

The Darkling Thrush

darkling - in darkness or darkening

I leant upon a coppice gate,
 When Frost was spectre-gray,
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.

coppice - little wood of small trees

spectre-gray – frost made the landscape as gray as a ghost

dregs - left-over bits desolate - bleak/deserted/dismal/miserable

eye of day - sun

bine-stems - dried-out stems of bindweed; scored - carved

broken lyres - Romantic Aeolian lyre or wind harp

anyone who lived in the neighbourhood

had gone indoors to the warmth of their fires

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

the sharp outlines of the winter landscape

outleant - stretched out, one of Hardy's own compounds

the wind's sound was like a song grieving over the century's death

pulse – life force; germ – state from which things can grow

fervourless –empty of fervour, passion, intensity

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,
With blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.

arose - burst out.

evensong – evening service worshipping God

illimited - unlimited

aged – old; frail – feeble; gaunt - thin

blast – very strong gust of wind; beruffled – disordered, scruffy; plume – feathers

growing gloom – deepening twilight as night approaches

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.

caroling - singing

terrestrial – to do with the earth, the landscape

afar or nigh – in the distance or nearby

air – tune (without accompaniment)

31 December 1900

* crypt – burial place; canopy – an ornamental cloth, here the cloudy sky hanging over the scene

Hardy wrote this poem at the very end of the nineteenth century, looking towards the new twentieth century. It was first printed as 'By the Century's Deathbed' in *The Graphic* on 29 December 1900. Hardy writes it in the form of an ode, conventionally a lyric poem in the form of an address to a particular subject, often written in a lofty, elevated style giving it a formal tone. However, odes can be written in a more private, personal vein, as in the reflective way that Hardy writes this one.

On this momentous occasion, the last hours of the old century, Hardy writes his reflections in the first person, 'I'. He is leaning on a gate in a little wood – it's traditionally a thinking pose, and the poem conveys his thoughts and feelings. The gate also suggests a doorway into a new place, the new century. It is the end of the century, and of the year; Hardy paints in words a frosty evening landscape when everyone else has gone indoors. The sharp outlines of the winter landscape seem to him like the sharp features of a corpse, specifically, the corpse of the dying nineteenth century. The cloudy sky is like the crypt (burial place) for the corpse and the sound of the winter wind a lament for the dead person – that is, the century. Every living creature seems as devoid of passion as Hardy is, almost as dead as the century. Suddenly a thrush's beautiful song breaks upon this grim cold scene, the 'growing gloom'. Hardy wonders whether the bird knows of some reason for hope of which he himself is ignorant.

I am going to take a straightforward reading of the poem, but it's obvious, even from the eventual title, 'The Darkling Thrush', that Hardy was consciously using words with a long poetic history. 'Darkling' means in darkness, or becoming dark, for Hardy can still see the landscape, and the sun is 'weakening' but not completely set. The title must be shorthand for 'the thrush that sang as night was approaching.'

The word 'darkling' has a tremendous history in poetry. The word itself goes back to the mid fifteenth century. Milton, in *Paradise Lost* Book III describes the nightingale: 'the wakeful Bird / Sings darkling, and in shadiest Covert hid / Tunes her nocturnal Note ...' Keats famously uses the word in his 'Ode to a Nightingale': 'Darkling, I listen ...'. Matthew Arnold, in 'Dover Beach' writes about the 'darkling plain'. Not only this, but there is a long and famous tradition of poems about birds, the Keats already mentioned, and those by Cowper and Wordsworth.

The next phrase with a considerable literary tradition is 'strings of broken lyres'. This harks back to the Romantic notion of an Aeolian lyre or wind harp. Coleridge, in the 'Ode to the Departing Year' addresses the 'Spirit who sweepst the wild harp of Time' referring to an Aeolian harp or lyre, a stringed instrument that is 'played' when the wind passes over its strings. Then, with 'Its crypt the cloudy canopy, / The wind its death-lament' Hardy alludes to Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind'. Shelley writes 'thou dirge / of the dying year', 'dirge' meaning 'death lament'. Several other rather consciously poetic words such as 'full-hearted', 'ecstatic', hark back to Tennyson, Wordsworth and Keats. In other words, this poem has a resonance of past poets and their thoughts and feelings on a similar subject; it makes specific allusions to these poets and poems; their echoes are part of its tradition. (In outlining the poem's place in the poetic tradition, I am indebted to Tim Armstrong's notes in his edition of *Hardy's Selected Poems*.)

