1.1 A BRIEF SUMMARY OF HOPKINS’ LIFE:

Born in Stratford, Essex, on July 28, 1844, Gerard Manley Hopkins was the eldest of nine children born to Manley Hopkins and Kate Smith Hopkins, “both of whom were talented and who encouraged artistic expression in their children” (Patterson, p. 1). His father, who held the position of Consul-General of the Hawaiian Islands during Hopkins’ childhood, published several prose works, among them Hawaii: an historical account of the Sandwich Islands, prefaced by Bishop Wilberforce (New York: Appleton, 1869). He also published two collections of poetry, The Philosopher’s Stone (1843) and Spicilegium Poeticum (1892), and collaborated with his younger brother on a third, Pietas Metrica (1849), “though his [poetry] never rose to the heights of his son’s” (Lahey, p. 1).

In 1852, the family moved to Hampstead, London, where Gerard Manley Hopkins attended a preparatory day-school. From September 1854 to April 1863, when he won a scholarship to Balliol College, he attended Cholmondeley Grammar School in Highgate, where, at fifteen, he won the 1860 Poetry Prize for a 135-line poem in Spenserian stanzas, entitled The Escorial (P4, poem 1, pp. 3–7) and dated “Easter 1860” (P4, p. 245). From April 1863 to July 1867 he was a student of Balliol College, Oxford, where he numbered Walter Pater among his tutors, Benjamin Jowett, Edward Bouvier Pusey, and Matthew Arnold among his lecturers, and Edward Bond, William Macfarlane, Edward Urquhart, Vincent Coles, and particularly William Addis, Robert Bridges, and Alexander Baillie among his friends.

Having had a relatively moderate High Church upbringing, Hopkins soon joined “the High Church section at Balliol”; in June 1863, he was one of some 900 undergraduates who signed a petition against the abolition of obligatory subscription to the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England. Half a year later, on December 8, 1863, “Hopkins, Addis, and Bridges were among six new members proposed and seconded” for election to the Brotherhood of the Holy Trinity (JP, “Notes to Early Diaries”, p. 305). This Brotherhood was a society of active Tractarians, followers of Dr. Pusey and led by Canon Liddon; but though he was tempted to join, Hopkins, contrary to Addis and Bridges (both elected on January 28, 1864), never did: “Home ties were probably still too strong; later, his own scruples and rules of asceticism may well have gone beyond those of the Brotherhood” (JP, “Notes to Early Diaries”, p. 306).

At this time, Hopkins still wanted to be a painter, but during his Oxford period his interest was more and more deflected towards poetry, and later towards religion. On July 10, 1863, he wrote to Baillie: “I am sketching (in pencil
chiefly) a good deal. I venture to hope you will approve of
some of the sketches in a Ruskinese point of view [...]"
(FL, CXX, p. 202), but at the same time he was writing a
good deal of poetry, and in a letter written to Baillie
shortly after August 1, 1864, he says: "I have now a more
rational hope than before of doing something—-in poetry
and painting" (FL, CXXIII, p. 214). In June 1864, Hopkins
started working on Pilate (P4, 80, pp. 116-19), his first
poem on a religious subject, and towards the end of July he
wrote Barnfloor and Winepress (P4, 6, pp. 16-17), the first
poem in which we hear his personal religious note. In August
he also started making notes on the language of poetry (JP,
p. 38; see Ch. 2, pp. 8-9). On November 21, 1864, the Classic-
al Moderation examinations started, and Hopkins gained First
Class Honours in Greek and Latin literature.

In 1865, Hopkins underwent the great spiritual crisis
that finally brought about his conversion to Roman Catholic-
cism on July 17 or 18, 1866; he was received into the
Catholic Church by John Henry Newman on October 21, 1866.
It is during this spiritual crisis that we get the first
hint of what the sonnet would come to mean to Hopkins: never
having tried his hand at this verse form before, "Hopkins
steps without strain into a considerable mastery of the
traditional sonnet-form" (Gardner, vol. 2, p. 79), and
writes no less than twelve sonnets (and the octave of a
thirteenth) between the beginning of March and the end of
October 1865. In February 1865, he met Digby Dolben, a
young poet and religious enthusiast, "who may have awakened
[his] intensive spiritual questioning during these months"
(Patterson, p. 11). Although this was Hopkins' only meeting
with him—-Dolben was drowned, at the age of 19, in 1867—-
"[Dolben] must have been a good deal with him, for Gerard
conceived a high admiration for him, and always spoke of
him afterwards with great affection". On March 12, 1865,
Hopkins notes: "A day of the great mercy of God" ("Early
Diaries (1865)", JP, p. 58), and two weeks later: "I con-
fessed on Saturday, Lady Day, March 25" ("Early Diaries
(1865)", JP, p. 59). From that day onwards till the end of
the early diaries (January 1866) he writes daily notes for
confession, which editors have consistently—and rightly—
declined to print. Hopkins' regular confessor was H.P.
Liddon (JP, p. 322), but on at least one occasion he con-
fessed to E.B. Pusey. The further course of his spiritual
crisis can be traced not only in his diaries and letters,
but also in the early poetry; it culminates first in the
bitter contrition of "Therefore how bitter, and learnt how
late, the truth!" (See how Spring opens with disabling cold,
P4, 17, 1. 14, p. 27; see Part 2, Ch. 9, pp. 150-52), and
then in the triumphant certainty of "I have found the dom-
inant of my range and state—-/Love, O my God, to call Thee
Love and Love" (Let me be to Thee as the circling bird, P4,
19, 11. 13-14, p. 28; see Part 2, Ch. 10, pp. 168-72)—-
the former written on June 26, the latter on or around Octo-
ber 22, 1865 (see Ch. 3, p. 31). Although it took Hopkins
final decision to leave the Church of England and become a
Roman Catholic, he wrote to his friend Urquhart: "[...] al-
though my actual conversion was two months ago yet the
silent conviction that I was to become a Catholic has been
present to me for a year perhaps, as strongly, in spite of
my resistance to it when it formed itself into words, as if
I had already determined it" (To the Rev. E.W. Urquhart, FL,
XI, postmarked 25 September 1866, p. 27). And in the letter
to his father written five days before he was to be received
into the Roman Catholic Church, Hopkins is explicit about
what has brought him to Roman Catholicism:

