The Darkling Thrush Study Guide

The Darkling Thrush by Thomas Hardy

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

Thomas Hardy's gloomy poem about the turn of the twentieth century, "The Darkling Thrush," remains one of his most popular and anthologized lyrics. Written on the eve of the new century and first published in *Graphic* with the subtitle "By the Century's Deathbed" and then published in *London Times* on New Year's Day, 1901, the thirty-twoline poem uses a bleak and wintry landscape as a metaphor for the close of the nineteenth century and the joyful song of a solitary thrush as a symbolic image of the dawning century. Like much of Hardy's writing, "The Darkling Thrush" embodies the writer's despair and pessimism. This is partially offset, however, by the artfulness of the poem itself. Hardy was sixty years old when he penned the lyric, far past the life expectancy for a man of his time. A few years earlier he had stopped writing novels, after critics panned *Jude the Obscure*, and turned to writing poetry exclusively. "The Darkling Thrush" is included in his second volume of verse, *Poems of the Past and the Present* (1901), in the section "Miscellaneous Poems," sandwiched between "The Last Chrysanthemum" and "The Comet at Yell'ham," two other bleak poems of nature. Harper & Brothers published *Poems of the Past and the Present* in an edition of one thousand copies, and a few months later a second edition was published in an edition of five hundred copies. The poem also frequently appears in poetry anthologies such as *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* because it is a transitional poem, illustrating the trepidation and doubt many people felt about the future as the Victorian era came to an end and the modern era was about to begin.

Author Biography

Poet and novelist Thomas Hardy was born in the third year of Queen Victoria's reign on June 2, 1840, in Higher Bockhampton, Dorset, England, to Thomas Hardy, a stonemason, and Jemima (Hand) Hardy. Hardy's father, who played the violin, and his mother, who loved books, encouraged their frail son's pursuit of literature early on. Hardy entered the new school at Lower Bockhampton in 1848 already knowing how to read. In 1856, Hardy apprenticed with architect John Hicks and, in 1862, he moved to London to work with Arthur Blomfield's architectural firm. He returned to Dorset in 1867 and worked again with Hicks, this time overseeing the restoration of old village churches. Hardy, however, read and wrote regularly all the while and, in 1865, he published his first piece, the short story "How I Built My House," which appeared in *Chamber's Journal*.

Although Hardy's first love was poetry, he made his reputation as a novelist. In 1868, he finished his first novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady*, but no one would publish it. In 1871, he published the novel *Desperate Remedies* in three volumes with William Tinsley, but its sales were mediocre. Critics praised his next novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), comparing it to the work of George Eliot. The unexpected success in 1874 of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, which was serialized in *Cornhill*, cemented Hardy's reputation as a first-rate novelist and allowed him to devote all of his time to writing. The novel also identified Hardy with rural characters and the fictional region he called Wessex, which he based on Dorset and the surrounding area. Hardy's future novels, many of which were also first serialized, include *The Return of the Native* (1878), *The Trumpet-Major: A Tale* (1880), *A Laodicean* (1881), *Two on a Tower: A Romance* (1882), *The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid* (1883), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented* (1892), and *Jude the Obscure* (1896). After critics panned *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy stopped writing novels and devoted himself to poetry. Even though he had been writing poetry since the 1850s, he had published little of it, preferring instead the money that novel-writing brought him.

Hardy published his first collection of poems, *Wessex Poems and Other Verses*, in 1898, and *Poems of the Past and the Present* in 1901. Though they did not make him the kind of money he had been making writing novels, they were critically praised (for the most part) and helped establish him as a leading British poet. Lyrics such as "The Darkling Thrush," written on the eve of the twentieth century, and "Drummer Hodge," an indictment of the British involvement in the Boer War, became instantly popular and continue to be reprinted in anthologies. Hardy published eight volumes of poems in all. By the time of his death in 1928 of a massive heart attack, he had become an international celebrity, and admirers came from around the world to visit him. His many awards include the Order of Merit, 1910, from the British government and a number of honorary doctorates in literature from schools such as Cambridge University (1913) and Oxford University (1920).

Poem Text

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.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

The opening lines of "The Darkling Thrush" establish the tone and the setting of the poem. Hardy underscores the speaker's meditative mood by describing him leaning upon a "coppice gate," meaning a gate that opens onto the woods. The presence of frost tells readers it is winter, and the adjective "spectre-grey," a word Hardy coined, suggests a haunted landscape. The word "dregs" means the last of something, but here the dregs act upon the "weakening eye of day," making the twilight "desolate."

In the fifth and sixth lines, the speaker uses a simile to compare "tangled bine-stems" to "strings of broken lyres." Bine-stems are the stems of shrubs, and a lyre is a stringed musical instrument similar to a harp. Although "score" is a musical term, Hardy uses it to create an ominous visual image. While the speaker is outside contemplating a bleak landscape, the rest of the world is comfortably inside, warmed by "their household fires."

Stanza 2

In this stanza, the speaker uses metaphor to describe the barren landscape as the corpse of the nineteenth century. The now personified century is entombed in the sky ("the cloudy canopy"), and the wind is its "death lament." Lines 13-14 refer to the seeds of spring, which are now "shrunken hard and dry." The description literally depicts what happens to seeds during winter, but figuratively the speaker implies that the very processes of nature are at a standstill and that the next spring might not come. In the last two lines, the speaker compares himself with "every spirit upon earth," projecting his despondency onto the world.

Stanza 3

This stanza marks a break in the tone and action of the poem, as the speaker hears an old thrush break out in song. Thrushes are fairly common songbirds and usually have a brownish upper plumage and a spotted breast. "Evensong" means a song sung in the evening, significant here both for an "aged" bird and because it is the last day of a century. The image of the bird "choosing" to "fling his soul / Upon the growing gloom" suggests both hope and desperation and resonates with the speaker's own emotions. The image also evokes the phoenix, a mythological bird with a beautiful song that self-reincarnates from its own ashes.

Stanza 4

In this stanza, the speaker expresses incredulity at the bird's singing ("carolings"), literally wondering what on Earth ("terrestrial things") could make it so happy. The

incongruity of a joyful bird amidst such a stark landscape is striking, and it puzzles the speaker who, though he can recognize joy, cannot experience it himself. However, the word "blessed," the capitalization of "Hope," and the limiting phrase "terrestrial things" open the possibility that there might be religious or spiritual reasons for the thrush's behavior. The speaker's acknowledgement that he is "unaware" of the cause of the bird's singing also suggests the possibility that there may indeed *be* a cause for it and that the speaker might in time come to know that cause.

Themes

Search for Meaning

The speaker's despair echoes Hardy's own world-weariness and loss of hope for humanity's future. Isolated from those who have "sought their household fires," the speaker sees a death-haunted landscape and a "growing gloom." Hardy himself mourned the passing of agricultural society and saw little cause to celebrate England's rapid industrialization, which helped destroy the customs and traditions of rural life. The speaker's connection to the past has been severed, and he cannot find meaning in the present, and the dawning century, symbolized by the thrush's song, offers little in the way of meaning. The bird is "frail, gaunt, and small," and his "carolings," though joyful and "fullhearted," are an evensong and about to end. Any meaning that a new beginning might bring with it is nowhere to be found, not in the landscape and not in the speaker's heart.

Nature

In Hardy's poem, nature is not a pretty place where flowers bloom and fuzzy animals frolic in the sun waiting to be petted. It is governed by the cycle of life and death and is largely indifferent to human needs or desires. "The Darkling Thrush" deromanticizes nature by taking even the capacity for renewal away: "The ancient pulse of germ and birth, / Was shrunken hard and dry." Romantics such as William Wordsworth often depicted nature as awe-inspiring, simultaneously inscrutable and full of meaning. Hardy's speaker, however, finds no inspiration in the processes of the natural world. Though he has meditated on the nature of life, he has found no life in nature. Even the thrush, the harbinger of hope, is "aged" and on its last song. By using the exhausted landscape as a symbolic projection of the speaker's own interior life, Hardy makes a bleak comment on the potential of human nature as well.

