2003

Meanings of Merlin: An Analysis of the Hawk in Hopkins' "The Windhover" and Thoreau's Walden

Jeff Horvath '03

Illinois Wesleyan University

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev/vol15/iss1/6
Meanings of Merlin: An Analysis of the Hawk in Hopkins’ “The Windhover” and Thoreau’s Walden

Jeff Horvath

With scientific accuracy and artistic vision, both Gerald Manley Hopkins and Henry David Thoreau observed, described, and classified the natural world and its creatures throughout their lives. As writers and philosophers, however, these men sought a deeper and more fundamental understanding of their subjects. To help create and analyze the highly personal significance that certain animals held in their own lives, Hopkins and Thoreau studied the mythological and spiritual symbolism of animals in various modern and ancient societies.

One such animal—appearing as the subject of Hopkins’ “The Windhover” and surfacing occasionally throughout Thoreau’s Walden—is the hawk. Placed in its historical and cultural context, the hawk generates and illuminates many themes in Hopkins’ verse and Thoreau’s prose. Many of the most subtle—but most profound—truths in these texts, however, stem from the alternate name of the pigeon-hawk: the merlin. Together, the symbolic history of the hawk and the legendary figure of Merlin the Enchanter inform and permeate the works and worldviews of Hopkins and Thoreau.

The most basic treatment of the hawk in these texts is the admiration of its salient physical characteristics. In “The Windhover,” Hopkins glorifies the brute power and animal beauty of the bird (“Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here” [30]), while in Walden Thoreau alludes to the keen eyesight of the creature that circles above the forest “like a mote in the eye, or in aerial brother of the wave which he sails over, wind. This ability to respond quickly to a change was equally lauded in “The Windhover,” as the bird “sailing over some farmer’s yard” (Walden 109), the hawk also responds naturally and expressively to wind.

Thoreau and Hopkins thus admire the fundamental physical characteristics: power, vision, and adaptability. Historically, many societies developed symbolic interpretations of an animal from such physical traits. In general, the hawk was associated with light, royalty, power, the sun, the wind, and the heavens. In ancient Egypt, the hawk was considered a symbol of the soul; in Greco-Roman mythology, it was the messenger of Apollo. Polynesian tribes associated the bird with light, royalty, power, the sun, the wind, and the heavens. In ancient Egypt, the hawk was considered a symbol of the soul; in Greco-Roman mythology, it was the messenger of Apollo. Polynesian tribes associated the bird with royalty, power, the sun, the wind, and the heavens.

Hopkins and Thoreau, however, extended these symbolic interpretations of the hawk to include more spiritual significance that extend beyond the physical characteristics of the hawk. For example, the hawk is associated with light, royalty, power, the sun, the wind, and the heavens. In ancient Egypt, the hawk was considered a symbol of the soul; in Greco-Roman mythology, it was the messenger of Apollo. Polynesian tribes associated the bird with royalty, power, the sun, the wind, and the heavens.

Hopkins and Thoreau, however, extended these symbolic interpretations of the hawk to include more spiritual significance that extend beyond the physical characteristics of the hawk. For example, the hawk is associated with light, royalty, power, the sun, the wind, and the heavens. In ancient Egypt, the hawk was considered a symbol of the soul; in Greco-Roman mythology, it was the messenger of Apollo. Polynesian tribes associated the bird with royalty, power, the sun, the wind, and the heavens.

Hopkins and Thoreau, however, extended these symbolic interpretations of the hawk to include more spiritual significance that extend beyond the physical characteristics of the hawk. For example, the hawk is associated with light, royalty, power, the sun, the wind, and the heavens. In ancient Egypt, the hawk was considered a symbol of the soul; in Greco-Roman mythology, it was the messenger of Apollo. Polynesian tribes associated the bird with royalty, power, the sun, the wind, and the heavens.
Merlin: An Analysis of the Hopkin's "The Windhover"
Thoreau's Walden

Jeff Horvath

accuracy and artistic vision, both Gerald Manley and Thoreau observed, described, and classified creatures throughout their lives. As writers, these men sought a deeper and more fundamental knowledge of their subjects. To help create and analyze the significance that certain animals held in their own lives, they studied the mythological and spiritual symbolism of ancient societies. Occasionally appearing as the subject of Hopkins' "The Windhover" throughout Thoreau's Walden in its historical and cultural context, the poem contains many themes in Hopkins' verse and of the most subtle—but most profound—truths stem from the alternate name of the pigeon-ether, the symbolic history of the hawk and the Enchanter inform and permeate the work of Hopkins and Thoreau.

