rhyme scheme is: ABBACDCDCD.
This poem shows the skilful innovations which were to have considerable influence on later modern poetry. The confusing grammatical structures and sentence order in this sonnet contribute to its difficulty, but they also represent a masterful use of language. Hopkins blends and confuses adjectives, verbs, and subjects in order to echo his theme of smooth merging. Very important is the "-ing" ending to the poem's rhyme scheme; it occurs in verbs, adjectives, and nouns, linking the different parts of the sentences together in an intense unity. The Windhover is written in "sprung rhythm," a meter in which the number of accents in a line are counted but the number of syllables does not matter. This technique allows Hopkins to vary the speed of his lines so as to capture the bird's pausing and racing. The poem slows abruptly at the end, pausing in awe to reflect on Christ.