The Darkling Thrush

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.

SUMMARY

I was leaning on a gate, on a path leading into a forest. The frost was gray as a ghost and the last of the winter day made the sun look bleak as it descended. The tangled stems of climbing plants cut across the sky like the strings of a broken musical instrument. And all the people that lived nearby had gone away to the warmth of their homes.

The land's harsh hills and cliffs seemed like the corpse of the just-ended century, leaning out. And the clouds hanging above seemed like the century's tomb, while the wind seemed like a sad song played upon its death. The age-old urge to reproduce and grow had shriveled up. And every living thing on earth seemed as depressed as me.

All of a sudden, a voice rose up from the dreary twigs overhead, singing an evening prayer with limitless joy. He was a bird, frail and old, skinny and small, with his feathers rumpled by the wind. He had decided to sing with all his soul in the increasing dark.

There was no cause for such joyful singing—at least no cause was evident in the world around me. So I thought the bird's happy song carried some secret and holy hope, something that he knew about but I didn't.

THEMES

NATURE AND THE DECLINE OF HUMAN CIVILIZATION

"The Darkling Thrush" appears to be a poem about a winter landscape, which the speaker describes in considerable detail. On a symbolic level, however, this landscape is an extended metaphor: its bleakness and decay reflect the state of Western culture at the end of the 19th century. The speaker describes Western culture in a state of desolation: it seems to be damaged and dead, without the possibility of rebirth or resurrection. In this sense, the poem is both an elegy for and a rejection of that culture, providing a subtle critique of the way that the West has failed to take care of its own natural and cultural resources.

In the first stanza, the speaker compares "tangled-bine stems"—the stems of a climbing plant—to the "strings of broken lyres." The "lyre" is a significant symbol: it represents poetry and, more broadly, the cultural accomplishment of Western civilization. Its broken strings suggest that Western culture itself has fallen into disrepair or, like the "bine-stems," has not been properly maintained and pruned. In other words, the speaker thinks that things have grown unruly and gotten out of hand.

The second stanza expands on this idea, with a series of metaphors that describe the landscape as embodying the death of the 19th century and its culture. The speaker compares the

landscape's "sharp features" to "the Century's corpse." Since the poem was written late in 1900, most scholars take this as a reference to the end of the 19th century. The century is dead because it's literally over, but it's also dead in a broader sense: the simile in the previous stanza with the "broken lyres" suggests that the speaker feels that its culture has in some way failed.

The speaker does not specify the reasons why Western culture has failed—though there are clues in the way the speaker describes the landscape. For instance, the speaker begins the poem leaning on a "coppice gate." A "coppice" is a managed forest, which foresters cut back regularly to stimulate growth. But with the "bine-stems" growing up into the sky, it seems that this coppice has not been recently cut back. This image suggests that human beings have shirked their duty to care for the land they use. Since the landscape is a metaphor for the state of Western culture, the implication is thus that people have acted as poor caretakers for Western culture itself.

These images of the landscape are perhaps also references to industrialization, the process by which the economy shifted from farming to factories. This process did significant damage to the English landscape, and it also caused the depopulation of rural parts of England. As factories took over the work—such as weaving and lace-making—that had been traditionally done by rural populations, people left their farms to work in the cities' factories.

The speaker does not propose any remedies to address the situation. Indeed, the speaker does not seem to believe any improvement is possible. In the final lines of the second stanza, the speaker complains that the cycle of death and rebirth has ended: it is "shrunken hard and dry." Judging from the first half of the poem, it seems that the cultural death the speaker describes will not end or reverse; it is permanent, and the speaker doesn't know what will come next.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

HOPE AND RENEWAL

The first half of "The Darkling Thrush" describes a desolate winter landscape—an extended metaphor for the decay of Western culture, which the speaker presents as dead or unsalvageable. Just as the poem seems to be sliding into despair, however, a symbol of hope and renewal bursts onto the scene: a singing "thrush." Various details suggest that the speaker treats the thrush as a symbol for religious faith and devotion. The speaker thus presents renewed religious faith as a solution to the cultural crisis he or she describes in the first half of the poem.

