

# THE DARKLING THRUSH

- *About The Poem*

Published in December 1900, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 metaphors.

'Darkling' means 'of the darkness', and conveys an 'end of days' metaphor. Here the dusk just doesn't 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 Chiarascuro 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 seems lost, depending on the way you look at it.

- *Summary*

**A scene of desolation:** When the frost was ghostly gray and the depressing winter landscape made the setting sun seem lonely and abandoned, the speaker leaned on a gate before a thicket of small trees. Twining plants, rising high, were silhouetted against the sky like the strings of broken lyres. All the people who lived nearby were inside their homes, gathered around their household fires.

**The close of the century:** The countryside looked like a corpse. The cloudy sky was the roof of the corpse's crypt, the speaker says, and the wind its

song of death. The cycle of birth and rebirth seemed to have shrunk and dried up as the result of the extreme cold of winter. This extreme cold and frost that always accompany winter have robbed every living creature of zest and enthusiasm. The poet himself does not feel cheerful or enthusiastic in any way.

**The joyful song of the thrush:** But then he heard the joyful song of a bird - a frail old thrush, whose feathers had been beaten and disordered by wintry storms - coming from scrawny branches overhead. The song was a jubilant outpouring against the evening gloom. The dreary landscape gave the thrush no reason to sing with such overflowing happiness.

**Mystery of the song:** The poet wondered what could cause the thrush to sing. There was no sign of joy. The whole scene around was bleak. The poet could not make out the reason of the happy song of the bird. The speaker wondered whether the bird was a harbinger of some hope of which he was unaware.

- *Style 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.

### ***Imagery:***

There are striking images in the poem, such as:

- The speaker is leaning against 'a coppice gate' (visual)
- The tangled bine-stems scoring the sky (visual)
- The cloudy canopy (visual)
- A voice arising among the bleak twigs (auditory)

The other sound devices used in the poem are:

**Simile:**

- The tangled bine-stems scored the sky

Like strings of broken lyres

**Metaphors:**

- Frost as spectre-grey (a pale, dull ghost-like)
- The last remaining unpleasant parts of winter, likened to winter's dregs
- The sun has been likened to the 'eye of day'.

**Personification:**

- Frost has been treated as a ghost
  - The day has an eye, like a human being
  - The century, like a human being, dies and has its dead body ready for the burial
- The thrush is not a mere bird, he has 'his soul'  
and he has his 'happy good-night song' song

**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 neighbouring 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)

- *Paraphrase*

First Stanza

I leant upon a coppice gate

When frost was spectre-grey,

And winter's dregs made desolate

The weakening eye of day.

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 into the woods. In his loneliness, the poet has **personified** winter and frost. Frost is described as '*spectre-grey*' or ghost-like grey. The winter's dregs - the fallen snow and

the heavy fog - are making the twilight/dusk (*the weakening eye of the day*) look desolate. So, as you can see, the Winter and the Frost are bleak company - they cannot arouse any sense of cheerfulness.

The tangled bine-stems scored the sky  
Like strings of broken lyres,  
And all mankind that haunted night  
Had sought their household fires  
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 lifeless and haunting, instead of living their lives. Then people going home and seeking their household fires add to the image of gloomy end of the day. There is no vibrancy in life or colour.

### Second Stanza

The land's sharp features seem to be  
The Century's corpse outleant,

His crypt the cloudy canopy,  
The wind his death lament.

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.

The ancient pulse of germ and birth  
Was shrunken hard and dry,  
And every spirit upon earth  
Seemed fervourless as I.

In winter, Nature is generally at a standstill. Life's vibrancy (*ancient pulse of germ and birth*) seems to have stopped (*shrunken 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.

Third Stanza

At once a voice arose among  
The bleak twigs overhead  
In a full-hearted evensong  
Of joy illimited;  
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.

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

#### Fourth Stanza

So little cause for carolings  
Of such ecstatic sound

Was written on terrestrial things  
Afar or nigh around.,

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.

That I could think there trembled through  
His happy good-night air

Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
And I was unaware.

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.

Thomas Hardy presents a theme of hope in his poem *The Darkling Thrush*. In the poem, the winter season has brought about death and despair. A tired old man leans over a coppice gate in a desolate area, to see the ghosts of the past and little hope for the future.

- *Title*

The title of the poem '*The Darkling Thrush*' is quite suggestive. The main focus of the poem is not the desolation of the wintry scene described so vividly and evocatively in the first two stanzas. The focus of interest is the song of the thrush hidden somewhere in the dark. Without its joyful song the perspective is not complete and clear. The song comes as a surprise to the

speaker. Even though he fails to understand the reason for the song, he instinctively feels that it hints at some hope of good to come. Thus, the song of the thrush acquires its meaning and significance, which justifies the title of the poem.

- *Complex Poem*

'The Darkling Thrush' is not a simple poem. It can be read at many levels. At one level, it is a superb nature poem. The poet describes an evening scene on a very cold wintry day minutely. The descriptive imagery is at its best:

*I leant upon a coppice gate  
When Frost was spectre-grey,  
And Winter's dregs made desolate  
The weakening eye of day.*

But as the poem advances, we gather that the main interest of the poem lies not in the desolation of the wintry scene but the desolation in the speaker's own heart. There is correspondence between the mood of nature and the mood of a human being. And yet, the song of the bird confirms that this is not so. Though the speaker seems to be totally

hopeless and listless, this is not true of nature. The bird's song is a reminder of the good old days to come. It indicates the birth of a new era which may bring some good to mankind. This note of mysticism is confounding. Hardy, being sceptic, refers to some religious quality in the concluding lines of his poem :

*His happy good-night air  
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
And I was unaware.*

Whatever be the case, the poem turns out to be quite interesting and stimulating.