It's a bleak and depressing mid-winter landscape. Hardy insists on that. The only colour is a ghostly gray.

I leant upon a coppice gate, coppice - little wood of small trees
When Frost was spectre-gray, spectre-gray – frost made the landscape as gray as a ghost
And Winter's dregs made desolate dregs - left-over bits desolate – bleak/deserted/dismal/miserable
The weakening eye of day. eye of day – the sun

There are plenty of heavy, gloomy 'g' sounds: 'gate', 'gray', 'dregs', and equally heavy 'd' sounds: 'dregs', 'desolate' and 'day'. Even day, which might be cheering, is described as 'desolate' and having a 'weakening eye' – that's to say, the sun is going down and giving out only a weak light. And a person with a weakening eye sounds old, with little power. The 'e' sound in 'leant' is repeated in 'spectre', 'dregs' and 'desolate' and these repeated sounds link the thoughtful poet who is leaning, with the ghostly gray colour (spectre-gray) of the landscape and the general desolation ('desolate'). There is a tiny whisper of sound in the repeated slight 's' sounds of coppice, spectre, dregs and desolate. 'Gray' rhymes with 'day'; the only colour left in the 'darkling' daylight is gray. Frost and Winter have capital letters, as if their presence is the most important. The rhythm is regular iambic tetrameter alternated with iambic trimeter (8 syllables in a line, with the second line in each case having just 6 syllables); it's a ballad stanza rhythm. This regular rhythm, seems to have a slow, joyless effect. The pace is slow. These lines in the opening verse establish a lifeless wasteland.

Suddenly the poet's eye alights on a detail: the mess of tangled, dried-up stems of a summer flower, carving a line against the grey sky and reminding him of the broken strings of a musical instrument.

The tangled bine-stems scored the sky bine-stems – dried out stems of bindweed
Like strings of broken lyres, broken lyres – broken harps
And all mankind that haunted nigh
Had sought their household fires.

The dead flower stems form a reminder of summer, making the winter seem harsher through contrast. The broken lyre underlines the absence of harmony and therefore perhaps of joy in his vision of life. Harsh sounds add to this impression: sounds such as 'scored' and 'sky', 'broken' and 'mankind'. Even the people who have gone home to the warmth of their fires seem to have assumed a ghostly quality, 'all mankind that haunted nigh'. The world is a bleak, colourless, cold place with a few reminders of the melody and warmth that have vanished.

The second verse intensifies the poet's perception of the gloomy wintry landscape in a series of metaphors associated with death. The landscape seems like the corpse of the century and the century is personified which intensifies one's feeling that it is a real presence. The cloudy sky seems like the century's tomb; the winter wind like the century's death song. Any 'pulse' (throbbing heartbeat) of germination and birth is dead, hard and dry. As in the first stanza, the first six lines are concerned with the winter landscape and the end of the century. And as in the first stanza, the last two lines of the second stanza are concerned with men; every spirit on the planet seems to have become as 'fervourless' (lacking in passion and intensity) as the poet, as hard and dry as the shrunken pulses of germ and birth.

The alliteration in this stanza intensifies the atmosphere of gloom and deathliness. Repeated cs link 'century's corpse', 'crypt' and 'cloudy canopy'. The rhymes of 'birth' and 'earth' are negated by 'dry' and 'I'. Everything is seen in terms of death: 'sharp features' (of a dead body), 'century's

corpse', 'crypt', 'death-lament', 'shrunken hard and dry', 'fervourless'. It seems that it is not just the death of the old century that Hardy is describing, but the death of the pulse of life that vitalises and energises him and other people, the death of hope.