Thoreau and Hopkins thus admire the hawk for many of its fundamental physical characteristics: power, vision, and ability to adapt to change. Historically, many societies developed the spiritual symbolism of an animal from such physical traits. In general, the hawk was associated with light, royalty, power, the sun, the wind, watchfulness, and the heavens. In ancient Egypt, the hawk was considered a royal bird and a symbol of the soul; in Greco-Roman mythology, the hawk was the swift messenger of Apollo. Polynesian tribes associated the hawk with healing and prophecy, and the Native American Lakota tribe respected the hawk for its speed, boldness, and sharp eyesight.

Hopkins and Thoreau, however, discover many levels of spiritual significance that extend beyond the basic physical characteristics of the hawk. For example, the hawk is naturally independent, free from the restrictions of society; with no necessary ties to others, it is the quintessential animal of solitude. To Thoreau, "the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer's yard" (Walden 109) signifies its wild and unpredictable nature, unfettered by modern society. Hawks transcend the artificial boundaries of the world, as T. H. White notes in his classic work The Goshawk: "Hawks were the nobility of the air . . . [and the]

above the forest "like a mote in the eye, or in heaven's eye" (150). "An aerial brother of the wave which he sails over and surveys" (Walden 109), the hawk also responds naturally and effortlessly to changes in the wind. This ability to respond quickly to a changing environment is equally lauded in "The Windhover," as the bird struggles against the wind but then glides with it ("the hurl and gliding / Rebuffed the big wind" [30]).

Thoreau and Hopkins thus admire the hawk for many of its fundamental physical characteristics: power, vision, and ability to adapt to change. Historically, many societies developed the spiritual symbolism of an animal from such physical traits. In general, the hawk was associated with light, royalty, power, the sun, the wind, watchfulness, and the heavens. In ancient Egypt, the hawk was considered a royal bird and a symbol of the soul; in Greco-Roman mythology, the hawk was the swift messenger of Apollo. Polynesian tribes associated the hawk with healing and prophecy, and the Native American Lakota tribe respected the hawk for its speed, boldness, and sharp eyesight.

Hopkins and Thoreau, however, discover many levels of spiritual significance that extend beyond the basic physical characteristics of the hawk. For example, the hawk is naturally independent, free from the restrictions of society; with no necessary ties to others, it is the quintessential animal of solitude. To Thoreau, "the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer's yard" (Walden 109) signifies its wild and unpredictable nature, unfettered by modern society. Hawks transcend the artificial boundaries of the world, as T. H. White notes in his classic work The Goshawk: "Hawks were the nobility of the air . . . [and the]
only creatures for which man had troubled to legislate. [We] never
troubled to lay down rules for the birds themselves” (18). Thus, as a
symbol of “no master, no property, no fetters” (Goshawk 39), the hawk
serves an alluring ideal for the naturally hermetic Hopkins and Thoreau.

The fierce individualism of the hawk also reveals its inner
power and beauty, a certain spiritual “thusness” that remains difficult to
detect and describe adequately. For both Hopkins and Thoreau, this
deeper essence of the hawk proves much more interesting than its
physical characteristics or natural freedom, as Hopkins indicates in
“The Windhover”: “AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion /
Times told lovelier, more dangerous” (30). Hopkins refers to the dis­tinctive nature of the hawk as its “inscape,” a term that describes “the
outward reflection of the inner nature of a thing” (Gardner xx). Ins­
capes, Hopkins believed, are evidence of God’s work in the world and
an intuitive link between the mundane and the divine; when grasped
and condensed through poetry, they connect the poet, the reader, the
natural world, and God.

