

Unit # 6 The Darkling Thrush

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 night
Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be
The Century's corpse out leant,
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.

Explanation

This poem is "The Darkling Thrush" by Thomas Hardy. It was written in 1900, at the turn of the century, and reflects Hardy's sense of uncertainty about the future, as well as his feelings about life, nature, and the passage of time.

Stanza 1:

The speaker describes a bleak winter landscape, leaning on a gate in the countryside. The atmosphere is cold and desolate. The sky is grey, and the day is fading. The vine-stems (vines) are tangled and lifeless, resembling broken strings of a musical instrument. People nearby have gone indoors to escape the cold, symbolizing the retreat of life and warmth.

Stanza 2:

The speaker goes on to describe the land as having "sharp features" that resemble the corpse of a century, covered by a cloudy sky. The wind is described as a death-lament. The speaker reflects on the decline of life and vitality, seeing nature as hard and dry, much like his own spirit. The century's death also suggests Hardy's pessimism about the turn of the 20th century, seeing it as an end rather than a hopeful beginning.

Stanza 3:

Suddenly, the speaker hears a sound in the air—a bird singing. The bird is an old thrush, weak and battered by the wind. Yet, despite its frailty, it sings joyfully and with enthusiasm. This contrast between the aged thrush and its full-hearted song captures the attention of the speaker, who finds this sudden burst of life surprising in the otherwise dead, cold world.

Stanza 4:

The speaker wonders why the thrush is singing so ecstatically, as there seems to be no reason for such joy in the desolate landscape. The speaker is puzzled by this optimism and suggests that perhaps the thrush knows something the speaker does not—a hidden hope that eludes human understanding. This hope might be spiritual or existential, suggesting that while the speaker cannot see any reason for optimism, the thrush embodies an awareness of something greater or more hopeful.

Themes:

Desolation and Hope: The poem contrasts the bleakness of the natural world with the hope represented by the thrush's song.

Pessimism about the Future: Hardy's concerns about the future, both personally and for humanity as the century ends, are reflected in the dark imagery.

Nature and Life: The poem shows how nature continues to persist, even in its weakest and most fragile forms, suggesting that hope and joy can exist even in the darkest times.

The poem ends on a note of mystery, as the speaker remains uncertain about the hope that the thrush seems to represent, leaving readers with the idea that hope may exist even when it is not immediately visible.

Comprehension

1. How does the poet describe the winter?

The poet describes winter as cold, desolate, and lifeless. The day is fading, the sky is grey, and the landscape is barren. Words like “Frost was spectre-grey,” “Winter’s dregs,” and “tangled bine-stems” evoke a bleak, dying world. The imagery suggests a season of decay and stagnation, with no signs of life or warmth.

2. How is the song of the thrush described?

The song of the thrush is described as full-hearted and filled with ecstatic sound. Despite the harsh, bleak surroundings, the “aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small” sings with joy and energy, offering an unexpected contrast to the desolation of winter. The song is described as “illimited,” suggesting boundless joy.

3. Which old-fashioned words are used in the poem?

Several old-fashioned words are used in the poem, including:

Coppice (a small woodland)

Spectre (ghost or spirit)

Dregs (the remnants or last parts of something)

Canopy (a covering, often referring to the sky)

Fervourless (lacking passion or enthusiasm)

4. Do you find the poem gloomy? Is there a note of hope in it? Discuss.

The poem starts with a gloomy tone, describing the landscape as cold, barren, and dead. The imagery of a decaying winter and a lifeless century enhances the melancholic mood. However, there is a note of hope introduced with the thrush’s song in the third stanza. The thrush’s joyful singing in such a bleak environment suggests the possibility of hope and renewal, even in the darkest times. The speaker is unsure of the source of this hope, but its presence is undeniable.

5. Find out the symbolic significance of the bird in Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush."

The thrush symbolizes hope and resilience. In the face of winter's bleakness, the aged thrush sings joyfully, suggesting that even in difficult times, life continues and hope can persist. The bird's song represents the possibility of renewal, optimism, or perhaps some deeper spiritual understanding that the speaker doesn't fully comprehend. It offers a sense of spiritual hope, even when the speaker feels despondent.

6. What are examples of imagery used in "The Darkling Thrush"?

Hardy uses vivid imagery to convey the desolate winter landscape:

"Frost was spectre-grey": conveys coldness and lifelessness.

"Tangled bine-stems scored the sky / Like strings of broken lyres": visual imagery of vines resembling broken musical instruments, symbolizing decay.

"The Century's corpse outleant": personifies the century as a dead body.

