
- **“God's Grandeur” Summary**

- The speaker describes a natural world through which God's presence runs like an electrical current, becoming momentarily visible in flame-like flashes that resemble the sparkling of metal foil when moved in the light. Alternately, the speaker describes God's presence as being like a rich oil (such as olive oil), whose true power or greatness is only revealed when crushed to its essence. Given this powerful undercurrent of evidence of God's presence in the world, the speaker asks, why do human beings not heed God's divine authority? The speaker starts to answer his own question by describing the state of human life: the way that humanity over the generations has endlessly walked over the ground, and the way that industry and economic pursuits have damaged and corrupted the landscape such that it looks and smells only of men (and not of God). Not only has the land been stripped bare of the natural things that once lived upon it, but even the shoes that people now wear have cut off the physical connection between their feet and the earth they walk on.

And yet, the speaker asserts, nature never loses its power, and deep down life always continues to exist. Though the sun will always fade into the darkness of night in the west, morning will always follow by springing up over the edge of the horizon in the east. The source of this constant cycle of regeneration is the grace of a God who guards the broken world much like a mother bird uses its body to watch over and keep warm its eggs and hatchlings.

- **“God's Grandeur” Themes**

- **God, Nature, and Man**

The poem's very first line establishes the profound connection between God and nature that the speaker explores throughout "God's Grandeur." God is not connected to nature merely because God *created* nature. Rather, the speaker describes God as actively

suffused within nature, as an ever-present "charge" running through it. Further, by describing God's grandeur as being something that will "flame out," or as being something as tangible as the oil that oozes from a crushed olive, the speaker makes an additional claim: that human beings can perceive, contemplate, or even interact with God through nature. The speaker reveres nature not only because it is a divine creation, but also because it is a direct conduit between humanity and God.

The belief in such a deep link among God, nature, and humanity explains the speaker's despair about how humanity is ruining the natural world. In destroying nature ("sear[ing]", "smear[ing]", and "blar[ing]" it), humanity is destroying God's creation and severing its own connection to God. Even worse, humanity is not only destroying nature, but replacing the pristine sights, sounds, and smells of the natural world—and God's "charge" within it— with the "smudge" and "smell" of human beings.

At the same time, nature's connection to God gives the speaker hope: because it is the creation of an omnipotent God who continues to watch over the world, nature can never be obscured or ruined by human beings. The natural cycles of life and death (implied by the references to sunset followed by sunrise), and the fact that God is still fulfilling his "charge" to protect nature (the way a mother bird "broods" over an egg), give the speaker confidence that nature will endure humanity's plundering and be reborn. Yet the speaker seems unsure about humanity's own place within nature's endless cycles: it's unclear if the speaker's vision of a reborn world includes humanity or not.

- **Industry and Destruction**

Hopkins wrote "God's Grandeur" in 1877, in the midst of the Second Industrial Revolution, which was a period of rapid technological advancement, including the expansion of factories, railroads, and electrical power. While the Second Industrial Revolution had many positive aspects, such as improving standards of living and loosening the social restrictions that blocked the lower classes from rising, it also had a

brutal impact on nature: clear-cutting and mining for resources decimated the landscape; pollution from factories and trains darkened the air and water; and growing urbanization replaced countryside with cities and suburbs.

In short, the rise of industry came at the expense of the natural world. In lines 5-8, the speaker of "God's Grandeur" laments the destruction of nature and the reckless way that humanity is engaging in this destruction. The repetition of "have trod" in line 5 captures the unceasing and almost mindless way that humanity has worn down the earth over countless generations. Hopkins's expressive—or even graphic—choice of the words "seared," "bleared," and "smeared" conveys Hopkins's disgust at how "all" has been corrupted and destroyed by humanity's relentless "trade" and "toil." The rise of industry has caused nature, once pristine and free of the unnatural stains of mankind, to be marred by "man's smudge" and "man's smell."

Finally, in line 8, the speaker notes how the blind pursuit of economic growth has made humanity unable to even recognize the destruction that the rise of industry has left in its wake. The earth has been laid bare by industrial development, but people can no longer even feel the ground beneath their feet because they are wearing shoes that symbolize the mass production of the industrial world. In "God's Grandeur," the speaker describes a double tragedy: how humanity destroyed nature and its connection to God, and how the destruction is so complete that humanity can't even recognize what it has lost.