As in the majority of Hopkins’ verse, inscape in “The Wind­hover” is expressed through bold experimentation with rhythm and
word choice (linked to Hopkins’ desire to interpret the symbolic order
of the world and its creatures through linguistic relationships) and
through intense fusion and compression of language (an effort to “weld
together, in one concentrated image, all the essential characteristics of
an object, to inscape them in words, to communicate to the reader the
same ‘instress of feeling’ which first moved the poet himself” [Gardner
xxiii]). For example, alliteration (“daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-
drawn Falcon”) in “The Windhover” helps to
formation of the hawk into a single bright and nob­
employment of adjectives as adverbs (“swee­
hand, creates a language without traditional link.
Hopkins can better detect and illustrate the es­
Sensing and glorifying the inscape of the hawk
proves dangerous to Hopkins. He can only let
his “heart in hiding” (“Windhover” 30), indi­
take complete joy in the contemplation of an inscape, thus highlights an internal conflict in Hopkins:

God and license to love life upon earth. As with
this analysis, the hawk frequently appears in
Thoreau’s works as such an animal of conflict and
pies a tension-filled realm of transition between

Nevertheless, the hawk also represents and ideals of nobility and chivalry for Hopkins.

The hawk appears as a part of the Court, both as the (“morning’s minion”) and as the prince of day­
light’s dauphin”) (“Windhover” 30). In “riding
itself by pulling upon a rein (“High there, how
a wimpling wing”) (30), the hawk becomes a
lier!”) that readies itself for combat or adven­
sight, Thoreau notes, reminds him “of falcon
poetry are associated with that sport” (Walden

T. H. White’s The Goshawk provides the significance that the sport of hawking ac

Published by Digital Commons @ IWU, 2003
man had troubled to legislate. [We] never
was for the birds themselves" (18). Thus, as a
property, no fetters” (Goshawk 39), the hawk
for the naturally hermetic Hopkins and Thoreau.
Dualism of the hawk also reveals its inner
spiritual “thusness” that remains difficult to
adequately. For both Hopkins and Thoreau, this
hawk proves much more interesting than its
natural freedom, as Hopkins indicates in
D the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion /
D the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion /
the dangerous” (30). Hopkins refers to the dis-
wk as its “inscape,” a term that describes “the
inner nature of a thing” (Gardner xx). In-
deed, are evidence of God’s work in the world and
the mundane and the divine; when grasped
poetry, they connect the poet, the reader, the

usibility of Hopkins’ verse, inscape in “The Wind-
ough bold experimentation with rhythm and
Hopkins’ desire to interpret the symbolic order
atures through linguistic relationships) and
and compression of language (an effort to “weld
reated image, all the essential characteristics of
em in words, to communicate to the reader the
which first moved the poet himself” [Gardner
lliteration (“daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-
drawn Falcon”) in “The Windhover” helps to unify Hopkins’ descrip-
tion of the hawk into a single bright and noble image. The frequent
employment of adjectives as adverbs (“sweeps smooth”), on the other
hand, creates a language without traditional boundaries through which
Hopkins can better detect and illustrate the essence of the hawk.

Sensing and glorifying the inscape of the hawk, however, also
proves dangerous to Hopkins. He can only love the hawk secretly with
his “heart in hiding” (“Windhover” 30), indicating that he is afraid to
take complete joy in the contemplation of an earthly being. The hawk
thus highlights an internal conflict in Hopkins’ life between service to
God and license to love life upon earth. As will become evident later in
this analysis, the hawk frequently appears in both Hopkins’s and Tho-
reau’s works as such an animal of conflict and contradiction—it ocup-
ies a tension-filled realm of transition between worlds.

