Gerard Manley Hopkins was born in 1844 to devout Anglican parents in Essex, England; an environment that significantly shaped his world view, and specifically, his poetry. While he grew up in a religious home, he was by no means un-cultured. He had very artistic family members: two of his brothers were painters, his father wrote an unpublished novel, and many of his relatives engaged in various artistic activities. His mother, also highly educated and deeply involved in the arts, played an essential role in his upbringing. At eight years old, Gerard and his family moved to a town outside of Essex – to an environment that they felt would be more conducive to their religious ideals. England was in the midst of the industrial revolution and the Hopkins’ parents felt that they could not raise their children religiously and artistically amongst the thick hustle and bustle of the expanding city. Gerard went on to study at Oxford University and at this time began exploring his religious beliefs. He eventually joined the Catholic Church and later became a Jesuit priest. Scholars and analysts have argued that his short life was fraught with melancholy and that he was distinctly unhappy throughout his years in the strict Jesuit order; away from his friends and home in England while teaching in Ireland. He even appears to have suffered from “homoerotic” feelings. Yet, his dying words were “I am so happy, I am so happy. I loved my life.” His iconic masterpiece, The Windhover, is a grand illustration of his devotion to Christ and the joy and comfort he received from his beliefs in the midst of what were otherwise unpleasant circumstances. Another of his great works, God’s Grandeur, reflects his awe for nature and God’s majesty. These poems seem to reflect a worldview where all that is good comes from God, and is embodied in nature: that man need only to turn from his often sordid, shallow constructions and revel in the glories of the divine.
"God’s Grandeur" is, to the modern eye, a relatively ambiguous poem. Hopkins uses analogies and metaphors whose current connotations lean toward the negative, while he clearly intended them to instill wonder and curiosity in his reader. In this poem, he compares God’s power to oil and electricity – works of men which at the time were cutting edge technologies. To Hopkins, witnessing these technologies must have seemed like peering through a tiny window into the magnificent world of God – much as we would think of the Hubble telescope or deep-ocean submarines today. Today, when “oil” has become synonymous with BP and tar-choked birds and foil “conjures” images of left-overs and Halloween costumes, these words lost their intrigue in our current eyes. Hopkins paints an intensely visual picture for his readers in an attempt to show how humans have left the natural world (and by allusion, God’s presence) behind in the vain search for ... what, money? The text illustrating this is effective and intriguing:

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

Hopkins also uses irony to illustrate man’s disconnect from divine nature: the soil has become bare, instead of man’s feet (as they once were). As man “progressed” and began wearing shoes, he symbolically separated himself from God and nature. Now the soil is bare – naked before man’s unending quest for modernization. All creation is now stained by man’s sins. And yet, Hopkins’s poem is not meant to reduce the reader to apocalyptic tears at the sorry plight of our once Edenic planet. He spends the second half of this Italian sonnet explaining how God and his creations have nevertheless prevailed despite man’s best efforts to spoil them. His visual diction in the sestet draws the reader in and awakens in him a yearning desire to connect with those lost natural things. Intriguingly, the poet uses distinctly earthen colors and tones: brown,
black, “deep down things,” rather than the bright and flashy to illustrate the still- living nature of the earth. The final line features a metaphor between the Holy Ghost and the rising sun which seems to argue that God still watches over mankind and has prepared fertile earth in which his human seeds can sprout. If man will but throw off his proverbial shoes, he can again become a Godly creature – furrowing into the “deep down” earth and drinking in the sunlight of the Spirit – regaining the depth and divine nature he once had.

The poem “The Windhover” dovetails with God’s Grandeur – taking a more detailed and specific look at the glory of Jesus Christ and His all-powerful redemption. Without this redemption, men could not return to the nature God had prepared for them – as alluded to in God’s Grandeur. It was this poem, The Windhover, which Hopkins regarded as his greatest work, though it was not published until 1918, some thirty years after his death. The Windhover is filled with Hopkins’ signature wonder, this time directed at a Windhover (also known as the Common Kestrel) - a type of falcon. Hopkins admires the beauty and grace of this amazing bird and uses it a metaphor for Christ. The first stanza is devoted entirely to a visual representation of this bird in flight and the poet’s awe at its perfect and inspiring nature. This stanza is a wonderful example of Hopkins’ renowned skill at imagery. And yet this stanza is not merely a picture of a falcon, but more significantly, of the author’s love and admiration for this fantastic creature as shown in the last line “My heart in hiding / Stirred for a bird,—the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!” The second and third stanza deal more specifically with the technicalities of Christ’s redeeming grace. As Christ descended below all things to save mankind from sin and sorry, so too this Windhover suddenly dives in search for prey; not with menace or hungry eyes, but rather with valor, pride, and plume. In the third stanza, a plow, dirt,
and embers are used to represent Christ and us – the fallen children of God. It is through Christ’s Atonement – his plowing the earth of our souls, that we are able to grow and bring forth fruit. And embers, now smoldering gray and black, when broken open blaze gold-vermillion; intimating great worth of our souls, and the blood paid in sacrifice to save them. The Windhover is a captivating poem that illustrates Christ’s redeeming power through nature, a power necessary to return us to the divine nature God imbued us with long ago.

Hopkins’ poetry is something that is new to me, but also something I instantly liked. His constant use of vivid imagery and natural themes appeals greatly to me. I enjoy that the poems are readable on a purely surface level as interesting portraits of nature, of man, of windhovers and sunrises. Moreover, they can go much deeper and delve into the complexity and wonder involved in the human soul and it relationship to God its maker. I find his poems both entertaining and enlightening. Too often these days we are bombarded with poetry that is crass or purposefully enigmatic – poetry meant to shock or stump rather than educate and enlighten. Hopkins’ poetry does the latter; casting a revealing light on the world of the reader ready and willing to dig deeper and read carefully. It is hard not to come away from his poems with a renewed and heightened sense of the surrounding world and its awesome power and beauty. His poetry is a treat for the senses and food for the soul.