

The Darkling Thrush

by Thomas Hardy

1. (a) From the poem, 'The Darkling Thrush' describe what elements of nature has the poet emphasised upon?

Answer : Hardy finds various aspects of nature, which clash at times. Nature can be depressing like hell as seen in his "The Convergence of the Twain," and at the same time it can be beautiful like "Birds at Winter Nightfall." One amazing fact of the elements of nature in his poems is that Hardy not only uses it as ornamentation but also as a purpose to anticipate serious topics like life itself. Hardy's poem, "The Darkling Thrush" reflects on the poet's inquiry about the meaning of life in nature. The puzzle to understand the meaning of nature to man is left for the reader to ponder upon. The speaker of the poem sees nature as alive as a source of inspiration and influence.

*I leant upon a coppice gate
When Frost was spectre-grey*

Though the speaker is leaning up against a gate leading to a big patch of brush and brambles but the focus is on the cold and dreary winter day. As the speaker ponders that "Frost" is "spectre-grey", he is actually trying to highlight or beautify the frost, to enhance the element of nature in this very poem "Spectre" is also an extravagant term for "ghost" used during the 19th century.

The term of nature winter is an allegory for death which is presented with both the purposes - natural element and the theme of despair in the poem too.

So, it can be summed up that this poem "The Darkling Thrush" is full of natural elements which are treated in Hardy's own style to maintain the grim theme of the poem too.

(b) What is the significance of the time when this poem was published?

Answer: The poem "The Darkling Thrush" was written with a precise prominence on time and change. If we ponder upon the time when "The Darkling Thrush" was written then it was the last day of the nineteenth century, again a time which has great importance as it's a link between the forthcoming time and the past. The poem itself deals with a subject about the evolution from one century to another in terms of time and change.

Critics have applauded Hardy for writing a poem at a crucial moment of time, as seen in this poem, which is written at the turn of the century or the millennium. "The Darkling Thrush", written at the very end of the nineteenth century, has a compact view of the past and vision for the forthcoming in precise and metaphorical stanzas. The ambience is made from the very first stanza as is seen that the poem begins on a cold winter's day; "When Frost was spectre-grey and Winter's dregs made desolate". To make the weather more potent, Hardy has personified the season and frost and has also given it humanlike

qualities. It is after knowing this fact the reader can comprehend the reason for the word "Darkling" in the title of this poem. Hardy seems to be converted from a lively man in the former century to that of a pessimist in the succeeding one. The main importance of time in this poem begins from when it was written, as this poem was written exactly at the end of the 19th century.

(c) Does the depressed narrator in the poem find hope due to the thrush?

Answer : The beginning of the poem as starts on a winter day, which reflects in itself the notion of depression and death. This is the environment, which the depressed narrator is trying to express to his readers. It demonstrates the attitude of the depressed narrator as he is not looking forward to a bright future rather the only thing he knows will happen for sure is death.

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

This stanza portrays the sole impression of death, no vigour, and nothing to look forward to. Within all these depressing surroundings Hardy, the depressed narrator, is astonished to hear "a voice arose among the bleak twigs overhead" in the third stanza. It was a bird singing "a full-hearted evensong of joy limited;" all this collectively presents a wonderful contrast on one hand, a bird is singing a joyful song full of zest whereas on the other hand, the narrator "seemed fervourless". The appearance of the singing bird brought a hope: "An aged thrush, frail, gaunt and small, in blast-beruffled plume". The thrush can be taken as a mirror image of Hardy, the narrator himself, gloomy dull, tired and hopeless. It's here, that the narrator finds hope because he thinks that though being, old and feeble, the thrush can sing in such a jolly tone, then why cannot he have happiness in life.

Hardy was strikingly depressed throughout the poem and confused too as to why the thrush was singing so zestfully, as he cannot find any reason for the thrush to sing so joyously. As soon as the song begins, the surrounding begins to shed off all its gloom scattered around—the ghostly and grey frost started getting lighter, the depressing winter landscape, which made the sun set lonely and abandoned, faded, 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 these were trying to lighten their gloomy moods. Hardy assumes the song "Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew". Hardy thus tells the readers that earlier he believed that there was no hope in the future for him to adjust.

