

The Darkling Thrush

BY THOMAS HARDY

I leant upon a coppice gate
When Frost was spectre-grey,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted nigh
Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be
The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervourless as I.

At once a voice arose among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
Of joy illimited;
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew

And I was unaware.

The Darkling Thrush: About the poem

Published in December 1900, at the end of the 19th century, ‘*The Darkling Thrush*’ symbolically mourns the passing of an era. In that respect, it is an **elegy** — a mournful poem that deals with death — here, the death of the century. As a matter of fact, the poem was **originally called** ‘*The Century’s End, 1900*’. But it was also the dawn of the 20th century. Probably giving way to his guarded optimism about what the new age would bring, Hardy renamed the piece to the more cheery title as we know today — The Darkling Thrush.

‘The Darkling Thrush’ is rich in metaphor. ‘Darkling’ means ‘of the darkness’, and conveys an ‘end of days’ metaphor. Here the dusk doesn’t just refer to the dimming of light. On a deeper level, we deal with despair and death of the century. Add the winter landscape to this, and things get more dismal.

Thankfully not all is doom and gloom. There is another focal point to this poem — the Thrush. A complete **antithesis** (contrast) to what everything else in the poem represents, the bird speaks of Hope, Joy and Change. This play of light and shade called **chiaroscuro** effect is treated equally in the poem. All these are lofty concepts that go beyond our five senses. Such poems based on abstract ideas are called **abstractions**.

Change is never easy. More often than not, we do not have a choice but to accept it. ‘**The Darkling Thrush**’ is about one person’s reaction to this change. It is about hope in the face of despair, about endings and cautious beginnings, about courage when all seems lost, depending on the way you look at it.

Form and language of the poem

Hardy does not bring any drama with the structure and wordplay in the poem. He was seeing enough of that in real life. Rather the poet chose to bring symmetry to the poem. He neatly divides the poem in two halves, allocating 2 of the 4 stanzas for his two main subjects — the winter evening, then the thrush. Each stanza is an **octet** — i.e. it comprises of 8 lines. Hardy even coined his own words — *outleant*, *blast-beruffled*, *spectre-grey*, contributing to the ordered meter/ rhythm of the poem. These words don’t occur anywhere else in the English language and are called **nonce words** (Have fun coming up with your own).

We have an **ababcdcd** rhyme scheme; each stanza repeats the same pattern but with a different end rhyme. The other sound devices used in the poem are:

Assonance: Repetition of similar vowel sounds.

At once a voice arose among (O and A sounds- Line 17)

Consonance: Repetition of similar consonant sounds in neighboring words.

And Winter’s dregs made desolate

The weakening eye of day (Lines 4-5)

*An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom. (Lines 24-28)*

Alliteration: Repetition of initial consonant sounds.

That I could think there trembled through (Line 29)

His crypt the cloudy canopy, (Line 11)

Alliteration is a type of consonance. Here is an instance where the two overlapped:

In blast-beruffled plume (Line 25)

Consonance (L sound) + Alliteration (B sound)

Explanation

The poet paints a somber picture of the world. The mood feels lonely and meditative, the speaker watching as a silent bystander leaning upon the coppice gate — a gate that opens onto the woods. In his loneliness, the poet has **personified** Winter and Frost. Frost is described as ‘*specter-grey*’ or ghost-like grey. The Winter’s dregs — the fallen snow and heavy fog — are making the twilight/ dusk (*the weakening eye of day*) look desolate. So, as you can see, the Winter and the Frost are bleak company — they cannot arouse any sense of cheerfulness.

Climbing plants, dead for winter, have left behind only their climbing stems or *bine stems*. They add to the gloominess as the poem compares them to the **simile** of strings of broken lyres (a musical instrument) notching the sky. This comparison is also important in suggesting the lack of music or happiness for that matter.

Even people seem listless and haunting, instead of living their lives. Then people going home and seeking their household fires add to the image of the gloomy end of the day. There is no vibrancy in life or color.

Winter in the Northern Hemisphere is also the end of the year. Here it becomes even more meaningful, as the end of the year in this case also marks the end of the century. This is why the century is **personified** as a corpse; the harsh winter landscape defining its wasted body. The ‘*cloudy canopy*’ or sky covers the century’s tomb and the sad wind becomes a song of death.

In winter, Nature is generally at a standstill. Life’s vibrancy (*ancient pulse of germ and birth*) seems to have stopped (*shrunk hard and dry*). The dormant environment feeds the poet’s brooding frame of mind. The scale of his pessimism increases. Dull observations escalate to a despairing mindset and the poet only sees a world without promise or future.

Suddenly, like the proverbial silver lining to dark clouds, a joyful song breaks into the poet's despairing outlook from among the frosty twigs overhead. The poet calls the thrush's melody a '*full-hearted evensong*' — prayers sung at the end of the day, in the evening. The song was coming out of boundless joy. Look at the use of word 'illimited', suggesting something uncommon.

But who was it singing? It was an old thrush bird — feeble, lean and small, with its feathers disarranged by the wind (*blast-beruffled*). Though the thrush's appearance does not arouse any hope, heedless of the oppressive environment and the growing darkness — the mark of struggling to survive in winter — the thrush sings. The bird puts his soul into his voice as he belts out a happy tune to no one but the Eternal Listener (Remember the word 'evensong', a prayer?).

Though the title of the poem suggested that it was all about a thrush, it took two and a half stanzas to get to the first mention of the bird. But still, the thrush and its song seem to overcome the initial melancholy that the atmosphere brought even to the readers.

No one knows what inspires the darkling thrush singing (compared to singing Christmas carols). The 'ecstatic sound' of the thrush is in complete contrast to such a hopeless situation. The poet cannot think of any earthly event or cause, near or far away that could be responsible.

The thrush's song is an enigma, and the poet marvels at the blessed Hope or knowledge the bird has. There are no straight answers. Does the thrush sing a song of farewell — a hymn of gratitude for the good things that have been? Or does he sing a song of hope — a reassurance of good things that are to come? Like the poet, we can only wonder, keep our hearts open and just be glad that there is a reason to be happy at all.