Chaos and Order

The form of Hardy's poem is traditional in meter and rhyme and acts as a container of sorts for the chaos of the landscape he describes. Other structural parallels similarly give the poem a coherence that the poem's themes work against. The speaker's posture leaning "upon a coppice gate," for example, is like the "Century's corpse outleant." By juxtaposing the chaos of a dying world with the order of its description, Hardy illustrates and underscores his own status as a poet with one foot in Victorian England and the other in the modern world.

Style

Form

Composed in four octet, or eight-line, stanzas, with an ABABCDCD rhyme scheme, "The Darkling Thrush" is written in iambic tetrameter, with lines one, three, five, and seven carrying four stressed syllables, and lines two, four, six, and eight carrying three stressed syllables. In poetry, a foot refers to a group of syllables, one of which is accented. An iambic foot, the most popular in English verse, consists of an unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable. The restrictions of these conventional features are at odds with the tone of despair and portrayal of meaninglessness in the poem, creating a tension that gives the poem energy and emotional depth.

Diction

Diction refers to an author's word choice. Hardy is known for his innovative use of the English language, and he frequently coined new words in his poetry. He called words created for a single occasion "nonce words," and in "The Darkling Thrush" he uses a few, including "outleant," "blastberuffled," and "spectre-gray" to fit the meter and rhyme scheme of the poem. He was especially deft at creating compound words such as the latter two. A student of the English language, Hardy also echoed unusual words used by other poets. The unusual word "darkling," for example, was used by John Keats in "Ode to a Nightengale" and by Matthew Arnold in "Dover Beach."

Personification

Personification is a trope, one of the two major divisions of figures of speech. To personify something is to give human qualities to inanimate things. Hardy does this throughout the poem, describing twilight as the "weakening eye of day" and the landscape as "The Century's corpse." Personification allows him to paradoxically make the land "come alive" while at the same time to describe its death-like features. Other tropes include metaphor, metonymy, simile, and synecdoche.

Historical Context

When Hardy wrote "The Darkling Thrush" in 1900, the British Empire had expanded to include almost 4 million square miles. England controlled a sizeable portion of the world's land, including India, large swaths of Africa and China, Australia, and Canada. Some were outright colonies; others held "dominion" status. *Poems of the Past and the Present* (1901), which includes "The Darkling Thrush," also contains many poems expressing Hardy's dismay with British imperialism. Poems in the section "War Poems," for example, deal primarily with the Boer War. In 1899, the British High Commissioner of Cape Colony in South Africa, Alfred Milner, schemed to gain power of the gold mines in the Dutch Boer republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, precipitating a war with the Boers. More than a half million British soldiers fought in the war and tens of thousands were killed before the war ended in 1902 with the Treaty of Vereeniging. Hardy's disillusionment with humanity was also a disillusionment with his country's policies. Britain viewed its imperialistic expansion as a moral responsibility, using Darwin's theories of evolution as a rationale for exerting greater control over their colonies. British writer Rudyard Kipling referred to this responsibility as "the white man's burden," meaning that it was the God-given duty of the British to civilize and Christianize those people whom the British assumed were incapable of governing themselves.

Hardy was also disillusioned with the ways in which industrialization was changing how human beings related to their environment. During Queen Victoria's reign, technologies such as the railway, electricity, the steamship, and suspension bridges re-shaped the working lives of millions of British subjects, sending them flocking to cities to work in factories and live in row houses. The agricultural depression of the 1870s further depleted the number of remaining farmers. By the turn of the century, more than 80 percent of Britain's population lived in cities. Hardy's pessimism, rooted in his lament for the now abandoned farms of the British countryside and for the loss of folk customs and traditions, is a pessimism of which the British in general have been historically accused. Poems such as "The Darkling Thrush" did nothing to dispel that image.

The sentiment expressed in the last lines of the poem, that of a man who would like to feel joy but cannot, mirrors Hardy's, and many other late Victorians', attitude towards religion: he would like to believe in God, but he cannot. This shift in attitude came about gradually but was in no small part due to the influence of Charles Darwin's theories of evolution, detailed in his study *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, published in 1859. Science itself, in its modern incarnation, was a product of Victorian England, replacing the fields of "natural philosophy" and "natural history." Darwin's claim that all life struggles to exist and that it is the survival of the fittest that ultimately wins out challenged Judeo-Christian notions that "man" is at the center of the universe and that the goal of one's life is to strive for moral perfection. With the popularization of evolution and the formalization of science education in schools, more people began questioning the place of human beings in nature and the universe. Karl Marx's publication of the *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848 also gave Victorians another way to think about their place in the social pecking order. By 1901, although churchgoing

remained a regular part of small town life, only about 20 percent of the people in London regularly attended services.

Critical Overview

On the whole, critics have been kind to "The Darkling Thrush," praising both its subject matter and its form. It is one of Hardy's most written-about poems. Richard Carpenter, for example, in his study of Hardy and his work, *Thomas Hardy*, writes, "[The poem] is sharp and clear in its images, harsh and austere in its feelings, done in Hardy's most characteristic manner." In his essay "Thomas Hardy: Moments of Vision," Geoffrey Harvey calls "The Darkling Thrush" a poem of the highest imaginative order," noting that the speaker mourns God's death as much as the death of nature. Sheila Berger, in her study *Thomas Hardy and Visual Structures*, makes a link between what the speaker physically sees and the thematic vision of the poem. "There is a question in the air," Berger writes, "as there is in much of the poetry." Dennis Taylor reads the poem in the tradition of other "bird poems," including Keats's "Ode to a Nightengale," Shelley's "To a Skylark," and numerous poems by William Wordsworth. Taylor writes, "'The Darkling Thrush' . . . announces itself as the last nineteenth-century revision of the great tradition." David Perkins also notes the poem's relation to other bird poems of the nineteenth century, specifically that all of the birds are symbolic of the visionary imagination. In his essay for *English Literary History*, Perkins claims that Hardy's thrush, however, is a "more complicated□ symbolic reference . . . with the implication that there is no hope of closing the gap between the speaker and bird."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of literature whose writing appears regularly in literary journals. In this essay, Semansky considers modernist attitudes in Hardy's poem.

Critics have long called Hardy a transitional figure between the Victorian era and the modern world. Though it is easy to see the Victorian influences in his poetry, especially in his traditional verse forms and his nostalgia for older, simpler ways of living, it is often more difficult to see what makes him a modernist. In "The Darkling Thrush," written at the beginning of a new century, Hardy evokes some of the ideas and sentiments that would influence numerous subsequent poets such as Wilfred Owen, Philip Larkin, and W. H. Auden and that would help to shape modernist attitudes towards history and humanity. These include the representation of nature as a hostile (or, at best, an indifferent) force, a tolerance for contradiction, and a deep pessimism about the potential for humanity to change its behavior.

The Victorian era, lasting from 1837 until Queen Victoria's death in 1901, was marked by intense and rapid change (political, technological, socioeconomic, and psychological), and writing during the period often addresses the idea of loss. One stereotype of Victorian writing, especially poetry, depicts it as overly polite, grave, and with a thread of uncertainty and doubt running through it. Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" (1867), for example, laments human misery and the loss of faith. The Victorians were fearful of what the future would bring. They were riding the crest of an unprecedented buildup of their empire, but if the British were proud of their status as "world civilizers," they were also insecure as they waited for resistance or retaliation. Like Americans today, the Victorians had to bear the obligations and scorn that come with being a world power. In addition to the geopolitical responsibility that came with international might, the Victorians had to contend with changes in how they perceived themselves in the universal scheme of things. Writers such as Marx and Darwin forced Victorians to reassess their relationship to one another and to nature. Darwin's theory of evolution caused many to rethink the purpose of their lives.

