

Characters list of Thorn

By William Wordsworth

The speaker

William Wordsworth himself described the speaker in subsequent published editions of the poem. In fact, he explicitly stated that the person speaking the verse is an actual character, distinct from the poet, and not merely a representative of the poet himself. According to Wordsworth, the speaker is the captain of a small commercial boat who is now past middle-age and firmly set into a life of a pensioner retired to a small country village. It is important, Wordsworth stated, that this old captain lives in a part of the country to which he is not a native. In the wake of no longer having a purpose to get up for every day, the captain reveals a propensity toward talkativeness which in turn reveals a quasi-superstitious nature.

Martha Ray

The poem centers on a mystery surrounding a woman named Martha Ray. In her youth, Ray had fallen in love with a man named Stephen Hill—only to discover on the very day they were to wed that he was on his way to church to marry another. To make matters worse, she was also pregnant with Stephen's child. Overcome with grief at the loss of the life she expected to have, she seeks a sanctuary high atop a mountain. There she remains for the subsequent twenty years, until the speaker relates her tale. In all that time, nobody ever saw the child she was supposedly carrying. Speculation ranges from a stillborn infant to infanticide, and the child's fate remains uncertain. Martha is now destitute and insane, and she is often heard wailing for her lost child.

Stephen Hill

Very little information is provided about Stephen Hill. All that can be known for sure—if the narrator can even be trusted—is that he is an insensitive and selfish man who took Martha Ray's virginity, convinced her that he loved her, and ultimately betrayed her by marrying another woman and leaving Martha Ray destitute and pregnant. In a sense, the character of Stephen Hill symbolizes the loss of innocence that comes with growing up. The innocent promises of love made in youth may turn into selfish lies when the passage into adulthood begins.

The Child

As the tale unfolds from a narrator who proves increasingly unreliable, doubt begins to creep in not only as to the fate of the unborn child, but whether Martha Ray was even pregnant. It is possible that she lost the child naturally through a stillbirth or miscarriage, or perhaps she is guilty of infanticide. The villagers claim to know the location of the burial site of the baby. However, they also claim that when an attempt was made to bring Martha to justice for killing the infant, the buried bones were somehow capable of

creating an earthquake around the alleged burial site—thereby preventing them from confirming their suspicions. The fate of the child is therefore left ambiguous, with the only certainty being that the alleged child's mother leads a tortured existence as she mourns the loss of this child she claims to have had.

Summary:

The Thorn is a poem that is considered to be a form of gossip, told through the words of a sea captain. The narrator tells the story as if it were a rumour assumed to be true as the story as seemingly been added to over the course of time.

The poem begins with the speaker's description of an old thornbush perched high on a mountaintop. The thorn is wretched-looking, as time has caused it to become withered and covered in mosses. The speaker then proceeds to describe the immediate environment of the thorn in more pleasant terms, gradually revealing that this colorful and majestic scenery is in fact the probable location of a child's grave. A woman named Martha Ray is a frequent visitor to this hill, as she comes to lament the child she once lost.

The speaker reveals the full background of the destitute Martha Ray, recounting how she was once in love with a man named Stephen Hill. While Stephen had promised to marry her, he ultimately abandoned Martha for another woman. Martha is subsequently left heartbroken and pregnant with his child.

At this point, the fate of the child becomes ambiguous. The speaker reveals his own uncertainties about this supposed child (and his growing status as an unreliable narrator), relaying the different views of the local residents who gossip incessantly about the poor woman. Some say she committed infanticide due to the social stigma of the unmarried pregnant woman, while others believe the baby was stillborn. In any case, no one ever saw the child and it is never confirmed that the child ever existed. Martha Ray becomes the subject of local myth, and many townspeople believe she should be held responsible for the child's death. However, when they suggest bringing her to justice, the ground surrounding the supposed grave begins to shake—suggesting an earthquake or some supernatural force. While definitive proof of the grave is never found, the locals continue to insist that a child was indeed lost as its mother wails often on the mountaintop. The story of Martha Ray and her child remains shrouded in mystery at the poem's conclusion, leaving the reader—like the speaker and the townspeople—to draw his own conclusions as to what really happened. This poem is a dramatic turn away from the usual, positive form of references to nature we are used to seeing in this time period in that it depicts the loss of something so innocent and precious- and further portrays this loss through reference to a thorn, a simple part of nature.

What is the significance of the thorn in the poem?

The thorn is a symbol of the coexisting feelings of joy and sadness that one experiences in life—especially as one grows older and “joins society,” so to speak. Within the context of Romantic literature, the thorn may represent how even in the most beautiful natural setting, ugliness can be found.

Romantic poetry often adheres to the belief that modern society corrupted the simple and pure way of life that people used to follow while living in nature. On another level, the thorn may symbolize grief and affliction. The speaker may be referring once again to the inevitable pitfalls of growing up, joining society, and thus leaving the innocence and purity of the natural world one enjoys so freely as a child. Growing up is a kind of affliction of the human experience, as love, innocence, and truthfulness are lost. The townspeople represent society—they gossip about Martha Ray and judge her, feigning sympathy but never once reaching out to help her. As the final resting place of Martha's child, the thorn is the very embodiment of innocence lost.

