



*Journal of Advances and  
Scholarly Researches in  
Allied Education*

*Vol. X, Issue No. XX,  
Oct-2015, ISSN 2230-7540*

**REMEMBERING THE EXCELLENCE OF GERARD  
MANLEY HOPKINS: A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF  
“WRECK OF DEUTSCHLAND”**

AN  
INTERNATIONALLY  
INDEXED PEER  
REVIEWED &  
REFEREED JOURNAL

# Remembering the Excellence of Gerard Manley Hopkins: A Brief Analysis of “Wreck of Deutschland”

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**Abstract –** *The Wreck of the Deutschland was Hopkins’s, ‘first major poem written in ‘sprung rhythm’. Herein is contained a brief analysis of this heart moving poem and the impact it has created in the minds of many readers down the ages. The authors in the opening paragraphs of this article have made a concerted attempt to bring out some parallelism from the Book of Psalms and also the theological aspect of innocent suffering. This concept of human suffering seems deeply embedded in this particular poem of Hopkins and this is what the authors wish to portray for their readers. We have also highlighted the various aspects of the three streams of suffering that Hopkins talks about in this epic poem. The three sufferings are brought out in this manner, Hopkins own suffering at conversion, the suffering of the ship wrecked people especially the nuns on the ship and finally delving into the sufferings of Christ. God the supreme who is good and wishes that good also takes place in the lives of human beings and at the same allows us to suffer is a persistent curiosity arising in the minds of all humankind. And this is what forms one of the many crucial cruxes into the deeper understanding of the theology of Christianity. Going on further the authors have brought to the attention of the readers, the juxtapositioning done by Hopkins regarding this concept of human suffering versus the travails experienced of the nuns in the ship wreck. In connection to this discourse Hopkins mentions and brings into picture the deeply revered catholic saint and spiritual personality Fr. St. Francis as a type of Christ to drive home this aspect of innocent suffering. Finally towards the end of this article we wish to focus on the plight of the nuns.*

**Key words:** Falk Law, Parallelisms, Prosody, Acrostic, Sprung Rhythm, Tumultuous, Reminiscence, Epoch, Juxtapositioning, Retrospection, Egging, Incongruable, Luminaries, Cruxes, Oddity, Obscurity.

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## INTRODUCTION

This poem was rendered “To the happy memory of five Franciscan Nuns, exiles by the Falk law who met their watery fate between midnight and morning of December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1875”- as the title aptly elaborates. It is acclaimed as one of the masterpieces of Gerard Manley Hopkins. This poem consists of 35 stanzas with 8 lines each making it the longest of Hopkins’s poems. As we delve deeper into the stanzas, what strikes the readers is that there are certain aspects of parallelisms of different strains with other genres of literature. The scholarship of Hopkins has sailed vast miles from the days of its inception in the 20’s where readers in the realm of scarcity of expository material were left to fumble through the maze of innovative

syntax and prosody to grasp what promised to look like an absolutely new outlook on nature and living.

As mentioned earlier one such parallelism that can be accrued is Psalm 119. This particular Psalm happens to be the longest chapter in the Holy Bible, with twenty two sections of eight verses each. It is worth mentioning that these sections were written in acrostic writing with twenty two Hebrew alphabets in succession. Moving on further on has to bear in mind this poem was Hopkins ‘first major poem written in sprung rhythm’. The details of the narration of the wreck are of vital significance due to their indelible impact it had upon the mind of this great poet. A brief account may be presented at this juncture with available data as to the sequence of events that followed. This so named Deutschland was a transatlantic North German Lloyd steamship. It was

three hundred and twenty eight feet long and built to accommodate three thousand tons of luggage and around one hundred and twenty passengers with a crew of ninety members. The story so goes on that there were five Franciscan Nuns among the travelers aboard this ill-fated ship on their way to Canada. So be it history tells us that were not only persecuted for their religious faith under Otto Von Bismarck's oppressive rule but were also exiled by the Falk Laws. The ship ran into heavy violent weather. Heading onwards into the English Channel after a tumultuous day, it was haunted by darkness and snow. The storm went unabated and in poor visibility the ship drove further into the storm. It was not making the desired headway to its destination. They were already many miles of coast. The winds driving them onwards 'treacherous shoals'. So the narration continues till fate befalls them, where about one hundred and fifty survivors were rescued, six four lives lost and the five nuns accounted among the dead.