Literary modernism began to take hold in the 1890s. In the United States, writers such as Stephen Crane wrote stories about individuals driven by forces of which they were only dimly aware battling an indifferent nature. Hardy had been chronicling his own bleak view of the human condition in his novels in the last quarter of the century, and that bleakness continued unabated in his poems. The speaker of "The Darkling Thrush" is a typical Hardy character: a watcher, a thinker, one who projects onto the physical world his own emotional turmoil. Paradoxically, the world revolves around him, yet also seems to ignore him. This intense inwardness is also evident in how the speaker characterizes other people. It is not just *some* people or *some* families that have gone inside but "all mankind" that has retreated from nature's threatening landscape and "sought their household fires."

The speaker is left alone outside with death all around him. The century that has passed is now a "corpse outleant." The sense of loss is everywhere, in the "weakening eye of

day," in the "Winter's dregs," even in the procreative powers of nature itself, "the ancient pulse of germ and birth," which is now "shrunken hard and dry." In some ways, the poem is an elegy for the troubled nineteenth century. Elegies are meditative poems that lament the loss of something. However, there is no lamentation for a particular idea or object in Hardy's poem—just the *recognition* of a passing and a sense of gloom and doom that the speaker generalizes to everything and everyone around him. The only lamenting done is by the figure of the century, which mourns itself. One can imagine that Hardy did not need the occasion of the century's turn to write this poem. For Hardy's speaker, the world is going from bad to worse, and the century's passing is merely a way to keep time of misery's march.

The thrush, appearing in the third stanza, arrives as a potential savior for the darkness threatening literally to bury the speaker. That it "chooses" to "fling his soul / Upon the growing gloom" is significant, for it underscores the importance of individuality and free will, contentious ideas for late Victorians who were busy digesting notions that their ancestors were apes and that human beings are driven as much by biological imperatives as they are by rational decision-making. The landscape is not improving but becoming worse than before. Hardy believed that if humanity were ever to change, it would need to marshal its own resources and not rely on the Christian God to rescue it from self-destruction.

The charges of pessimism against Hardy are so great that Norman Page, in his encyclopedia *Oxford Reader's Companion to Hardy*, includes an entry on "pessimism." However, Peter Casagrande, who wrote the entry, apologizes for Hardy, arguing that the poet is really misunderstood. Casagrande writes: "Pessimism was for Hardy not an end in itself but an instrument for exposure of his highly refined sense of reality—a sense better captured by the phrase 'tragic realism' than the word 'pessimism.'" The tragic realism can be seen in the last stanza, in the speaker's allowance for the possibility that human change may be possible, but that it is highly improbable.

William Buckler notes the gloominess but argues that Hardy's poem "functions in a narrow gauge between sentimentality and severity" and that the poem is successful because of its pacing of "poetic disclosure." Buckler claims that Hardy's "death-resurrection motif would pose no problems if it were purely naturalistic, but the capitalization of the crucial word 'hope' skews it toward the supernatural . . . and this is a problem." Buckler "solves" this problem by making a distinction between the poet and the speaker, asserting that where the speaker sees "the pattern of a miracle" in the bird's appearance, the poet "sees only a mystery." Buckler concludes:

> Recognition of the discrepancy restores a wholly acceptable naturalistic insight to the poem while revealing another dimension of its imaginative awareness, namely, the proneness of the human spirit, even in the face of massive empirical data, to leap to miraculous explanations that weaken rather than strengthen the transformation of spirit to which the poems speaks.

What Buckler describes is irony. However, his irony rests on the necessity of readers seeing the wink in the eye of the person writing the poem (Hardy). Buckler's interpretation is weak, but it is one of many that critics have made of Hardy's poem. The very fact that Hardy's poem has occasioned such response speaks to its popularity and to the fact that so many readers have recognized in it the emotional impasse that continues to plague individuals in the twenty-first century. People *want* to believe that their lives have purpose, that the future will be better, if not for themselves, then for their children. However, all of the evidence speaks to the contrary. This evidence includes, during Hardy's time, the wars (e.g., the Boer War of 1899-1902), which the British Empire waged all over the world in the name of civilizing "ignorant" peoples, and the degrading living conditions of the working class toiling in poverty in London and other industrialized cities. These urban laborers were now not only cut off from any relationship to the land but from the products of their own work as well. Technological progress and scientific knowledge had not brought enlightenment to the masses□just more misery and pain. This would become even more evident in the next decade and a half, when the world would plunge into war, with countries using new military technology to slaughter one another's troops.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "The Darkling Thrush," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Maynard explores the themes of death and a life without hope in "The Darkling Thrush," especially as they relate to similar conclusions in nineteenth-century thought.

The poem offers two complementary portraits of the "senselessness" of nature. One is literal and the other figurative, corresponding to the two meaning of "darkling": "in the dark" and "obscure."

In the first two stanzas, the world appears physically dead. The first suggests the exhaustion of sense experience. There is little to see in the "spectre-gray" landscape; the "eye of day" is weak. "Winter's dregs" offer little to satisfy the sense of taste or smell. Heaviness characterizes the sense of touch, as suggested by Hardy's use of "leant" to describe his own physical posture in the scene. Finally, there is no sound at all. The image of tangled bine-stems resembling strings of broken lyres vividly conveys the utter silence of the scene.

The second stanza extends this death-sense to include time as well as space. The landscape seems to represent the century that is ending, or dying, this New Year's Eve. The land's desolate features represent more than the simple and conventional figure of wintry death, or the lowest point in the cycle of seasons. A greater termination is occurring, involving the very "pulse" of creation. Hardy qualifies this assertion by frankly confessing his own "fervourless" condition; but the poem's tone up to this point is seamless. There is even a touch of grandeur in the image of the clouds forming a canopy for the dead century.

In the last two stanzas, nature, as represented by the singing thrush, displays a sudden vigor. Here, too, nature is "senseless," inasmuch as the song does not arise from anything perceived in "terrestrial things." That is, the song is not inspired by anything in the immediate scene, or anything Hardy might understand as a reason for song. The frailty of the bird itself, "gaunt and small" with "blastberuffled plumage," also militates against any song.

Donald Davie accuses Hardy of fudging the poem's ending to avoid ruffling readers who might recoil at the prospect of a life without hope. "Can we doubt," asks Davie, "that the reader of *The Times* in 1900, and the reader of anthologies ever since, and at present, read the lines to mean: 'I, the notorious pessimist and author of *Jude the Obscure*, humbly confess myself foolish beside the sanguine and resolute wisdom of this bird'?" On textual grounds alone, a good case can be raised against Davie's charge. Hardy published the poem with the title "By the Century's Deathbed." The poem's theme is certainly the death of hope; but the revised title is infinitely more suggestive.

If the thrush is "in the dark," singing at night, flinging its soul into the "growing gloom," it is also singing for what must remain to humanity decidedly obscure reasons. Whatever prompts the bird's song is not evident to Hardy. The "illimited joy" of the song and

"blessed hope" it betokens seem small recompense for the pain men and women endure now and have endured through the century. If the bird sings while humanity confronts the desolation of its existence, the question arises whether nature has any sense□awareness or concern□at all, for the thrush's joy can only be heard as an ironic comment on humanity's joyless state.