Nevertheless, the hawk also represents many unchanging values
and ideals of nobility and chivalry for Hopkins and Thoreau. Hopkins’
hawk appears as a part of the Court, both as the servant of the morning
(“morning’s minion”) and as the prince of daylight (“kingdom of day-
light’s dauphin”) (“Windhover” 30). In “riding” on the air and halting
itself by pulling upon a rein (“High there, how he rung upon the rein of
a wimpling wing”) (30), the hawk becomes a knight (“Oh, my cheva-
lier!”) that readies itself for combat or adventure (“Buckle!”). Such a
sight, Thoreau notes, reminds him “of falconry and what nobleness and
poetry are associated with that sport” (Walden 296).

T. H. White’s The Goshawk provides considerable insight into
the significance that the sport of hawking achieves in the works of Tho-
reu and Hopkins. On one level, hawking links the modern world to a simpler and more chivalrous past; it allows the hawker to understand “the small race now underground, strangers of a vanished species safe from comprehension, almost from imagination: monks, nuns, and the eternal villain . . . [as he becomes] as close to them as anybody now, close even to Chaucer ‘with grey goshawk in [hand]’” (Goshawk 81). The very process of training and caring for a hawk, White explains, also forces one to simplify as Thoreau did in Walden, to discover “what things [are] not necessary [and] what things one really [needs]” (Goshawk 71). This simplification of daily life is crucial because hawking requires complete concentration and enormous patience, a type of total commitment to an activity about which one “cannot be slipshod” (Goshawk 212). Hopkins, intensely driven to express his understanding of the world through language, and Thoreau, consistently focused on only one task at a time in the wilderness, would have appreciated the mind of a hawker.

More importantly, however, both Thoreau and Hopkins would have understood the imperfect nature of the human-hawk relationship and the significance of such imperfection. Searching for a connection with the natural world in all of its strength, beauty, cruelty, and irrationality, the hawker loses a part of himself or herself forever, sacrificing true domination and power over nature in an attempt to understand one of its creatures. Hawking exposes the idea of total control as an illusion that ends in failure where “at last we should come to nothing, with all our creances in a tangle about us, our curtains unhemmed and unraveling, and the tools confused and broken” (Goshawk 109). As Hamlet, as “Ludwig of Bavaria,” (192) as “wild [prince]” (147), as “frantic heritors of frenetic sires [than half insane]” (92), hawks are—on some untamable. Realizing this fundamental truth fully controlled, Hopkins and Thoreau choose to exist and participate in the natural world, rather than in it.

The hawk thus has a variety of symbolic historical roles in Walden and “The Windhover,” extraordinary vision, ability to adapt to change, transition as a creature of transition, link to nobility, and commitment in the sport of hawking. A more profound significance in the hawk, however, is suggested by the use of the bird’s alternate title: “the Merl” be called, but I care not for its name” (Walden 109). “merlin” was not used to represent the Roman watch until medieval times (Crystal 7) and its French word esmerillon (referring to a female certain (519), the character of Merlin has occurred in various Arthurian legends and myths of which we were likely aware. Many of the symbolic rela-

between Thoreau, Hopkins, and the Merlin of

In Mary Stewart’s modern Arthurian gift is Sight—the ability to see not just the ph detail, but to transcend its boundaries, to glint: between dreams and reality, between the future
The level, hawking links the modern world to a distant past; it allows the hawker to understand background, strangers of a vanished species safe lost from imagination: monks, nuns, and the becomes] as close to them as anybody now, with grey goshawk in [hand]" (Goshawk 81).

Hawking and caring for a hawk, White explains, also Thoreau did in Walden, to discover "what and what things one really needs". Simplification of daily life is crucial because ete concentration and enormous patience, a type an activity about which one "cannot be slip-Hopkins, intensely driven to express his under rough language, and Thoreau, consistently fo a time in the wilderness, would have appreci

ually, however, both Thoreau and Hopkins would perfect nature of the human-hawk relationship such imperfection. Searching for a connection in all of its strength, beauty, cruelty, and irration a part of himself or herself forever, sacrificing wer over nature in an attempt to understand one thing exposes the idea of total control as an illusion are "at last we should come to nothing, with all e about us, our curtains unhemmed and unravel used and broken" (Goshawk 109). As Hamlet, as "Ludwig of Bavaria," (192) as "wild [princes] of Teutonic origin" (147), as "frantic heritors of frenetic sires [that are] in full health more than half insane" (92), hawks are — on some fundamental level — untamable. Realizing this fundamental truth that nature can never be fully controlled, Hopkins and Thoreau choose the alternate path: to exist and participate in the natural world, rather than to become an enemy of it.