I shall hold as a Catholic what I have long held as an
Anglican, that literal truth of our Lord's words by
which I learn that the least fragment of the consecrated
elements in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar is the
whole body of Christ born of the Blessed Virgin, before
which the whole host of saints and angels as it lies on
the altar trembles with adoration. This belief once got
is the life of the soul and when I doubted it I shd.
become an atheist the next day. But [...] it is a gross
superstition unless guaranteed by infallibility. I can-
not hold this doctrine confessedly except as a Tracta-
rian or a Catholic: the Tractarian ground I have seen
broken to pieces under my feet. (FL, XLVII, Oct. 16,
1866, p. 92)12

On August 28, 1866, Hopkins wrote to John Henry Newman,
asking for an interview, and on October 21, 1866, Newman
received him into the Roman Catholic Church. Easter 1867 he
spent at the Benedictine Priory, Belmont Abbey, near Here-
ford, which he had also visited in 1865 and 1866: "He may
at this time have been considering entering the priesthood
and the Benedictine order" (Patterson, p. 19). On June 7,
his final exams started, which he passed with First Class
Honours. From September 10, 1867 to April 15, 1868, he was
a lay master at Newman's Oratory School, The Oratory, Birm-
ingham. It was during a retreat with the Jesuits at Roe-
hampton, April 27-May 7, 1868, that he decided to study for
the priesthood.13 On May 11, 1868, Hopkins notes: "Slaughter
of the innocents" ("Journal (1868)", JP, p. 165), which is
now generally believed to refer to the burning of his poems:
"I saw they wd. interfere with my state and vocation" (LRB,
XXII, Aug. 7, 1868, p. 24).14 Although the burning of his
poetry must have been an important decision for Hopkins, and
symbolic of an even more momentous resolution---"C'est d'un
mouvement de tout l'être que Gérard Hopkins se porte vers
Dieu et le Christ" (Ritz, p. 115)---to us it is not as
catastrophic as it sounds, since most of his poetry has, in
some form or version, survived the holocaust.

On May 19, 1868, Hopkins asked to be received into the
Society of Jesus, and he was accepted on May 30. From July
3 to August 1, he took a trip to Switzerland with his friend
Edward Bond.15 On his return, he entered the Jesuit Novitiate
at Manresa House, Roehampton, on September 7, 1868, and
stayed there till September 8, 1870, for the required two years of self-examination. On September 8, he took his first vows, and the following day he left as a formed scholastic for Stonyhurst College, St. Mary’s Hall, Lancashire, where he studied philosophy for three years. He completed his studies at Stonyhurst College on June 23, 1873, and was given orders to teach Rhetoric at Roehampton, where he stayed till July 31, 1874. On August 28 of that year, he began his three-year theologate at St. Beuno’s College, St. Asaph, in the Vale of Clwyd, North Wales. It was at St. Beuno’s that Hopkins wrote many of his most famous works, after a seven-year silence (P4, 28 to 40, pp. 51-71; of these thirteen poems, ten are sonnets). On September 23, 1877, at the age of thirty-three, Hopkins was ordained, and in October he was appointed to Mount St. Mary’s College, Spinkhill, near Sheffield.16

As a priest, Hopkins held appointments at Mount St. Mary’s College, Stonyhurst College (tutorship), London, Oxford, Bedford Leigh, and Liverpool, where he came face to face with the deepest poverty and misery17; it is known that he was not a great success as a preacher. In August 1881 he was appointed to Glasgow, and on October 8 of that year he went back to Roehampton for his year of tertianship. After taking his final vows in July, 1882, he taught classics at Stonyhurst College, where he wrote the "Author's Preface" explaining his "Sprung Rhythm" (P4, pp. 45-49). In March 1884, he left Stonyhurst College to become Professor of Latin and Greek at the Royal University College in Dublin, where his failing health—which had always been precarious—and his strenuous duties—which he always approached in an over-conscientious manner—caused serious spells of weakness and "deep fit[s] of nervous prostration" (LRB, CXIV, p. 193). It was in Dublin that Hopkins experienced the sense of desolation that gave rise to the so-called "terrible sonnets" (P4, 64, 65, 66, 67, 69, pp. 99-101, 102-03), and it was there that he died, at the age of forty-four, on June 8, 1889, of typhoid fever. He lies buried at Glasnevin, in the burial ground of the Society of Jesus. On December 8, 1975, the centenary of the founding of the Deutschland (see The Wreck of the Deutschland, P4, 28, pp. 51-03—Hopkins’ greatest achievement), a plaque commemorating the poet was unveiled in Westminster Abbey by the Duke of Norfolk.

1.2 A BRIEF SURVEY OF HOPKINS’ WORKS:
Hopkins was not only a poet of great stature, but also a talented draughtsman, and, later in life, an original composer. But it is his poetry that has made him famous, and it is his writings only that concern us here.18 Besides his poems, Hopkins wrote hundreds of letters, composed sermons and other devotional writings, kept a diary (from September 24, 1863 till the end of January, 1866; JP, pp. 4-73) and a journal (from May 2, 1866 till February 7, 1875; JP, pp. 133-263), and wrote a number of essays (JP, pp. 74-130) and