The striking image in the first stanza, the simile likening bine-stems to the strings of broken lyres, adds significant weight to Hardy's sense of the century's death. The simile unites a figure of human art with a figure of natural growth. The lyre suggests the sunny, song-filled youth of Western civilization, specifically the ancient cultures of Greece and Rome, the troubadours of Provence, and more immediately for Hardy the Romantic poets of the century's early decades. Palgrave, as we have seen, believed the Romantic poet rivaled and perhaps even outshone his Greek ancestor by virtue of an acuter sense of natural beauty. By fusing art and nature in this image, Hardy suggests the singular characteristic of the Romantic era: the attempt to find in nature a means to recapture the lyrical spirit of former ages.

The image of tangled and overgrown stems illustrates humanity's failure to find in nature a suitable accompaniment to its own human song. Things of the physical universe live, grow, and overgrow regardless of human wishes or needs. If the lyre was played in paeans to the gods, the tangled lyrestems suggest that nature offers no substitute for those lost spirits. Neither God nor nature accompanies humanity, comforts or consoles people, in this earthly existence. By dint of mindless vitality, nature, in the form of the aged thrush, sings when a person would surely not sing: at that moment when one senses mortality and imagines the full weight of an entire century's pain and suffering stretching "afar or nigh." In this respect, "The Darkling Thrush" is about the death of hope in the nineteenth century; for having lost faith in God and nature, people can place faith in no other benevolent force.

Source: Katherine Kearney Maynard, "The Tragic Lyric," in *Thomas Hardy's Tragic Poetry*, University of Iowa Press, 1991, pp. 109-79.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay excerpt, Lock compares the singing of the thrush in "The Darkling Thrush" with Hardy's role as poet and his view of poetry.

Keats's thrush, who is the speaker of the sonnet 'O thou whose face hath felt the winter's wind' which is addressed to one saddened by the landscape of winter, exhorts the poet:

Oh, fret not after knowledge□I have none,
And yet the evening listens.

The joy of Hardy's thrush, however, is not owed to the absence of knowledge but to the knowledge of 'some blessed Hope'. That is a small, buried irony which is insufficient to explain Hardy's choice of bird. For an adequate explanation we must turn to another poet, and to natural history and ornithology. In his *Hardy of Wessex* of 1940, Carl J. Weber pointed out the remarkable similarities between Hardy's poem and the account of the missel-thrush in W. H. Hudson's *Nature in Downland*, published in 1900:

There is one thing to make a lover of bird-music
happy in the darkest weather in January . . . Midwinter
is the season of the missel-thrush . . . [I]f you
should observe him in rough or gloomy weather,
perched on an elm-top, swayed about this way and
that by the gusts, singing his best, you must believe
that this dark aspect of things delights him; that his
pleasure in life, expressed with such sounds and in
such circumstances, must greatly exceed in degree
the contentment and bliss that is ours

. . . That the thrush should sing his best when the weather is most gloomy is not only an irony of Nature such as Hardy characteristically observes: it is also an image of the poet, cheerfully sounding from his own misery, helplessly improving on reality.

The ironic distinction between Hardy's thrush and Keats's is only one, as we shall shortly see, of a number of clues and devices by which Hardy distances himself from the Romantic Lyric. To a certain extent modern poetry can be seen as nothing but a struggle against Romanticism, and it seems probable that in Hardy's struggle□especially against the most admired models of Shelley and Keats□he derives support from Whitman's 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd'. As Lincoln's coffin journeys across America, assimilating the nation to itself ('the great cloud darkening the land . . . the cities draped in black'), a thrush sings 'in the swamp'. While in Keats and Shelley the bird is implicitly a symbol of the poet or the poetic imagination, Whitman's thrush is explicitly so: the bird is so common, his habitat so unpoetical, that Whitman need make no pretence of having 'actually' heard him:

Song of the bleeding throat,
Death's outlet song of life, (for well dear brother I
know,
If thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st
surely die.)

The blatant symbolism, unrooted in natural observation, and the bird's defiant unreality are confirmed by the address 'dear brother' and by the later apostrophe, 'I hear your notes . . . I understand you . . .' Lilacs do not bloom in mid-winter, so the contrast between the song and the weather, central for Hardy as for Hudson, is not available to Whitman: his contrast is effected through the habitat□a swamp, like a rag-and-bone shop, being a good place to find a symbol.

Whereas Romantic Lyric describes a movement of bird and poet towards identification, Whitman assumes a fixed identity between them: the poet 'warbles' and the bird sings a 'Loud human song'. The center of Whitman's poem is the thrush's 'carol' which is, explicitly, identical with the poet's poem:

And the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the
bird.

There is no question of Hardy's familiarity with Whitman□he is quoted in *Desperate Remedies* and in *Tess*□and little doubt of his presence in 'The Darkling Thrush'. 'When Lilacs Last . . .' provides Hardy with a model of identity between poet and bird, thus enabling him to avoid the emotions of identification characteristic of Romantic Lyric.

That 'The Darkling Thrush's third stanza contains no first person pronoun is crucial. Despite the title's 'Darkling', what the poet almost conspicuously does not say is 'I listen'. Nor does the poet say that he looked at the bird: the conventional movement in Romantic Lyric is to have the attention drawn and concentrated, with a corresponding action on the poet's part. (Even Keats, the least physically active of Romantic poets, manages to suggest the movement to the poet by apostrophising the urn from different sides.) Hardy does not indicate any changes in the poet's position after he has leant on the gate, nor does the poet apostrophise the thrush.

The song is□audibly□'full-hearted', and the thrush is□visibly□'frail, gaunt, and small', but where is the poet who has heard and seen these things? By the conventions of symbolism the poet is, of course, the thrush, but he has not *become* the thrush. The Romantic Lyric occupies a passage of time during which poet and apostrophised object draw near to, meet or become one another, after which they withdraw into separateness once more. No time elapses in 'The Darkling Thrush'. The poet's absence from the third stanza is precisely matched by the temporal adverb, 'At once'. The anticipated but missing phrase is 'And then'. Casual reading supposes the thrush's song to be subsequent to the poet's leaning; 'At once', however, requires the beginning of the bird's song to share an identical moment with another action. That moment must be the poem's only moment, the moment into which the entire poem has been concentrated, in which the one action has been the poet's leaning on a gate. The poem and the thrush's

song begin simultaneously. The poem fills but a moment, and so does the song, as W. H. Hudson observes: 'the song is an outburst, a cry of happiness, and is over in a moment . . .'

'The Darkling Thrush' thus achieves a figure of identity between the poet and the thrush, without movement in space or through time, without the process of becoming, of identification. With specific reference to Pasternak Roman Jakobson made a fundamental distinction between, on the one hand, metaphor and simile and, on the other. metonymy. 'Metaphor works through creative association by similarity and contrast,' says Jakobson, while metonymy is 'association by proximity . . . images of the surrounding world function as contiguous reflections, or metonymical expressions, of the poet's self.' Hardy has effected the drastic break between the second and third stanzas precisely by a figurative shift from metaphor and simile to metonymy. The first stanza had placed the poet in the landscape, contrasting him to 'all mankind' indoors and comparing the bine-stems to 'strings of broken lyres'; the second stanza compared the landscape to the Century, and assimilated both to the poet□'as I'. In our analysis of those stanzas we have seen how the contrived appearance of poetic weakness and fervourlessness is expressed by figurative incoherence: similes are inverted; a figure is indeterminably metaphor or simile or both; visualisation is unfocussed, and conceptualisation is blurred.

The third stanza proceeds without the poet looking at or hearing the bird, and without any comparisons, whether metaphor or simile. Instead, contiguity is exemplified: in space, 'overhead', and in time 'At once'. Just as there is no process, no desire for identification, no equivalent of Shelley's 'Be thou me, impetuous one!' or Keats's 'I will fly to thee . . . Already with thee . . .', so there need be no falling away, nothing unfulfilled, nothing to regret. The song of Keats's nightingale has a beginning□ albeit unspecified□and a stated end: 'Fled is that music'. Hardy's thrush neither begins nor ceases to sing within the poem, for his song is exactly coterminous with the poem. Through identity and simultaneity the poet is free of the feelings of desire and regret that characterise Romantic Lyric; his 'I' is absent; his feelings are elicited not by not being a thrush but by being metonymically poet and thrush.