The hawk thus has a variety of symbolic characteristics and historical roles in Walden and "The Windhover," which include its extraordinary vision, ability to adapt to change, independent nature, position as a creature of transition, link to nobility and chivalry, and participation in the sport of hawking. A more profound and human level of significance in the hawk, however, is suggested when Thoreau cryptically uses the bird’s alternate title: “the Merlin it seemed to me it might be called, but I care not for its name” (Walden 296). While the name “merlin” was not used to represent the Roman word for falcon or corwalch until medieval times (Crystal 7) and its derivation from the old French word esmerillon (referring to a female hawk) is somewhat uncertain (519), the character of Merlin has occupied a prominent position in various Arthurian legends and myths of which Thoreau and Hopkins were likely aware. Many of the symbolic relationships and parallels between Thoreau, Hopkins, and the Merlin of legend are striking.

In Mary Stewart’s modern Arthurian trilogy, Merlin’s greatest gift is Sight—the ability to see not just the physical world with great detail, but to transcend its boundaries, to glimpse the hidden things between dreams and reality, between the future and the past. Building
from the pseudo-historical figure from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, Stewart creates her Merlin as a character that “[grows] out of and [epitomizes] the time of confusion and seeking that we call the Dark Ages” (*Hollow* 459). The Sight of this Merlin represents a certain “multiplicity of vision” that Geoffrey Ashe describes in his book *From Caesar to Arthur*: “When Christianity prevailed and Celtic paganism crumbled into mythology, a great [period of transition occurred]. Water and islands retained their magic . . . haunted hills became fairy-hills . . . unseen realms intersected the visible . . . [and] theme by theme the Celtic imagination articulated itself in the story. Yet any given episode might be taken as fact or imagination or religious allegory or all three at once” (*Hollow* 459-60). Merlin thus emerges as a “link between the worlds” (460) during a period in which everything was changing, a transitional figure much like Hopkins and Thoreau in their own times.

The first worlds that the figure of Merlin connects are temporal ones; he spans the impassable abyss between the past, present, and future. In T. H White’s *The Once and Future King*, for example, Merlyn the magician lives backwards in time, growing younger and telling of his experiences in the future while Arthur and other characters age normally (*Once and Future* 35). Unable to exist properly in the present, Merlyn becomes a visionary and messenger of Fate, explaining to the Court that “there is a thing about Time and Space which the philosopher Einstein is going to find out. Some people call it Destiny” (286). Stewart’s Merlin assumes a similar role, occasionally glimpsing fragments of the future and the past to provide essential military and political information for Aurelius Ambrosius.

From his extraordinary and otherworldly life, Merlin also develops a large amount of specific knowledge, of modern social visionary living in the Dark Ages, to educate Arthur about the concepts of “Might” (*Future* 246) and the horrors of war by changing different animals. When humans can intuitively empathize with creatures of the natural world, Merlyn eventually finally solve the problems of their own species. When the earth’s surface . . . [that] the airborne bird [would disappear] for Man if he could learn to fly . . . (639). This central theme that Merlyn and many of the human beings to look outside themselves toward the earth’s surface . . . [that] the airborne bird would disappear for Man if he could learn to fly . . . (639). This central theme that Merlyn and many authors achieved a rare understanding of the natural world, and—most importantly—the value of direct personal experience (throu
figure from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s His-
in, Stewart creates her Merlin as a character who epitomizes the time of confusion and seeking " (Hollow 459). The Sight of this Merlin's multiplicity of vision" that Geoffrey Ashe describes in his biography of Caesar to Arthur: “When Christianity pre-
crumbled into mythology, a great [period of] time and islands retained their magic . . . hilly . . . unseen realms intersected the vis-
the Celtic imagination articulated itself in some ways: ‘When three at once” (Hollow 459-60). Merlin thus "seen the worlds” (460) during a period in which g, a transitional figure much like Hopkins and Hobbies.