The deep intensity of the tragedy was that the Deutschland had been on the bank for full thirty hours and the irony was that the people on shore had done nothing to initiate a rescue. For the entire tale that it was worth telling, this tragic wreck of the Deutschland had shocked the land and shaken the conscious of the people. With this before us, thus so far one can infer in addition to the overtones of this calamity in the natural world there were also serious implications in the religious world, which stand out as a severe test to one's faith. In sequel to this we should be aware of the aspect that it raises one of the most burning theological problems of all times namely, 'the problem of innocent suffering'. Let's see at this juncture a brief reminiscence of this theological theme. All of us don't like suffering. However suffering seemingly forms a part of our humane life. There is no truer statement in the Bible than that which says "Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7). Hopkins talks of three sufferings in this poem. Hopkins own suffering at conversion, the suffering of the ship wrecked people especially the nuns on the ship and finally the sufferings of Christ.

If we happen to dig deep into the theology of Christianity, it often speaks of it being God who 'seeks out' human beings rather than the other way round. "While we were yet sinners he died on the Cross for us" says the Bible. His mission was to seek and save sinners. This aspect for some people is as far from comfortable experience. For Hopkins conversion seems to have been a difficult experience, which happened entirely almost against his personal wish and will. Still he was led on to a thoughtful commitment of faith and spirituality. This account of his spiritual and mental anguish can be observed in stanza 2 and 3 of this epoch churning poem. He tastes sheer trembling in this very experienced terror 'the swoon of the heart' at 'the hurl of thee trod', vertigo even, as if he were being thrown from a great height. However having succumbed to the will of God, 'fled with a fling of the heart', he experienced mercy 'but you were dove winged' rather than punishment or

a sense of entrapment. After all this indeed he senses a deep feeling of exhilaration. The suffering of the ship wrecked people comes into his perspective. The suffering of the nuns is more complex to him, since they have been expelled from their native country and so they are already suffering for their faith, rather suffering to bring her to faith. As is true to the basic tenants of Christianity death does not have the same terror for her. Christianity believes that death does not separate believers from God. One has to understand here that the nun's concern is to make a 'good death', if that is God's will. In fact as seen in this crises Hopkins believes she has a vision of Christ actually coming over the storm to take her. The other four nuns are scarcely talked about but in the eyes of Hopkins they might have died similar 'good deaths!' As we postulate at this particular stage of this poem, it is for everyone else on the ship that Hopkins feels extremely concerned. His conviction and faith is that if they did make last minute repentances perhaps inspired by the nun's cry then God's mercy would be extended to them ('a mercy that out strides / The all of water').

There is a persistent curiosity arising in human beings as to how God can be all powerful and all good in the face of such human suffering. Down the centuries, this has been a great enigma for many scholars and poets, Hopkins being prominent among them. It was quite recently that atheist Christopher Hitchens who went to his heavenly reward, wrote "God is not Great". His works leaned heavily on this theme of suffering in the world to deny God's existence. This notion of the concept of suffering takes us into a deep retrospection of Christian faith in an all good and all powerful God. It is natural when people face extreme suffering; they ask "where is God"? As it stands today even then during his time also Hopkins senses would have surely thought along these lines as well. An account of human suffering would not suffice for Hopkins without linking it back into the concept of Christ's suffering. He goes on to mention St. Francis as a type of Christ. Whatever Hopkins may have felt, Christ felt the same but much more so ('the driven passion and frightful sweat').

Every individual needs to keep in mind that there is suffering that is deserved and suffering that is innocent-not deserved. Hopkins mind one assumes might have been heavily laden with this phrase 'not deserved' egging him on to give birth to this excellent masterpiece born of his poetic genius. The chief nun was further reported to have murmured out "My God, my God make haste, make haste"- crying till the last moments of her destiny and fate, when she and the other nuns were swept out to sea. It has been aptly chronicled that none of them had shown any fear but faced their ultimate end with a deep sense of 'amazing composure'. Hopkins was deeply touched and greatly moved by the events of this tragedy. A deep feeling of remorse and grief engulfed him. The plight of those nuns had ignited a spark on his thoughts. This little spark leads him to give shape to this poem. Watt quotes Hopkins from one of his own letters, "The

Deutschland would be more generally interesting if there were more wreck and less discourse". The wreck was just 'intended to be the occasion of the poem rather than its whole subject'- and this may be substantially revealed by a glimpse of the poem. The poem from the first ten stanzas never touches the ship wreck at all. It is at stanza twelve that the narration begins to slowly take form and shape. We can incur by what Watt has to say that at this particular stage, there were a series of intermittent interruptions, ultimately yielding place altogether to 'the other business of the poem'. Initially this poem had an inauspicious response from within and without. It was readily rejected on account of it being 'unreadable' and 'incongruable'. The editor of a Jesuit magazine Fr. Coleridge denied acceptance for its publication. A host of other poetic luminaries and minds like Coventry Patmore, Yvor Winters, J.F. Cotter and Robert Bridges ignored it on account of it being full of 'oddity and obscurity'. It was only later on that after much soul searching and intense debating of Hopkins merits a due amount of respect was accorded to him as one of England's finest poet. Along with this followed the Wreck of the Deutschland in tow.

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