What is it for a poet to be metonymically a thrush? What is the significance of the contiguity? If the poet were the tenor of a metaphor or a simile, then to the bird would be attributed those qualities desired by the poet□song, freedom, the flight of inspiration□and imaginatively suggested by the bird's 'natural' being. When the tenor is human a metaphor's vehicle is anthropomorphic. Regardless of its subject, metaphor arranges and orders, patterning the contingent, unifying the disparate: it is the pre-eminent figure of Romantic poetics wherein matter is subordinated to the imagination. The problem of post-Romantic poetry lies in part in the conflict between the heritage of metaphor and the loss of faith in the power of imagination. If, far from revealing or shaping the truth, metaphor 'makes nothing happen' then it is not only useless but deceptive, decorative in the most pejorative sense.

Metonymy, with its modestly imaginative acceptance of the world as it approximately is, tends to be the dominant figure in realistic narrative. The distinction formulated and

made absolute by Jakobson had been a long time in gestation. Ricoeur paraphrases Gaston Esnault, writing in 1925: 'the imaginative equivalence instituted by metaphor does more violence to the real than does metonymy, which respects the links inscribed in the facts'. Heidegger more bluntly claims that 'the metaphorical exists only inside the metaphysical'. Hardy is predisposed to metonymy by his post-Romantic awareness of the fallaciousness of metaphor, and further encouraged in his evasion of metaphor by his metonymic practice as a novelist. To be, metonymically, a thrush is to respect the thrush's own being, to apprehend, as it were from within, the thrush's independence from the human imagination.

When Whitman confides to his thrush:

(for well dear brother I know,
If thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st die.)

he is sharing a secret that the Romantics never found out: that poets and birds are alike not only in their song but in the compulsion of their singing. Tennyson knew it, and therewith justified his 'parade of pain':

I do but sing because I must,
And pipe but as the linnets sing.

That birds sing from compulsion, and not unconsciously but from pain, has long been known. There is an Italian proverb, 'L'uccello canta nella gabbia, non di gioia ma di rabbia' (the bird sings in the cage, not in joy but in rage), which Webster might almost be translating in 'We think caged birds sing, when indeed they cry.' It is only with Tennyson and Whitman that the poet uses such a traditional observation about birds to subvert the complacency and ornithological ignorance of the Romantic metaphor. While the proverb specifically refers to the caged bird, Tennyson and Whitman see birds in general as partaking in the necessity and cruelty of Nature. Insofar as humans had come to be perceived as part of the evolutionary scheme of Nature the bird in poetry ceased to be merely a symbol for human projection. The metonymic contiguity instead challenges the poet to see himself in the bird's terms□to find what is shared between poet and bird not in the invalidated realm of symbol but in the 'real' world of Nature. As integral as are metaphor and resemblance of the 'Great Chain of Being', are metonymy and contiguity to Evolution.

When Hardy writes that the thrush 'had chosen thus to fling his soul' he is obviously ironic in as- suming that a bird has a soul and a choice. That is the first and manifest level of irony. Beneath that is the second level. Irony concerning the bird's soul and choice becomes self-reflexive: does the poet have a soul or any choice about writing this poem? There is little possibility of significance in the mere fact of contiguity unless we respect the metonymical figure of identity, and suspect the poet's song to be as unchosen, as determined, as the thrush's. There is a third level of irony, that for all his protestations of metonymic identity with the thrush the poet cannot deny his consciousness, of himself and even of his compulsions. These three levels of irony establish, first, the difference between poet and thrush; second, the identity of poet and

thrush in the song/poem and the compulsion of utterance; and third, the distinction between the poet's utterance and his consciousness. This division is within the poet, separating the one who writes from the one who thinks and suffers—and who, in suffering, can question the worth of writing. As the thrush's 'carol' within Whitman's poem is the elegy on Lincoln that Whitman has been trying to write, so the thrush's 'carolings' in the third stanza of Hardy's poem are to be taken for the entire poem: fervourless in the growing gloom, the poet is inspired to write a poem and wonders—in this alone distinct from the thrush—what makes him do it.

It is possible that this last distinction is manifested acoustically in the third stanza, through the elaborate patterning of short 'u' and long 'o' sounds. 'Once . . . among . . . thrush . . . beruffled . . . thus' are words of lyric expression, both bird's and poet's; 'arose . . . overhead . . . chosen . . . soul . . . growing' tend to be words of self-conscious interpretation, personifying and ironic. These two impressive sets of internal rhyme are deliberately accentuated by Hardy's use of imperfect rhyme in the odd lines, a feature of this stanza only. The acoustic pattern continues in the last stanza: the conscious thinker in the poet sees '*So* little cause' for the lyricist's 'carolings Of s*u*ch ecstatic sound.'

The third stanza is the triumph of metonymy over metaphor: the poet is identified with the thrush not as a symbol but as a natural phenomenon. That both are part of the evolutionary scheme of Nature, and that neither bird nor poet has a soul or a choice, is the significance of their contiguity. The outstanding problem with which the final stanza must deal originates in what I have termed the third level of irony in 1. 23. Neither poet nor bird may have a soul or a choice, but the poet has those words and the consciousness of their ironic use. That consciousness can be explained only by the exclusion of some aspects of the poet from the metonymic identity: metaphor proposes itself once more as a possibility, even as a necessity. The last stanza, like the first two, contains a first person pronoun and an extensive landscape. The landscape had been, in the poem's first half, as fervourless as the man, its tangled bine-stems like his weak poetic powers. Now, in the last stanza, the landscape is as it was before—in contrast with the twigs and the poet from both of which song issues.

Who or what, then, is the 'I'? Is it the poet metonymically identified with the thrush, or is it the poet metaphorically compared to the landscape in metaphorical contrast to the thrush?

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think . . .

The 'I', being detached, looking at the landscape, listening to the song, can see no cause for the singing of the bird which is the writing of this poem. 'Why do I write?' is the question implied at the beginning of the final stanza. The evidence of the landscape, what is 'written on terrestrial things', is insufficient cause or occasion of this poem. Like 'chosen', 'written' is a residue of the language of poetic fallacy, to be used only ironically

or sentimentally: landscape can be interpreted as 'written' only by an observer who can presuppose a writer, and Hardy is not that observer. In his choice of the word 'written', ironically meant, Hardy approaches Nietzsche's aphorism that, having got rid of God, we must now get rid of grammar. Grammar is the ordering of words, and its traditional, Aristotelian validity derived from the faith that the world is analogously ordered. In retrospect that validity seems to have withdrawn from literature at least in an inevitable progression: it is but steps from Ruskin's identification of the pathetic fallacy, to the superior intellectual respectability of metonymy over metaphor, to the present sense of the invalidity of all discourse. That progression is enacted in 'The Darkling Thrush': what is not, or is inadequately, 'written on terrestrial things' is not inscribed in the facts and not only metaphor but writing itself is put in question.