The speaker describes the bird that appears in the second half of the poem in considerable detail, down its feathers. It is possible, then, to read the "Hope" that the bird expresses and represents literally: the speaker's bad mood is lifted, partially, by the bird and its song. But the speaker also provides hints that the bird's song should be understood metaphorically—both on its own and in conjunction with the extended metaphor developed in the poem's first two stanzas.

One key detail is that the speaker describes the bird's song as "a full-hearted evensong." Evensong is a ritual in the Anglican Church: it is evening prayers, chants, and songs. The speaker thus describes the bird's song as embodying a religious ritual. And in the next stanza, the speaker calls the "Hope" in the thrush's song "blessed." The word "blessed" once again suggests religious rituals and beliefs. And "Hope" itself may be symbolic here: it's not just any hope, but the Christian hope for resurrection—that is, life after death. As such, the "hope" that the thrush provides might be tied to Christianity.

The thrush's appearance in the poem suggests a solution to the cultural decay that the speaker documents in the first half of the poem. In the first half of the poem, the speaker treats the bleak landscape as an extended metaphor for the cultural decline of Western civilization—a decline so severe that the speaker sees no possibility that it might be renewed or reborn. But the hope the thrush embodies does offer the possibility of renewal and resurrection, specifically through religious faith.

That said, the speaker is "unaware" of this "blessed Hope." Perhaps this means that the bird is singing in vain, and the Christian tradition it evokes is as doomed as the rest of civilization. This would suggest that this tradition is itself rather oblivious, blind to the reality of the world around it. Alternatively, the presence of the happy bird in the midst of such drudgery suggests the opposite: that religious faith is the one thing that will survive the march of time. It's up to the reader to decide.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 17-32

DESPAIR AND ISOLATION

"The Darkling Thrush" in part uses its description of a bleak winter landscape as an extended metaphor for the cultural decline of Western civilization. But it is also a literal, detailed description of the world—and of the speaker's state of mind while looking out onto that landscape. The speaker seems filled with a sense of isolation and despair, and these feelings strongly shape how the speaker interprets the surrounding world. Intentionally or not, the poem suggests the cyclical and self-fulfilling nature of negativity.

The speaker describes him- or herself as "fervourless" (meaning depressed or lacking passion), and then sees this trait reflected

everywhere. Not only does "every spirit" seem as "fervourless" as the speaker, the speaker consistently interprets the natural world in terms that reinforce his or her own state of mind. For example, the speaker describes the "Frost" as "spectre-grey," meaning it looks like a ghost or a spirit. The speaker interprets the frost as a sign that the world is dead, lifeless, and hopeless. However, one could imagine a different speaker interpreting the landscape differently; for instance, there is no objective basis for seeing the "land's sharp features" as an image of the "Century's corpse." They could just as soon be majestic and soaring or evidence of God's hand in creation.

While the poem's landscape is described in detail, it is not described objectively: instead, each element becomes another testament to the speaker's personal emotions and priorities. The poem's second stanza, for example, consists of a long list of metaphors, one building on the next: the landscape is like the "Century's corpse," the clouds are like a "crypt," the wind like a "death-lament." The speaker is thus trapped in a vicious cycle: his or her emotions shape the landscape, which then reinforces his or her emotions.

This cycle holds until the thrush appears in the poem, in stanza 3. The thrush refuses to assimilate to the speaker's view of the world or to reinforce the speaker's emotions. Though the bird is skinny and bedraggled—potentially as much a symbol of despair as the clouds overhead or the wind whistling—it nonetheless sings a hopeful song. The speaker thus concludes that the thrush knows something the speaker doesn't: "Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew / And I was unaware."

In its brilliant, inexplicable hopefulness, the thrush forces the speaker to recognize the existence of emotions beyond despair and isolation. Furthermore, the thrush makes the speaker recognize elements of the outside world that cannot be interpreted through those emotions. It might break the vicious cycle in which the speaker has been trapped, and so proves to the reader, too, that hope is present in even the most desolate of circumstances.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

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

The first four lines of "The Darkling Thrush" establish the poem's form and its initial themes.