Worl's that the figure of Merlin connects are the impassable abyss between the past, present, and future in history. For example, in his work The Once and Future King, for example, the writer explores the idea of "Might and Right" (Once and Future 246) and the horrors of war by changing him into a variety of different animals. When humans can intuitively understand and coexist with creatures of the natural world, Merlyn explains to Arthur, they will finally solve the problems of their own species: “the imaginary lines on the earth’s surface . . . [that] the airborne birds [skip] them by nature . . . [would disappear] for Man if he could learn to fly” (Once and Future 639). This central theme that Merlyn and merlins reveal, the need of human beings to look outside themselves towards nature (Book of Mer-
lyn 25) in order to simplify their existence and reduce their destructive hubris, was fundamentally important in the lives of Thoreau and Hop-
kins.

While they possessed no fantastic powers of Sight, both Tho-
reau and Hopkins maintained a broad vision of historical events and the modern dilemma. One facet of this dilemma involved the conflict between the natural and industrial worlds. In their time, Thoreau and Hopkins watched as technological and urban progress conquered much of the remaining wilderness. Like Stewart’s Merlin writing alone in his crystal cave while wars were fought and kingdoms constructed, these authors achieved a rare understanding of technology, science, politics, the natural world, and—most importantly—human nature. Professing the value of direct personal experience (through inscapes and through political information for Aurelius Ambrosius (Crystal 225).

From his extraordinary and otherworldly Sight, however, Mer-
lin also develops a large amount of specifically human wisdom. A modern social visionary living in the Dark Ages, White’s Merlyn seeks to educate Arthur about the concepts of “Might and Right” (Once and Future 246) and the horrors of war by changing him into a variety of different animals. When humans can intuitively understand and coexist with creatures of the natural world, Merlyn explains to Arthur, they will finally solve the problems of their own species: “the imaginary lines on the earth’s surface . . . [that] the airborne birds [skip] them by nature . . . [would disappear] for Man if he could learn to fly” (Once and Future 639). This central theme that Merlyn and merlins reveal, the need of human beings to look outside themselves towards nature (Book of Mer-
lyn 25) in order to simplify their existence and reduce their destructive hubris, was fundamentally important in the lives of Thoreau and Hop-
kins.
time spent in solitude) and the worth of the individual in an increasingly objective and materialistic society, Thoreau and Hopkins thus stood as transitional figures in an era of change.

Transition and change for Merlin, Thoreau, and Hopkins are also linked to the spiritual realm. Stewart’s Merlin sees no inherent contradiction between disparate gods or embodiments of the divine spirit; Ambrosius, reflecting Merlin’s own viewpoint, explains that “you will find [that] all gods who are born of the light are brothers, and in this land, if Mithras who gives us victory is to bear the face of Christ, why, then, we worship Christ” (Crystal 385). Watching from the “caves of glass, the invisible towers, the hollow hills where he now sleeps for all time,” Merlin thus observes the older, druidic gods of nature fade before the God of Christianity and serves as an instrument through which “all the kings [become] one King, and all the gods one God” (Hollow 460). Both Hopkins and Thoreau maintained a similar communion with all aspects of the divine, symbolizing the importance of natural spirituality in an increasingly physical and secular world. In Walden, every element and creature of nature—including the hawk—helps to prevent being “shipwrecked on a vain reality” (Walden 305) by revealing spiritual unity and truth in the world. God is omnipresent in “The Windhover” as well, appearing in the frequent poetic inscapes that allow an intuitive perception of the divine through Hopkins’ description of the hawk.

Symbolizing transition and change, however, is difficult; the price for moving between worlds—between the past and the future, nature and human society, and the secular and the divine—is high. In return for God’s gift of sight, Stewart’s Merlin blind,” stating, “when I exchanged my manhood for the death of many friends, and he weeps for th...
and the worth of the individual in an increasingly secular society, Thoreau and Hopkins thus stood as signs of change.