'I could think' introduces the poem's final clause with magisterial uncertainty: does 'could' mean 'was able to' or 'might'? Our only syntactical guide is the perfect tense of the final line, which may encourage us to take 1. 29 in the same tense ('was able to') but does not compel us to do so. Either (to paraphrase the alternative meanings) the contrast between what I could see and what I could hear was so great that I was able to think that the thrush had some secret knowledge; or the same contrast was so great that I might now think that the thrush had some secret knowledge. What Hardy has carefully avoided writing is 'That I could *not* think', which is the logical and anticipated consequence of 'So little cause'. That would be rational and ironic, unlike either reading of 'could think': both of them are sentimental, giving way to poetic language and the pathetic fallacy. While it is a pathetic fallacy to attribute 'Hope' to a thrush Hardy manages to establish some distance from the fallacy by describing within the poem the mental process of poetic surrender. This effect of 'conscious illusion' is characteristic of Hardy's poetry: other examples include 'The Oxen's 'Hoping it might be so' and 'My head unturned lest my dream should fade' from 'The Shadow on the Stone'. If it were certain that the oxen were not kneeling, or that the shadow was not his late wife's, what difference would it make? Hardy would not be at all disappointed, but there would be no poem. For Coleridge poetry is mediated by a willing suspension of disbelief; for Hardy that willing suspension is part of the poem's being. Thus the ambiguity of 'could' resolves itself: he was able to think and he is still able to think that there is 'Hope' in the thrush's song. That is the occasion of the poem, the 'enabling' of the poem, regardless of what the poet actually does think. It is not mere 'irony' that has one aspect of the poet casting doubt on another, for it is only because of the other that Hardy is a poet at all. In 1897, having recently devoted his writing solely to poetry, Hardy recorded: 'In spite of myself I cannot help noticing countenances and tempers in objects of scenery: e.g., trees, hills, houses.'

The poet 'could think' that 'Hope' 'trembled through' the thrush's song. At the very moment when the poet has effected a partial detachment through self-consciousness from metonymic identity with the thrush, the distinction is questioned. 'Trembling' is, strictly speaking, an involuntary action, something we do 'in spite of ourselves'. Hardy uses its musical association (both here and in the 'tremulous' of the first line of 'Afterwards'), wherein the *effect* of trembling is intentional, to disguise the primary meaning. 'Trembled' does not mean that the thrush's song is unchosen but that the 'Hope' that comes 'through' the song is involuntary. Since it is that very 'Hope'

knowledge of which the poet attributes to the thrush, 'trembled' is cunningly selected. The thrush may be aware of the Hope in his song in exactly the same manner in which the poet is aware of what poetic language implies: awareness is quite other than intellectual endorsement.

Whatever trick the poet tries he cannot evade the thrush. In Romantic Lyric the bird is anthropomorphised by metaphor, transformed into a symbol of the poet and of poetic aspirations. In Hardy's poem the thrush remains a thrush and the poet in his metonymic identity with the thrush is deprived of his humanity. In the writing of this poem the poet separates himself from 'all mankind', being a bird not in the Romantic or symbolic sense but only naturally. This is Hardy's resolution of the contradiction faced by numerous later writes□Kafka, Beckett, Ionesco, among other□that, however negative the intended mood or meaning, artistic form is always positive. In giving shape to despair, as Beckett obeys the injunction in Watt□'Nothingness in words enclose'□there is always a purpose implied, even faith and hope. Beckett's well-known description of his writings as 'the expression that there is nothing to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express', poses the question that 'The Darkling Thrush' has tried to answer. Why fulfil that obligation, why yield to poetry and all the tricks of language when reason, seeing nothing, counsels silence? 'And I was unaware' not so much of the 'Hope' trembling through the thrush's song□of which the poet has told us enough to be reckoned 'aware'□as of the 'Hope' that trembles, in spite of the author's intentions and wishes, through this poem, and through every great poem.

In his description of the thrush W. H. Hudson wonders at 'his habit of singing in weather that makes all other voices silent.' Poetry is for Hardy not a rare and precious human achievement, as it had been for the Romantics, but a peculiar natural compulsion. Whether that compulsion□and the 'Hope that trembles through it□is humanity's last illusion before the silence of despair, or the very vindication of metaphor and poetry, attesting to the superiority of human values over the natural, is a dilemma that writing cannot resolve. Language always sides with meaning. Silence might differ, but for Hardy and the thrush, as for Beckett, silence is not an option. when Hardy writes his intellectual honesty obliges him to seem compulsive, to appear spontaneous, to contrive to be a rustic warbler. By the time Hardy was 'resolved to say no more' it was of course far too late. Hardy's last poem was published months after his death: even the defiantly and honourably human resolution to 'keep the rest unknown' turned out to be only another of Nature's compulsions.

Source: Charles Lock, "'The Darkling Thrush' and the Habit of Singing," in *Essays in Criticism*, Vol. 36, No. 2, April 1986, pp. 120-41.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, May asserts that Hardy "took Keats's romantic view of nature" in "The Nightingale" and "inverted it to write an ironic rejection of such a view" in "The Darkling Thrush."

Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush," written to commemorate the end of the nineteenth century, has always been called one of Hardy's representative poems, sometimes even his best poem. But though it has been frequently commented on and anthologized, an important question about the poem has not been answered: Why did Hardy choose this particular subject to mark such an auspicious turning point? Carl Weber, the Hardy scholar who usually knows such things, says Hardy perhaps got the idea from W. H. Hudson's "Nature in Downland" (1900), in which a thrush's song suggests to Hudson a "contentment and bliss" beyond our own. Weber adds that Shelley's "Skylark" also may have contributed to the source of the poem. Neither of these poses a very precise or significant parallel.

James Granville Southworth catches the real echo in noting that in the word "Darkling" we have an emotive association with Keats's "darkling I listen" in "Ode to a Nightingale." However, this is the only echo Southworth sees in the poem, and he does not comment on its possible significance. David Perkins notes additional parallels and tentatively suggests that Keats's "Nightingale" "may have been stirring in Hardy's consciousness" when he wrote "The Darkling Thrush." Asserting that the bird is a symbol of the visionary imagination and that hope of identification with it provides the drive in both poems, Perkins concludes that although the Hardy speaker fails to achieve identification, he does not challenge the rightness of the bird's joy. "The Darkling Thrush," Perkins says, "presents not a speaker who asserts a mournful pessimism as a necessary reflection from the facts of life, but rather one who feels himself to be incapable of seeing whole, being in some way stunted and incomplete."

I suggest that "Ode to a Nightingale" was not merely "stirring in Hardy's consciousness," but that the parallels by their very pervasiveness indicate that Hardy purposely took Keats's romantic view of nature and inverted it to write an ironic rejection of such a view. The resulting reversal of the Keats poem makes an appropriate comment on the end of a century in which poets often saw nature as symbolically full of meaning and value worth identifying with. Further, I suggest that "The Darkling Thrush," instead of being unusual for Hardy, as Perkins says, because in it the speaker partially renounces the claims of his own experience, presents a speaker who, like the persona in the second part of "In Tenebris" and in "Wessex Heights," affirms the hard truth of his own experience and can only see the bird's ecstatic song as ironic amidst the bleakness of its natural surroundings. The focus in "Ode to a Nightingale" is on the plenitude of nature and the speaker's limitations in participating in it. In "The Darkling Thrush," the focus is on the vacuity of nature and the speaker's courage to exact "a full look at the Worst" and reject such a participation. Even a cursory look reveals that proportionately much more of Hardy's poem focuses on "So little cause for carolings" than it does on the caroling itself.

The dramatic situation and the subject itself pose an obvious parallel between the two poems. The nightingale, of course, is a species of thrush which has often had symbolic significance for poets because of its strange habit of singing only in darkness. This is surely why the bird's song appeals to both Keats and Hardy. But here too we note the first significant difference. It is well known that Keats wrote his poem on a spring morning in 1819, while staying with Charles Brown at Hampstead. Thus, Keats, although sitting in "embalmed darkness," can look forward not only to the coming day but to the rebirth of the year as well. In fact, in stanza five he celebrates the process of rebirth by noting the "coming must-rose, full of dewy wine." Hardy's thrush is also a nightingale singing in darkness, but here the speaker is in the darkness of "The weakening eye of day," and the season is winter, not spring. There is no hope for rebirth here, only the death of the day, the year, and the century. "The ancient pulse of germ and birth/Was shrunken hard and dry."

