

**“DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL” IN THE WORKS OF GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS AND ST.
MAANICKAVAACAKAR**

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Introduction

The phrase “dark night of the soul” comes from a poem by St. John of the Cross, a Spanish Carmelite monk and mystic. According to the poet, the “dark night of the soul” is the soul’s journey from the distractions and entanglements of the world to the perfect peace and harmony of union with God.

The monk taught that one seeking God will cast off all attachments to this world and live a life of austerity. Before attaining union with God, however, the soul must pass through a personal experience of God’s passion. This time of testing and agony is accompanied by confusion, fear, and uncertainty—including doubts of God—but on the other side are His glory, serenity, and a mystical union with God. The dark night is not pleasant, but to the end that it allows one to approach nearer to God and His love, the poet calls it a “happy night” and a “night more lovely than the dawn.” At the end of one’s journey, he concludes, God takes away all feeling, leaving the traveler senseless to everything except the presence of God Himself.

Dark Night of the Soul

The “night of the senses” and the “dark night of the soul” are properly subjects of theological study. The two terms apply to the two major purgations experienced by the soul in search of God. The whole principle underlying the experience is based on recognized fact that persons who determine to follow God closely, frequently after an initial period of enthusiasm and spiritual “sweetness,” experience long periods of trail desolation which bring intense suffering. These periods of trail often increase both in duration and intensity as the soul continues its search for God. This relationship between the soul and the Absolute constitutes the upward striving of the soul.

According to Evelyn Underhill, the mystical or transcendental aspect of the Dark Night is:

‘For the mystic who has once known the Beatific vision there can be no greater grief than the withdrawal of this Object from his field of consciousness; the loss of this companionship, the extinction of this Light. Therefore, whatever form the ‘Dark Night’ assumes, it must entail bitter suffering: far worse than that endured in the Purgative way.’

“The night of the senses” pertains to beginners and is relatively common. It occurs when God begins to bring the soul to realize his presence and to accept its dependence upon Him. This purgation strips the soul of desires - first sinful ones, then involuntary ones. This night is an active state because the soul is able to better its condition and to lighten

its suffering through active efforts and through sacrifices. In this state, the soul will avoid failure by its active cooperation with God's grace.

Experience of Gerard Manley Hopkins

During his life, Hopkins was most certainly subjected to many severe trials which had the characteristics of "the night of the senses" and "the dark night of the soul." His sufferings were more intense during the last years of his life, but they did not begin then. He had known suffering even when he found life so agreeable in the happy days of his scholasticate at St. Beuno's. In his autobiographical poem "The Wreck of Deutschland" he assured that what refers to me in the poem is all strictly and literally true and did occur; nothing is added for poetic padding.

Hopkins suffered from severe depression, and he expressed it in verse. This one is titled *I Wake and Feel the Fell of Dark*. Hopkins never shies away from using archaic and near forgotten words, and he uses one right off in the first line. It is the word "fell," which, as a noun, means "bitterness."

*I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day,
What hours, O what black hours we have spent
This night! What sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!*

Hopkins has awakened in the middle of the night: "*I wake and feel the fell of night, not day.*" He seems to have had nightmares, no doubt followed by fretting and worrying on waking, unable to sleep again: "*O what black hours we have spent / This night! what sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!*" The "we" is literary; he is speaking of his "heart," meaning his emotion-affected mind. It must have seen terrible things that night, and he has awakened in great mental distress. And he will continue to suffer even more, because he cannot go back to sleep, but must wait and fret and have gloomy thoughts and images in his mind through the remaining hours of darkness before the light of dawn finally comes — "*And more must, in yet longer light's delay.*"

"*I am gall I am heartburn.*" What Hopkins feels mentally, he also feels physically? And he thinks that is what God's will for him is. God *wants* him to taste bitterness, and that bitterness has become Hopkins' life, Hopkins himself: "*My taste was me*".

Hopkins's crippling depression was countered by faith that each particular object in creation had a luminous particularity or "thisness" -- an inward landscape he called "inscape" -- the essence of the thing -- shaped by a divine force he called "instress." Letting instress thrust you into an inscape is one way to apprehend Christ, as in these lines from "God's Grandeur":

*Their lives the dearest freshness deep down things. . . .
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and ah! bright wings.*

This physicality informs the dark sonnets both musically and in carnal detail. Hopkins called his dense metric system "sprung rhythm," even using accent marks to instruct the reader where to bear down.

In "Carrion Comfort," Hopkins refuses to feast on the rotten meat of melancholy, though he can barely long for day and stave off suicide.

***Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee,
Not untwist--slack they may be--these last strands of man
In me or, most weary, cry I can no more. I can;***

Hopkins's syntax is so mangled, the lines so packed with heavy plodding accents and stilted comma stops, that he speaks as if through a chokehold. Yet somehow the depth of his suffering proves the vigor of his faith.

Experience of St. Maanickavaacakar

There are ample evidences to show that St. Maanickavaacakar who has experienced the exalted ecstasy to 'Illumination' has also experienced this 'psychic fatigue', and passed through a phase of overwhelming darkness and deprivation. He has been blessed with the beatific vision of the Holy Feet of God, which were placed on his head as a mark of the divine bestowal of Grace.

He identifies as God's own son and he laments asking his father,

Will you leave me Thy son, crying out like this.

He had expressed his pangs of separation in the purgative stage. But now he expresses a deeper and more intense grief at the loss of Grace once bestowed. He cries out:

***..... No Joy have I upon this sea-girt earth,
Be Gracious, bid me come to thee!***

This prayer born of intense anguish is expressed throughout the decad, 'No joy in life'.

All external objects or the natural phenomena of the Universe are all manifestations of God and the poet had realized it through his apprehension of the Reality. But once the Illumination is gone, he tries again to have the same experience and struggles hard, but fails in his attempts. Hence his cry of despair:

***O Dancer! Spotless One! O ash-besmeared!
Thy brow hath central eye! Lord of heaven's host!
Sole Deity! Through all the world Thyself
I sought lamenting loud, but found Thee not.***

To him who had tasted the radiant glory of God there is nothing but dense darkness around. Hence his prayer:

***Cut short Thy work! O light, let darkness
Flee before Thy mercy's beam!***

The unique characteristics of the mystic experience of Illumination are the joy of the apprehension of Reality in its immanent and transcendental forms. This involves enjoyment and consciousness of enjoyment as well. St. Maanickavaacakar too was transcendently aware of the Supreme bliss of Illumination. This is clear from his words:

..... *Thou..*

....*gavest Thy grace; and giving mad'st me glad.*

I trod on air,

Here he refers to his own sense of pride. This pride is born of his sense of I hood which again is another expression of self-will. The poet struggled hard to get rid of all sense of ego born of both external and internal bonds of attachments. The struggle still continues, leading to this extreme anguish of the 'Dark Night'.

Both poets speak of everything being caused by God's will.

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