

FELIX RANDAL - GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

Summary

Felix Randal is an Italian sonnet.

Hopkins reflects on long illness and death of a thirty-one-year-old blacksmith (*farrier*) called Felix Randal. Father Gerard Manley Hopkins, while a curate in a slum parish in Liverpool, visited him often, administered the last sacraments, and officiated at his funeral.

In the first quatrain Hopkins sketches the course of the farrier's illness as the large man faded away until his thoughts became confused and four different disorders combined to kill him.

In the second quatrain, the poet examines Felix's spiritual state. Initially, the farrier cursed the loss of his former strength, but he became more patient as his religious faith increased. He received "the sweet reprieve and ransom" in the sacrament of the Holy Communion, which carries with it the promise of forgiveness and new life. Hopkins later anointed him with holy oil. The poet implores God to forgive any sin the farrier must have committed.

In the sestet, the poet states that looking after the sick can endear a priest in two ways - he may receive affectionate gratitude from those he tends; and, secondly, knowing that he is doing something worthwhile, might make him less discontented with himself.

The poem conveys two types of strength - the farrier using his physical strength at the forge, and the priest using his spiritual strength as he did his work among the sick and the dying.

Stanza 1

Line 1

Felix Randal the farrier, O is he dead then? my duty all ended,

farrier – Blacksmith whose main job is the shoeing of horses. A physically demanding job.

Hopkins' reaction to the news that Felix is dead is neither sorrow nor joy but a comment that Hopkins own duty toward Felix is "all-ended".

O is he dead then – the tone is casual, as if he was talking to somebody who has just informed him of the death of Felix. He appears unmoved at hearing of Felix's death.

my duty all ended – his first thoughts are about himself. His *duty* as a priest has ended. *Duty* suggests that he had attended to the last rites simply because that is what a priest was supposed to do. This creates a sense of detachment.

watched – He has been present and saw how the sickness has changed the dead man.

Lines 3-4

Who have watched his mould of man, big-boned and hardy-handsome

Pining, pining, till time when reason rambled in it, and some

Fatal four disorders, fleshed there, all contended?

He does not go on to speak of the good times in the man's life, but rather how his greatness diminished. He describes how he has watched the physical decline of this man.

mould of man – A mould is used to make copies of something. He was the perfect example of man. It is ironic that, as a result of his illness, he loses his shape like a piece of metal in the forge.

big-boned and hardy-handsome – He was well-built, powerful and good looking in a rugged way.

The physical power of the man is emphasised by the repeated alliteration in the line ‘his mould of man, big-boned and hardy-handsome’.

Pining, pining – the alliteration emphasises the rapid decline in his condition. He was wasting away. He also yearned for a time that is past, when he was healthy.

till time when reason rambled in it – when he became ill his thoughts became confused/delirious.

Fatal four disorders – refers to four of the deadliest diseases in the 19th century. These included cholera, polio, smallpox and tuberculosis (consumption). Felix died as a result of a combination of these.

fleshed there, all contended – The personification of his illness fighting over the physical body of the poor man, like ravenous animals, gives a vivid picture of the process that destroyed him.

Stanza 2

*Sickness broke him. Impatient, he cursed at first, but mended
Being anointed and all; though a heavenlier heart began some
Months earlier, since I had our sweet reprieve and ransom
Tendered to him. Ah well, God rest him all road ever he offended!*

The second stanza concentrates on Felix as the object of Hopkins’ ministries. The focus is not on the dying man, but on Hopkins’ work with the man.

Sickness broke him – The image of being ‘broken’ is appropriate, since he worked with horses. Horses are broken when they are trained to serve people’s purpose; now this man has been broken by sickness. He is no longer functioning as in the past.

Impatient, he cursed at first – His first reaction, a very human response, is to curse his misfortune. The word ‘impatient’ emphasises that he is unable to endure this sickness. He expected to recover very quickly. He could not come to terms with being ill that he was going to die. He was very frustrated in the way that the illness was impacting on his life because he had never been seriously ill before.

but mended – Felix is ‘mended’ not in any physical sense, but in the spiritual sense. Hopkins’ ministry brought about a change of heart: he became attuned to God’s will. While his physical body suffered, his mind ‘mended’.