The most significant contrast between the two poems is indicated by Hardy's use of the word "Darkling." In Keats's poem the focus is on the speaker in a desirable darkness: "Darkling I listen; and, for many a time/I have been half in love with easeful Death." The poet thinks it "rich to die" in such a moment of imaginative participation with the transcendent world of the nightingale. The darkness is a positive force that integrates him momentarily with the "shadows numberless" of the nightingale and nature. In Hardy's poem the focus is more on the thrush itself in darkness; but the darkness here is a negative force which further emphasizes nature's inability to satisfy man's longing for transcendent meaning. Hardy sees little cause for carolings in "terrestrial things / Afar or nigh around." The experience for Keats is a momentary perception of the order of nature. For Hardy it is the perception of the lack of such an order.

This contrast between Keats's view of nature as a plenitude and Hardy's view of nature as a vacuum is maintained through the poem. Keats opens his poem by comparing his momentary unity with nature to the experience of emptying "some dull opiate to the drains." Hardy picks up the image but uses it to refer to the vacuity of the year and the landscape, as "Winter's dregs made desolate / The weakening eye of day." Whereas Keats used the word "spectre" to refer to the world of man where youth "grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies," Hardy uses the word to refer to the world of nature itself as the "Frost was spectre-gray."

A further significant contrast exists between Keats's view of nature as soft and undifferentiated and Hardy's view of nature as harsh and stark. Both speakers are in a tree-covered thicket, but for Keats it is "verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways" where "soft incense hangs upon the boughs." For Hardy, "The tangled bine-stems scored the sky / Like strings of broken lyres" and "The land's sharp features seemed to be / The Century's corpse outleant." While Keats's nightingale is in "some melodious plot / Of beechen green," Hardy's thrush is on "The bleak twigs overhead."

This difference between the shadowy transcendence of the nightingale and the bleak reality of the thrush is further indicated by the fact that Keats never sees his bird; it remains part of the shadows, fully integrated with them. However, Hardy all too painfully sees his thrush, and it is "An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small, / In blastberuffled

plume." Moreover, while the nightingale is "pouring forth" its "soul" in "full-throated ease," the thrush in its greater desperation chooses to "fling" its soul "Upon the growing gloom." There is a significant similarity and difference also in the songs. Keats's bird sings first a "high requiem" and then a "plaintive anthem" which grieves the passing of the one moment of integration, but which also celebrates the hope for rebirth. Although Hardy's bird sings of "joy illimited," the wind counteracts this joy with a "death-lament" for the passing of the year and the century. The phrase suggests no such hope for rebirth.

At the end of "The Nightingale," Keats is left pondering the reality of the experience: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream?" Which state is the true reality□the experience with the song of the nightingale or my experience now that the song is ended? "Do I wake or sleep?" For Hardy, there is more irony than ambiguity. The song of the thrush makes a bitter ironic comment on the reality he perceives, a reality which is clearly "written on terrestrial things / Afar or nigh around." And there is nothing in such a world to justify the song of the bird. Whatever "blessed Hope" the thrush knows, Hardy is unaware of; and he realizes he will remain unaware of it. The reality of the cold winter setting, the death of the day, the death of the year, and the death of the century make this clear. The bird can only sing with such joy because it is exempt from man's knowledge of death.

It is true that Keats also perceives that the nightingale can sing only because it is not aware of process, change, mortality. But the nightingale's song celebrates natural plenitude; and Keats is able, if only momentarily, to participate in this plenitude on the "viewless wings of Poesy." Granted, Keats is tolled back to himself and the world of thought and change when the bird's song fades, but he is still left with a valid experience of at-oneness, an experience he can accept with that Negative Capability which allows him to be in "Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." Hardy, however, is not satisfied with "not knowing." He is left at the end of the poem with his harsh awareness of a natural world that cannot fulfill man's hope for value and meaning, a world that makes the song of the aged thrush an ironic indicator of the distance between the Romantic view of nature at the beginning of the century and the absurd view of nature at the end of the century.

Source: Charles E. May, "Hardy's 'Darkling Thrush': The 'Nightingale' Grown Old," in *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Spring 1973, pp. 62-65.

Critical Essay #5

In the following essay, Ownbey provides an overview of "The Darkling Thrush," finding that, despite the positive aspect of the thrush singing, the poem dwells overwhelmingly on despair and death.

A number of Thomas Hardy's poems are built on situations in which the speaker regretfully acknowledges his inability to react as orthodox religious believers might react. Sometimes this regret is made explicit as in "The Impercipient." Here the speaker, attending a cathedral service, laments his lack of power to make one of "this bright believing band."

Why always I must feel as blind
To sights my brethren see,
Why joys they've found I cannot find,
Abides a mystery.

Sometimes the regret is implied as in "The Oxen." Alluding to the legend that the oxen kneel at worship on Christmas Eve, the speaker comments:

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
"Come, see the oxen kneel

"In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,"
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

To this last category of poems belongs, it seems to me, "The Darkling Thrush." Although this poem is organized around the contrast between the gloom of the wintry setting and the "joy illimited" of the thrush's song, one must remember that the gloom is emphasized far more than the joy. By his selection of details and by his choice of figurative language, Hardy uses the setting not just as a physical background for the action of the poem but as a sort of symbol of the world as it appears to the narrator. It is a world of death.

At the beginning of the poem the speaker describes himself as standing at the entrance to a small wood, looking out over the wintry landscape. The first of the metaphors suggesting death is the adjective employed to describe the frost□*specter-gray*. The *weakening eye of day*, the sun sinking toward the horizon, has none of the sun's usual connotation of brightness and warmth. Instead the leaving of winter, the *dregs*, make even the sun appear *desolate*. The suggestion of the approach of night and darkness, of course, ties in with the idea of death already implied by the reference to winter and to the *specter-gray frost*. The simile comparing the *tangled bine-stems* to the *strings of*

broken lyres reinforces the earlier imagery. As the speaker looks up through the leafless vines, it seems to him that they *score*, that is, cut, or mark across, the sky. It is possible that with the juxtaposition of *score* and *lyres*, the poet may also have in mind a musical score; if so, it is a useless score, distorted from usual precision. Useless too are the *broken lyres*, no longer capable of producing music. There is here an implied contrast with the unbroken lyre, capable of producing melody. The last two lines of the stanza further emphasize the loneliness and chill of the setting. People living in the vicinity have gone to their homes, but the use of the word *haunted*, though possibly dialectal, suggests that these people are hardly more than ghosts. There is, of course, the implied contrast between the warmth and companionship of the *household fires* which these people have sought and the cold and loneliness of the speaker.

The date of "The Darkling Thrush," December 31, 1900, helps to explicate the poet's comparison in the second stanza of *the land's sharp feature* to the *Century's corpse.* Again there is an implied contrast between winter and summer, when the *sharp features* would be softened by fields of grain and leafy shrubs and trees. Now nothing is growing, the fields are bare, and the frost covering everything with a death-like pallor supports the parallel to a corpse. The poet develops the image further by comparing the *cloudy canopy* to a *crypt* and the sound of the wind to a *death-lament.* The wintry setting seems to be equated not only with the death of the century but also with the loss of hope in the sort of rebirth which we associate with spring. The seeds (*pulse*) of *germ and birth* are *shrunken hard and dry.* They are not moist and swollen as they would be during the process of germination. The poet even calls living human beings *spirits* which are *fervorless.* Both the literal and the figurative meanings of this adjective, "cold" and "without warmth of feeling," fit in with and reinforce the previous imagery of cold, both physical and spiritual.