Change for Merlin, Thoreau, and Hopkins are parallel realms. Stewart's Merlin sees no inherent separate gods or embodiments of the divine. Merlin's own viewpoint, explains that gods who are born of the light are brothers, and who gives us victory is to bear the face of Christ, Christ" (Crystal 385). Watching from the bible towers, the hollow hills where he now lives, Merlin thus observes the older, druidic gods of native Christianity and serves as an instrument of transition and change, however, is difficult; the worlds—between the past and the future, natural and the secular and the divine—is high. In return for God's gift of sight, Stewart's Merlin often becomes "human-blind," stating, "when I exchanged my manhood for power it seemed I had made myself blind to the ways of women" (Hollow 390). While Merlin was not asexual, he was primarily nonsexual, living as a virgin for the majority of his life. Merlin's sacrifice and suppression of his "desire for a normal manhood" (Hollow 460) reflect an ancient belief: the pursuit of truth and spiritual vision often requires a certain level of purity and physical sterility. As a Catholic priest, Hopkins made a similar sacrifice, trading earthly pleasure and love for divine favor.

Thoreau, consciously or unconsciously, also dissociated himself from the normal scope of human desire and feeling, practicing mild sexual asceticism and revealing little emotion throughout Walden.

The asceticism of Merlin, Hopkins, and Thoreau extended into their separation from society, a form of enforced isolation from other humans. Like Thoreau and Hopkins, Merlin was a recluse by nature, a learned sage that lived at the outskirts of civilization and sought knowledge mainly for its own sake. Yet as Thoreau attempted via Walden and Hopkins attempted in his poetry, Merlin occasionally imparted his wisdom to other individuals in society. Commonly cast as a tutor for young Arthur and as first councilor to the King, Merlin existed as a perpetual source of advice in a kingdom threatened by foreign armies, internal power struggles, and spiritual decay.

Ultimately, however, Merlin, Hopkins, and Thoreau emerge as somewhat tragic figures, creatures of solitude that can often only observe inevitable change. Stewart's Merlin foresees but cannot prevent the death of many friends, and he weeps for them and for himself, "for
Merlin the enchanter, who saw, and could do nothing; who walked his own lonely heights where it seemed that none would ever come near to him” (Last Enchantment 145). A source of creativity, discovery, and wisdom, Merlin’s solitude is at last only a lonely residence, a place from which he can understand and influence—but never truly join—human society. Merlin, like Thoreau and Hopkins, eventually accepts this imperfect existence with a combination of resignation and quiet satisfaction, stating: “I am nothing, yes; I am air and darkness, a word, a promise. I watch in the crystal and I wait in the hollow hills. But out there in the light I have a young king and a bright sword to do my work for me, and build what will stand when my name is only a word for forgotten songs and outworn wisdom” (Hollow 409).

Multiple levels of significance are thus evident in the treatment of the hawk in Thoreau’s Walden and Hopkins’ “The Windhover.” Both authors admire the physical characteristics of the merlin, value its independent nature and historical symbolism, and relate closely to the legendary figure of Merlin the Enchanter. In studying the relationship between Thoreau, Hopkins, and the hawk in these works, the reader gains a more profound understanding of the authors and the complex creature that they describe.

Works Cited


A source of creativity, discovery, and wisdom is at last only a lonely residence, a place of solitude and influence—but never truly join—like Thoreau and Hopkins, eventually accepts with a combination of resignation and quiet the world as it is, yes; I am air and darkness, a word, a crystal and I wait in the hollow hills. But out of nothingness, young king and a bright sword to do my work will stand when my name is only a word for foreign wisdom” (Hollow 409).

Such symbols of significance are thus evident in the treatment of Walden and Hopkins’ “The Windhover.”

The physical characteristics of the merlin, value its historical symbolism, and relate closely to the Enchanter. In studying the relationship between, and the hawk in these works, the reader gains an understanding of the authors and the complex narrative.