It is dusk on the last day of the nineteenth century and the atmosphere is dead and motionless.

But as soon as he suddenly heard the bubbly, jolly song of the thrush, he started wondering if the bird i.e., the thrush was a herald of some hope of which he was both hopeless and unconscious.

2. (a) In the poem 'The Darkling Thrush,' do the "broken strings" refer to Hardy's possibly broken spirit after his career took a downslide? How does the poem relate to his life?

Answer : Thomas Hardy has expressed gloomy and fatalistic views of various events in most of his writings and so it is not surprising that he uses a bleak winter landscape to symbolize the passing of the nineteenth century, which the poem calls a 'corpse' in a 'crypt'. On a closer analysis, the poem seems to be a reflection of the poet's life. The usage of the words 'broken strings' may be an indication of the time when his writing career was weakening. When Hardy wrote 'The Darkling Thrush' on the threshold of the twentieth century, he himself was making a transition—from writing novels to writing poetry exclusively. The motivation for the change was the negative public reception of two of his novels, 'Tess of the d'Urbervilles' and 'Jude the Obscure'. Their frank depictions of morally taboo subjects outraged readers. The novelist George Gissing, who was a friend of Hardy, had called the novel as 'Jude the Obscene'. So, Hardy had a reason to be gloomy and was full of doubts about whether the public will accept his poetry and would the new century improve on the old. It is important to notice that in this poem Hardy offers a little bit of hope, expressed in the joyous song of the bird. The hope that Hardy had felt in the song of the thrush came fruitful with 'Tess' and 'Jude the Obscure' now being widely read and admired by all lovers of literature. His poetry too is generally received with high praise and admiration.

(b) Do you think there is a relation between the time the poem was written and the tired and desolate state of the thrush?

Answer : 'The Darkling Thrush' was published by the end of the nineteenth century and time has a great significance with regards to the background of the poem. Hardy's thrush belongs to the Romantic tradition, in which birds seem to express emotion in 'songs that have human significance. Hardy wrote this poem in the last days of December and it is a sad narration of the dying century. The end of one century certainly means the start of a brand-new century, but the narrator in the poem finds it difficult to maintain any hope. The narrator describes the thrush as a tired and desolate bird that seems to be tired of all the trials and negativities of the day. The poet strikes a similitude between the tired bird and the passing century. The way a year or century ends laden with the happenings during its tenure, it becomes like a consumed bird returning after a day full of flying, struggling, efforts and disappointments. The Keatsian word 'darkling' simply means 'in the dark', but it has the sound of a prelude to a birdsong. To paint the passing of the year, the poet uses the image of the 'aged thrush, frail, gaunt and small, in the blast-be ruffled plume.'

(c) What situation in the poem makes the reader feel sad? What is it that the small bird could see but the narrator couldn't?

Answer : In the poem, the poet is sad and dreary and the world seems to him full of gloom and misery. The narrator in the poem only sees the negativity around him and fails to see the hope that is abundantly spread around. It is the end of the century and the visual around seems as if it the end of the world. A tiny frail bird which seems to be beaten by the weather and time, looking old and desolate like the year and the century passing by, is heard by the narrator. The poor bird has nothing to look forward to and yet it was singing a song of joy and hope. The narrator is moved by the bird's song and wonders why would

anyone sing a song and waste their breath when there was no one to hear the song in that dreary hopeless atmosphere. The notes of the thrush contribute a little hope to the coming times. The narrator is wondering why the bird was doing this when the world already seems to have fallen but he cannot, of course, talk to a bird, so he let goes the enquiry. But in his heart, he is contented that at least someone has found hope in these cold sad times. So, what if it is a bird that has made the discovery, which the narrator fails to see even though he is a human being. The small bird could see a small quantum of hope, which the poet is unable to see.

Long Questions and Answers

1. Isolation and loneliness are central causes of depression and despair, which abound in the poem - The Darkling Thrush. How is hope ushered in by the end of the poem? Discuss the two themes.