Into this atmosphere of cold and lifelessness, Hardy introduces the unexpected song of the thrush. But he does not allow us to forget the setting. The thrush is *among the bleak twigs.* The bird itself is *aged, frail, gaunt*, and *small*, its plume ruffled by the blast which the poet has earlier called the *death-lament* of the century. In all respects except that of its joyous song, the thrush matches the setting. And it is this fact which makes its song, dramatically speaking, all the more effective. For the appearance of the bird as well as its surroundings emphasizes, by contrast, the *joy illimited*, the *ecstatic sound* of its song. And this contrast motivates the momentary gleam of hope in the speaker.

Although the last stanza sums up the contrast between setting and song, and presents the reaction of the speaker, the force of this climactic section depends in large measure on the preparation made for it in the three preceding stanzas. Thus the understatement "So little cause for carolings/Of such ecstatic sound/Was written on terrestrial things" is effective because it evokes in the reader's mind the whole of the first two stanzas with their wealth of detail as well as the *bleak twigs* and the description of the bird in the third stanza. The description of the speaker's reaction to the bird's song has also some of the qualities of understatement, and properly so

. . . I could think there trembled through
His happy goodnight air

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

Hardy is concerned here with presenting a short-lived emotional reaction; he is not describing the conversion of an unbeliever. So he uses the conditional *could think* and the tentative *trembled* to emphasize the fact that the emotional reaction is momentary. That the bird has a vision of things celestial as opposed to the speaker's own vision of things terrestrial occupies his mind briefly. The *could think*, however, lets us know that his reason reasserts itself over his feeling. And the poem ends on a note of despair all the more profound because of the temporary lightening of the gloom.

Source: E. S. Ownbey, "A Reading of Thomas Hardy's 'The Darkling Thrush,' " in *Essays in Honor of Richebourg Gaillard McWilliams*, edited by Howard Creed, Birmingham- Southern College, 1971, pp. 29-32.

Adaptations

In 1915, Laurence Trimble directed *Far from the Madding Crowd* for the English cinema.

Far from the Madding Crowd was reproduced in 1967, this time directed by John Schlesinger.

Academy Award-winning director Roman Polanski adapted and directed *Tess of the d'Ubervilles* for the screen in 1979.

The Return of the Native was produced for English television in 1994, directed by Jack Gold and starring Academy Award-winning actress Catherine Zeta-Jones.

Topics for Further Study

Compare the attitude of the speaker in Hardy's poem towards the new century with your own attitude towards the beginning of the twentyfirst century. What similarities and differences do you see? Discuss this as a class.

In groups, compose a poster based on Hardy's poem. You will have to decide what to put in and what to leave out from what he describes. Feel free to use abstractions in your depiction. Hang the poster on the wall, and then discuss with your class the choices you made in composing it.

Write a short essay exploring the influence of romanticism on Hardy, who was a Victorian poet. How are his poems about nature different from John Keat's, William Wordsworth's, or Percy Bysshe Shelley's?

Compose a short essay comparing and contrasting Hardy's poem with Keats's "Ode to a Nightengale" and Emily Dickinson's "Hope Is the Thing with Feathers." Why do all of these poets choose song birds as central images in their poems? How do the different styles of these poets qualify the role of the songbird in the poems?

Write a poem or a story about a time when you were depressed or feeling very sad, and include what happened to change your mood (assuming it has changed). Be sure to include at least two "nonce" words in your poem or story. Nonce words bear a resemblance to currently used words or phrases. Hardy often created nonce words, like "outleant" (lean out), for specific poems or stories.

Write another stanza for the poem that takes place a year later. Follow the poem's meter and rhyme scheme exactly. Take turns reading your poems to the class, and then discuss the differences among them.

Compare and Contrast

1890s: The British Empire is at its strongest, controlling more than 4 million square miles worldwide, including India and large parts of China and Africa.

Today: After losing control of foreign lands that were once a part of the British Empre, Great Britain heads the Commonwealth of Nations.

1890s: Desiring control of South African gold mines, the British go to war against the Boers in South Africa.

Today: South Africa is an independent and democratic country.

1890s: At the turn of the century, the population of England and Wales is approximately 32.5 million.

Today: The population of England and Wales is approximately 50.5 million.

What Do I Read Next?

Richard D. Altick's *Victorian People and Ideas* (1973) describes the social structure of Victorian England, with chapters on technological change, social structure, art, and religion.

Hardy's novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) is a love story set in rural England and marks his first real literary success.

The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy, edited by Dale Kramer and released in 2001 by Cambridge University Press, collects critical essays on Hardy by prominent scholars.

Sally Mitchell's *Daily Life in Victorian England* (1996) provides a thorough overview of what it was like to live in Victorian England. Mitchell covers topics such as education, health and medicine, technology, and the significance of the ever-expanding British Empire.

James Morris's *Pax Britannica: The Climax of an Empire* (1968) describes how the empire grew and how the British people felt about it.

The *Oxford Reader's Companion to Hardy* (2000), edited by Norman Page, contains a wealth of information on Hardy, including an index of Hardy's poems and characters and a glossary of dialect words and expressions used in his writings.

Further Study

Armstrong, Tim, *Haunted Hardy: Poetry, History, Memory*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.

Armstrong uses literary theorists such as Jacques Derrida to investigate ghostliness, historicity, and memory in Hardy's poetry.

Gibson, James, and Trevor Johnson, eds., *Thomas Hardy: Poems*, Macmillan, 1979.

This collection contains important essays on Hardy's poetry by critics such as Thomas Gunn and Philip Larkin.

Hynes, Samuel, *The Patterns of Hardy's Poetry*, University of North Carolina Press, 1961.

Hynes examines how Hardy's poems contain irreconcilable conflicts and which poems he considers good.

Millgate, Michael, *Thomas Hardy: A Biography*, Random House, 1982.

Most Hardy critics consider Millgate's biography to be the definitive one written to date.

Orel, Harold, *The Final Years of Thomas Hardy: 1912- 1928*, Macmillan, 1976.

Orel, the vice president of the English Thomas Hardy Society, uses a biographical approach to read Hardy's later poetry.

Paulin, Tom, *Thomas Hardy: The Poetry of Perception*, Macmillan, 1975.

Paulin explores themes of vision and revelation in Hardy's poems in this highly readable account.

Pinion, F. B., *A Commentary on the Poems of Thomas Hardy*, Macmillan, 1976.

Pinion's study remains one of the most comprehensive resources for almost all of Hardy's poems.

Bibliography

Berger, Sheila, *Thomas Hardy and Visual Structure: Framing, Disruption, Process*, New York University Press, 1990, p. 100.

Buckler, William E., *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy: A Study in Art and Ideas*, New York University Press, 1983, pp. 255-59.

Carpenter, Richard, "Chapter Four: Poems, Verses, and *The Dynasts*," in *Thomas Hardy*, Twayne's English Author Series, No. 13, Twayne Publishers, 1964, p. 165.

Casagrande, Peter, "Pessimism," in *Oxford Reader's Companion to Hardy*, edited by Norman Page, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 306-07.

Hardy, Thomas, "The Darkling Thrush," in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 3d ed., edited by Alexander W. Allison, et al., W. W. Norton, 1983, p. 846.

Harvey, Geoffrey, "Thomas Hardy: Moments of Vision," in *Critical Essays on Thomas Hardy's Poetry*, edited by Harold Orel, G. K. Hall, 1995, pp. 35-47.

Perkins, David, "Hardy and the Poetry of Isolation," in *ELH*, Vol. 26, 1959, pp. 253-70.
Taylor, Dennis, "Hardy as a Nineteenth-Century Poet," in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, edited by Dale Kramer, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 183-204.

BOOKRAGS

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Poetry for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Poetry for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535