Being anointed and all – Hopkins anointed him with holy oil (rubs oil on the head of the person who is about to die – Christians believe that this will ensure the dying person’s

salvation) and performed the Last Rites. He finally accepted that he was going to die. The final sacrament is meant to prepare one's soul to enter heaven.

a heavenlier heart began some Months earlier – he began to turn his thoughts towards his inevitable destination and made peace with his fate. The sickness lasted several months and during that time his attitude changed. He began to accept his mortality and started making preparations to meet his maker a while before his death.

sweet reprieve and ransom – this refers to Confession and Communion. *Ransom* refers to the Christian belief Jesus sacrificed himself for mankind. The priest had given him all that was necessary to help his soul return to heaven.

Tendered – Pun: Double meaning – to perform a function or render a service. Hopkins renders a service tenderly.

Ah well ... – tone of resignation. Hopkins knows that he cannot do more to help Felix. The poet implores God to forgive any sin the farrier must have committed.

Stanza 3 (First Tercet)

*This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears.
My tongue had taught thee comfort, touch had quenched thy tears,
Thy tears that touched my heart, child, Felix, poor Felix Randal;*

endears them to us, us too it endears – The sestet provides a reflection on the situation presented in the octet. The change of mood is evident in the first line. Not only did the blacksmith benefit from the priest's ministry, but the priest, too, received grace of a kind from his contact with the sick man. Seeing the sick and coming in constant contact with them helps us to feel compassion towards them and at times a love. But this is not all, in this process we become better people and we are "endeared" towards God and those around us. We become more "loved" by those around us.

My tongue had taught thee comfort – He has given the dying man the comfort and solace through the words he has spoken. For this reason, Felix 'endears' himself to his priest because he listens to his spiritual advice and takes 'comfort' from it.

touch had quenched thy tears – His physical comforting has helped stop the man's tears.

Thy tears that touched my heart – In turn, the tears of the farrier touch the heart of the priest.

child, Felix, poor Felix Randal – The childlike simplicity and vulnerability of this 'big-boned and hardy-handsome' man moved the heart of the little priest. The priest is sympathetic (*poor*) towards Felix. The powerful farrier is now almost child-like in his dependence on those who are taking care of him. Felix was a big, strong man. Now he is as weak as a child.

Stanza 4 (Second Tercet)

*How far from then forethought of, all thy more boisterous years,
When thou at the random grim forge, powerful amidst peers,
Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse his bright and battering sandal!*

How far from then forethought of – The poet is looking back to the days when the farrier was in his prime and how distant the thought of death seemed then. The man that he seeing is nothing like the man who was young and strong and happy. Felix was lively (*boisterous*). However, as he approached death, he seemed the exact opposite: weak, cursing, and unlikeable.

random grim forge – the forge was built with stones of irregular shapes and sizes. When he was healthy he worked at the forge, which was very hot.

grim – it was black because of the smoke, soot and grime. Working at the forge was difficult.

powerful amidst peers – He was highly respected.

fettle – to prepare. In this case, he was making shoes to fit the horse.

Didst fettle for the great grey drayhorse – The alliteration emphasizes the size of the horse. A “dray” is a cart for carrying heavy loads so a drayhorse has to be large and strong.

Sandal – is an archaic term for the new iron shoes for the horse

bright and battering – onomatopoeia – this creates the sound of the horse’s hooves in as it trots noisily on new steel sandals

bright – it is new, *battering* – happening constantly

Themes

- Compassion
- Inevitability of death
- The acceptance of death
- The role of religion
- It is paradoxical that physically strong men find it difficult to accept death.

Tone

Compassion, sorrow, pity, remorse, acceptance, Detached/matter-of-fact then Endearing

Mood: (Readers emotions from reading the text)

Relief, sympathy, impatience, acceptance, comfort, admiration, ends with a triumphant + fiercely energetic mood

Questions

1. In line 1 the speaker says "my duty ...ended ". In your own words explain what this "duty" had been . (2)
2. What does the word "pining" (line 3) suggest about the effect of Randal's illness? (2)
3. In line 5 the speaker says "Sickness broke him." Describe how Randal managed to find peace in his last days. (2)
4. Refer to lines 9...11.
 - 4.1 Explain what the speaker means in line 9. (2)
 - 4.2 Comment on the appropriateness of the word “child” in Line 11. (3)
5. The last three lines end the poem in a positive tone. Do you agree? Justify your response by referring to diction and imagery. (3)