**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.

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 **Introduction**

While Hardy's unsentimental depictions of nature and the human condition were frequently condemned as pessimistic during his own lifetime, modern critics have generally praised him for his honesty and compassion. Like his novels, much of Hardy's poetry deals with pessimistic themes. "The Darkling Thrush," first published in the London Times on New Year's Day, 1900, eulogizes the end of the nineteenth century. The narrator turns toward the new century with a turn of mind that could hardly be described as optimistic. Hardy called himself a meliorist, one who believes that individuals are powerless to affect their own lives, and that only by accepting this fact can they have any hope of happiness. Hardy's novels and poetry portray human beings at the mercy of forces they have no ability to control—primarily nature, society, internal struggles and death. It is the death of the century that Hardy focuses on in "The Darkling Thrush," before turning toward the next century. "The Darkling Thrush" is one of Hardy's most well-known poems, appearing frequently in anthologies.

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**Explanation**

Lines 1-2

In these lines Hardy is establishing the setting for the poem. The narrator is taking a passive stance, leaning against a coppice gate (a gate leading into a thicket of woods). The setting he perceives is a dreary one. The "spectre-grey" is ghostly and apparitional, and the word "spectre" hints at a haunting landscape. The frost locates the setting in winter, and because it is not located by the speaker as on the ground or the gate or the trees, there is a sense that it pervades the entire setting.

Lines 3-4

Everything is ending. The winter is showing its "dregs" as the day draws to a close, but it is not quite night. It is twilight, the time when the shadows on the horizon can make things appear other than they are. If this setting seems simply melancholic, we also have the narrator's perception that the "winter's dregs" made this particular twilight "desolate." The "eye of day" can be taken to mean not only a certain time of day, again a time of "weakening" light, but also lends itself to the personification of the earth that is used in the poem. The word "dregs" contributes to the sense of a waning of things.

Lines 5-6

In these lines there is a musical reference both in the image of the bine-stems (the twining stems of shrubs) and in the strings of broken lyre. A lyre is a harp-like instrument which suggests heavenly influences, except here the strings are broken. The scoring probably means tracing lines upon the sky, but scoring also can refer to the writing of music and in this case the broken strings lend themselves to silence.

Lines 5-8

These lines suggest that others have found comfort within their homes and families rather than out in the barren world, but the speaker still sees them as "haunting" presences.

Lines 9-12

The death metaphor is now direct as the land becomes the Century's corpse, the sky its tomb, the wind its "death lament."

Lines 13-14

These are the lines of real despair in the poem. Here even the cycle of birth is paused. "The ancient pulse of germ and birth," the seeds of spring, are "shrunken hard and dry." The word "pulse" evokes a throbbing rhythm of blood and life, and this too seems stopped. Because the imagery has been so bleak, at this point the possibility of spring and rebirth does not seem to exist.

Lines 15-16

Here it's not just other people who seem as "fervourless" as the speaker, but rather "every spirit." The narrator's depression is beyond even envy; his viewpoint is self-absorbed and we can begin to see that the speaker is projecting his emotional state onto the landscape.

Lines 17-18

The previous description of bleakness, death, and despair has been encompassing, and so, the jolt the reader feels when coming upon this line may mimic the speaker's.

Lines 19-20

This "full-hearted evensong" is in direct contrast to the "ancient pulse" which was shrunken dry.

Lines 21-22

It isn't an exotic bird that has burst onto the landscape. It is a "aged" bedraggled common bird.

Lines 23-24

It is significant that the thrush "chooses" to fling his soul, as if there was a choice to be made. The speaker's word-selection implies a conscious decision on the part of the bird. The fact that the speaker also describes the "growing gloom" is a bit frightening, for one can hardly imagine a gloomier landscape than has been set in front of us.

Lines 25-28

The speaker is in wonder at the bird's joy. There is nothing, he feels, about earthly ("terrestrial") life that warrants the song. The poem does not clarify whether the speaker feels there is something beyond earthly existence which might warrant it, although the limiting phrase "terrestrial things" leaves that possibility open.

Lines 31-32

The speaker is still not moved by the apparent hope of the thrush, but there is a sense that while the speaker is powerless to experience hope himself, he recognizes the optimism of the thrush as having some value. Because the bird is part of the landscape and yet separate from it, it seems as if the feeling of death so etched into the landscape is not inescapable. Since this poem was published at the beginning of a new century, some readers have interpreted the thrush as looking forward with hope, but it is not clear that speaker of the poem views the bird this way.

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**Figures of Speech**

Alliteration

tangled bine-stems scored the sky (line 5)

Had sought their household fires (line 8)

His crypt the cloudy canopy (line 11)

Metaphor

weakening eye of day (line 4)

Comparison of the sun to an eye

Century's corpse (line 10)

Comparison of century to a dead body

His crypt the cloudy canopy (line 11)

Comparison of the cloud cover to a crypt

Had chosen thus to fling his soul (line 23)

Comparison of the bird's song to a soul

Simile

The tangled bine-stems scored the sky

Like strings of broken lyres (lines 5-6)

Comparison of plants stems to the broken strings of a musical instrument

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**Themes**

The primary theme of “The Darkling Thrush” is the despair of the modern temperament. Hardy describes in lyrical, descriptive detail the dying of the old world, but he cannot positively replace the dying with the new. Something is over, all is changed, civilization has decayed, and he does not know what will replace it. In “The Darkling Thrush,” Hardy poses one of the central questions of the modern age and reveals himself as a significant voice of the early twentieth century.

Hardy the modern poet is an isolated man. He has lost his connection with those nineteenth century people who are inside by their household fires. They are connected with one another, and with the natural cycle of death and rebirth, but Hardy, the twentieth century persona, is alone in the cold, surrounded by images of death. He may yearn for that simpler, truer world, and he may seek to recapture something that is lost by using the form of folk themes, but that old century is dead, and the outlook for the new century is bleak indeed.

Hardy saw traditional agricultural society decaying, the earth destroyed by industrialization, and in “The Darkling Thrush” he clearly reveals that he cannot believe in a note of hope. He finds “so little cause for carolings” that he cannot picture the new century or describe it for the reader. Hardy is “unaware” of any hope for the future.

With his tale of the “darkling thrush,” a thrush of evening rather than morning, Hardy rejects the Romantic themes of the nineteenth century. While the song of the thrush is the force that crystallizes his fervorless spirit, Hardy’s thrush is aged, “frail, gaunt and small,” not symbolizing new life but belonging to that dying old century. Even after hearing the thrush’s “full-hearted evensong/ Of joy illimited,” Hardy’s depression is lifted only as far as a state of puzzlement. He comes into the new century unable to believe that even the thrush, that representative of nature, can have a reason to hope.

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