Answer : "The Darkling Thrush" is a nature poem and its subject is the titular bird. Hardy wrote about this poem to usher in the New Year and the new century. The narrator speaks of a frost-bitten landscape, grey and lifeless, and how it makes him feel miserable and depressed. It is about the lack of hope and the doomed state of the world where everything is sombre, dark and grey.

The themes of loneliness and isolation abound in the poem- The Darkling Thrush. The poem is about a bird (thrush) that is singing a song on a gloomy evening of the last day of the year. The spectacle that the poet was watching was desolate and lonely.

Covering the leafless trees of December, when the frost was ghostly grey and the depressing winter landscape made the setting sun seem lonely and abandoned. The poet was sad because he felt that the New Year would bring in nothing to be happy about. The poet looks out at the wintry landscape, which appears to him to be the corpse of the previous century with its land barren and shrunken. Just like the speaker's feelings, everything on earth appears to be without energy or passion. All the people who lived nearby were inside their homes, gathered around their household fires. The cloudy sky is like the crypt for the corpse and the sound of the winter wind, a lament for the dead person that is the century. The narrator finds a place with no connection to anyone. Every living creature seems devoid of passion.

The poet's word choice creates an atmosphere of separation from the rest of the world i.e., desolate, weakening, haunted, dregs, broken suggest death, cold and ghostly. The broken lyres is a classic image of disharmony and perhaps points to a lack of joy in the poet's vision of life.

Right from the very onset of the poem, the inescapable feeling is one of depression and loneliness. However, gradually there comes a change from acceptance of the harder aspects and times in life to embrace of what joys exist: the narrator does not see the reason for that joy but is inspired to continue searching for it. The theme of hope is introduced with the appearance of a songbird. A full-throated song, sung by an old thrush was heard and the

mournful mood of the poet started changing. Seeing the thrush and its ability to find and create beauty in a joyless landscape allows the narrator to embrace the hope he can find in his own heart. The thrush's song breaks the mood of unhappiness. Despite the narrator's pessimistic attitude, he is appreciative to know that something in the natural world can still find joy in life. The caged bird has chosen to strike a note of new hope. The growing gloom is checked by that spirited song. Hopeful thoughts and cheer filled the atmosphere. The poet was unable to understand the ecstasy of the bird, however, the bird was successful in lifting the poet's mood from a melancholic state to a joyful state. Thus, the poem, which began sorrowfully, ended on a note of hope. So also the mood of the poet changed from gloom to hope.

Thus, we can see that hope holds influence with such great intensity and strength that it can conquer the worst of miseries and sorrows.

2. What are the metaphors used by the poet in The Darkling thrush to convey his desolation?

Answer : Hardy writes in a variety of tightly structured forms with a well-defined poetic pattern. There is a lot of variety to Hardy's use of language. Frequently, Hardy uses archaic or rustic diction and syntax. Sometimes he capitalises words mid-line to emphasize a moral point or an irony. Many of his poems are arranged in regular stanzas, with a set line length. Hardy's tone ranges from awe to despair. Images of nature are frequently accompanied by a tone of amazement

Hardy is sometimes the autobiographical speaker, though he also uses an abstract observer as the speaker. Hardy uses metaphorical language frequently. A metaphor compares two things without using the words "like" or "as." It gives the qualities of one thing to something that is quite different.

'The Darkling Thrush' depicts the bleakness and coldness in this poem: it is the end of the century, and of the year. 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.

In the first stanza, metaphor is used to depict the end of the year. Here the sunset symbolizes the end of the year. The metaphor tells the reader that the day is coming to an end so the sun is setting.

In the second stanza, the harsh barren landscape is a symbol of the death of the 19th century and loss of the nineteenth-century values in modern life. The metaphor represents the end of spring. He sees no hope for rebuilding or renewal in the coming century.

In the third stanza, despite the "growing gloom" of the end of the 19th century, the song of the thrush is a symbol of hope for new meaning in the new century, which emphasizes Hardy's search for meaning.

Century's corpse shows the comparison of the death of the previous century.

"His crypt the cloudy canopy" brings out the comparison of the cloud cover to a crypt.

Finally, "Had chosen thus to fling his soul" brings the comparison of the bird's song to a soul.