At this nadir, 'At once a voice arose' and it's the voice of an old, frail, thin, scruffy-looking thrush. Not the nightingale of Miltonic and Romantic tradition, whose arrival in Spring brings rapture to the poet, but the ordinary indigenous song-thrush, or possibly a mistle thrush, and a bedraggled one at that. It is 'blast-beruffled'; it has survived the winter winds (the word blast has a long history going back at least one thousand years, indigenous, like the thrush). And from the depths of the winter winds with their 'death lament' it brings its beautiful song; three run-on lines take us at full tilt to its message: 'joy illimited' (unlimited). The very words with which Hardy introduces the song are lyrical, rhythmic, repetitive, like the thrush's song: 'At once a voice arose among/The bleak twigs overhead.' In perfect iambics, each prefaced by the vowel 'a', Hardy echoes the sound of the thrush's song: 'at once a voice arose among...' Listen to the YouTube link and you will hear that this exactly mimics the thrush's song. The poet juxtaposes the opposites: the gloomy last evening of the century, 'the growing gloom,' and 'the bleak twigs overhead' are contrasted with 'full-hearted evensong', 'joy illimited', 'fling his soul'. The poet, together with everything else on earth, 'seemed fervourless'; now we get 'full-hearted' song. 'Evensong' is the evening service of worship of God. The idea of religious faith is continued in the last verse, with the thrush's 'carolings', reminiscent of Christmas carols, and the 'blessed Hope' – hope being one of the three great Christian virtues, faith, hope and charity (love). The broken lyre strings of the tangled bine-stems, the confusion and lack of harmony in the early part of the poem, are contrasted with the ecstatic sound of the thrush's song or 'carolings' and 'air' (tune), and the perception of Hope. The thrush itself is 'aged' and 'frail', perhaps facing its own imminent end, and yet it flings its soul ecstatically upon the darkening evening.

In the first three verses there is a definite pause at the end of the fourth line (two full stops, one semi colon) but in this last verse, filled with the sense of life and hope brought by the thrush's song, there is only one comma in the verse; the rest of the lines are run-on lines, bringing us to 'some blessed Hope.' The 'pulse' that in the second verse 'was shrunken hard and dry' is contrasted with the 'trembled through' of the melody of hope. The whole poem is built upon this contrast: the first two verses cold and gloomy, the second two verses containing unlooked-for melody, joy and hope.

Hardy's mood is reflected through the landscape and the season; but he (like Wordsworth in 'The Prelude' of 1805) is ready to learn from nature; a scruffy thrush can teach him about hope.

Carol Rumens' Poem of the Week in *The Guardian* in December 2009 was 'The Darkling Thrush' and you can find it on: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2009/dec/28/poem-of-the-week-the-darkling-thrush-thomas-hardy>

For a profound and very fine reading of 'The Darkling Thrush', you can read 'Thomas Hardy's Poetry of Transcendence' by Geoffrey Harvey, click on the following link.

[Thomas Hardy's Poetry of Transcendence](#)

ariel.synergiesprairies.ca/ariel/index.php/ariel/article/.../1273/1236

File Format: PDF/Adobe Acrobat - [View as HTML](#)

If you want to hear a song thrush, click on the link to

[British Song Thrush - YouTube](#)

▶ 2:34

www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2N9BN-mYrw

Jun 5, 2008 - Uploaded by AustinAnimalMagic

A British **Song Thrush** bird singing for all he is worth in Dorset.

Literary terms

Very often writers highlight important words. They do this with:

Alliteration – several words starting with the same letter or sound, for example, ‘bleared and black and blind’.

Assonance – same vowel sound in different words, for example, ‘abode’, ‘sloped’.

Cesura – a break or pause in the middle of a line of poetry.

Consonance – same consonants in words that contain different vowel sounds, for example, ‘bode’, ‘boughed’.

Enjambement or run-on lines – when there is no punctuation at the end of a line of verse and it runs straight on to the next line.

Onomatopoeia – the effect when the sound of a word reflects its meaning, like ‘plash’.

Personification – when something that is not human is referred to as if it is a person, for example, the Titanic, ‘still couches she’.
The effect is usually to exaggerate some aspect of the topic.

Repetition – repeated word or meaning.

Rhyme – very similar to assonance; same vowel sound and final consonant, for example, ‘say’, ‘decay’. Masculine rhyme – when the final syllable is stress, as in ‘say’ and ‘decay’. Feminine rhyme – when the final syllable is not stressed, as in ‘growing’, ‘showing’.

Rhythm – the musical beat of the line, with stressed and unstressed syllables (the stressed syllables will be the important ones). The different rhythms have different names. Trochee (trochaic): strong light, strong light; iamb (iambic): light strong, light strong; dactyl: strong light light, strong light light; anapaest: light light strong, light light strong. If puzzled, try Wikipedia which is very clear on the subject.

Then there are technical words for the number of lines in a verse or stanza.

Quatrain – four lines in a verse

Sestet – six line

Octave – eight lines