"The land's sharp features": suggests a harsh, unwelcoming environment.

"Blast-beruffled plume": describes the thrush's feathers blown by the harsh wind, symbolizing its fragility.

7. How does the speaker feel about the season in "The Darkling Thrush"?

The speaker feels disheartened and depressed by the season. Winter is depicted as cold, lifeless, and devoid of vitality. The speaker reflects on the harshness and decay of nature, which mirrors his own feelings of despair and lack of hope.

8. How does the thrush change the mood of the poem?

The thrush changes the mood of the poem from one of gloom and desolation to a glimmer of hope and optimism. Its joyful song cuts through the bleakness of the winter landscape, offering a contrast to the speaker's earlier despair. The thrush's song represents a spiritual hope or renewal that transforms the mood from purely negative to one where hope might be possible.

9. Discuss the tone of the poem.

The tone of the poem is initially bleak and pessimistic, reflecting the speaker's view of a decaying world and the cold, desolate landscape of winter. However, with the introduction of the thrush, the tone shifts slightly to one of wonder and possibility, as the speaker contemplates the hope embodied by the bird's song. The tone remains introspective and questioning, but there's an underlying sense of potential renewal.

10. Which words does the poet use to depict the bird's strength in the third stanza?

Despite the thrush being described as "aged," "frail," "gaunt," and "small," the poet emphasizes its strength through the description of its song, which is described as "full-hearted" and "illimited". These words suggest that, though the bird is physically weak, its spirit and vitality are strong, and its song carries immense power and joy.

Figures of Speech

Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush" makes use of several figures of speech to enhance the imagery, tone, and meaning of the poem. Here are some of the key ones:

1. Simile:

"The tangled bine-stems scored the sky / Like strings of broken lyres"

The comparison of vine stems to broken lyres (musical instruments) evokes a sense of decay and brokenness in nature, enhancing the imagery of desolation.

2. Personification:

"The Century's corpse outleant"

The century is personified as a corpse, symbolizing the end of an era and suggesting that the passage of time itself is dying.

"The wind his death-lament"

The wind is given human qualities, described as singing a lament for the death of the century.

"The weakening eye of day"

Here, day is personified as having an eye, suggesting the fading light as the day weakens and comes to an end.

3. Metaphor:

“The Century’s corpse outleant”

This is not just personification but also a metaphor for the decline of the 19th century, comparing it to a decaying corpse.

“Frost was spectre-grey”

Frost is metaphorically described as spectre-grey, implying a ghostly, death-like presence in the landscape.

“The ancient pulse of germ and birth / Was shrunken hard and dry”

This metaphor suggests that the life force of nature (the pulse of germination and birth) has been reduced to a lifeless state.

4. Alliteration:

“His crypt the cloudy canopy”

The repetition of the ‘c’ sound in crypt and cloudy canopy emphasizes the cold, gloomy atmosphere of the scene.

“blast-beruffled plume”

The ‘b’ sound in blast and beruffled gives emphasis to the harshness of the wind and the frail state of the bird.

5. Symbolism:

“The thrush” itself is a symbol of hope and resilience, contrasting with the bleakness of the winter landscape and the speaker's despondent mood.

“The winter landscape” symbolizes death, despair, and the end of an era (both literally and metaphorically for the century).

6. Hyperbole:

“Of joy illimited”

The joy of the thrush’s song is described as limitless, which is an exaggeration meant to emphasize the intense and unexpected contrast between the song and the bleak surroundings.

7. Irony:

The irony lies in the fact that the bird is described as frail, gaunt, and aged, yet it sings with great ecstatic joy, contrasting its physical weakness with its spiritual strength.

8. Imagery:

Though not a figure of speech per se, Hardy's vivid imagery—such as the **“spectre-grey frost,”** the **“tangled bine-stems,”** and the **“growing gloom”**—paints a picture of desolation and decay, which contrasts with the hopeful song of the thrush.

9. Enjambment:

“The tangled bine-stems scored the sky / Like strings of broken lyres,”

The sentence flows from one line to the next, emphasizing the connection between the visual image of the sky and the comparison to broken lyres.

“The land's sharp features seemed to be / The Century's corpse outleant,”

The idea of the Century's corpse being part of the landscape extends over two lines, linking the landscape to the metaphor of the century's death.

“So little cause for carolings / Of such ecstatic sound”

In summary, Hardy employs a variety of figures of speech to create a **vivid, melancholic** scene that is ultimately transformed by the thrush's hopeful song, adding depth and meaning to the poem's themes of despair and optimism.