The poem begins with the speaker leaning against a "coppice gate" at the "dregs" (that is, the end) of a winter's day. (A "coppice" is a kind of forest that foresters regularly cut back, chopping down trees and bushes in order to stimulate its growth. This detail will be important later in the stanza). For the speaker, the landscape is desolate; it provokes despair. For instance, the speaker uses a metaphor to compare the "Frost" which has fallen on it to a "spectre"—a ghost or spirit. Though the "Frost" could easily be interpreted differently by someone with a different mindset—for instance, as a sign of Christmas cheer—the speaker takes it as a metaphor for death. Similarly, the sun (the "eye of day" in line 4) is "weakening"—but the speaker does not mention that it will rise again. The prevailing mood is thus one of decline and decay, without the possibility of renewal or resurrection.

These lines also introduce a formal pattern that will hold for the rest of the poem. They are written in alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, rhymed *ABAB*. It also has a regular pattern of enjambment: every other line is end-stopped. This pattern will hold through the poem's first two stanzas; until the end of the second stanza, the speaker will never go more than 2 lines without an end-stop.

"The Darkling Thrush" is thus a ballad. The ballad is one of the oldest forms in English poetry. Though the ballad originated in France, it is strongly associated with the English language—and, in particular, English folk traditions. The ballad was long used for folk songs, which were popular poems about crime and love (usually printed cheaply and posted inside taverns). It was also used for hymns—the religious songs sung in English churches. The form is thus highly flexible, capable of accommodating a wide range of content. Hardy likely turns to it here for its religious seriousness: these first four lines suggest that this will not be a light-hearted poem with a conversational tone. Instead, it will pose the most serious questions affecting the speaker and his or her society—and it will attempt to offer answers.

LINES 5-8

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

In lines 5-8, the speaker continues to describe the winter landscape that appears in the poem's opening lines and begins to suggest that the landscape might serve as an extended metaphor for the speaker's culture.

The speaker notes that his or her view of the sky is obscured by "tangled bine-stems." ("Bine-stems" are the shoots of climbing plants). These plants have "scored" the sky—marked or cut it—in what seems to be an act of violence. Since the speaker is leaning against the gate of a "coppice"—a forest that people cut to stimulate its growth—the presence of these "bine-stems"

suggests that the people responsible for this forest aren't doing a great job managing it. It is overgrown and out-of-control—and has been for some time, since it's winter, and the "bine-stems" aren't currently growing but are rather left behind from previous seasons. The landscape, the speaker suggests here, is desolate in part because the people responsible for it have failed to manage it.

The speaker then compares the "bine-stems" to the "strings of broken lyres." The lyre is a potent symbol. A hand-held harp, used by Greek poets like Homer and Sappho to provide musical accompaniment as they performed their poems, the lyre often serves as a symbol for poetry itself—and, more broadly, for the cultural accomplishment of Western civilization. For the strings of a lyre to be broken suggests that Western civilization itself has been damaged—perhaps through poor stewardship and management. The connection between "bine-stems" and lyre strings thus suggests a culture in decline, poorly managed and poorly maintained. And indeed, the people who live in the landscape the speaker surveys are nowhere to be found: they have retreated indoors to their "household fires." Further, the rhyme between "fires" and "lyres" suggests that these fires may not be as cozy and comforting as they initially appear. The rhyme reminds the reader that fire can also be a destructive force, and that here its comfort is perhaps an excuse for people to neglect their responsibilities to the outside world.

These lines continue the formal pattern begun in lines 1-4: like them, it alternates lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, and it is rhymed *CDCD*. In these lines, the speaker shows off some of his or her literary skill. For example, the speaker strongly alliterates on a /b/ sound in lines 5-6: "bine" and "broken," which binds together the "bine-stems" with the "lyres" they are compared to. Similarly, line 7 contains strong assonance on a shifting /a/ sound, one of the poem's only moments of forceful assonance: "And all mankind that haunted nigh." The assonance binds "mankind" to "haunting," so that the two ideas seem necessarily bound together; it's as if haunting is simply what mankind does.

These sophisticated plays of sound are underscored by complex interplay between meter and rhyme. Lines 6 and 8 both have feminine endings but nonetheless rhyme the incomplete feet that close the lines, a tricky and skillful accomplishment. Additionally, there is a spondee in line 5, introducing an extra stress in the line:

> "The tan- | -gled bine- | stems scored | the sky"

This is the first of a series of such spondees (others appear in lines 9, 19, and 30), and it gives the poem a strong, forceful feeling.

LINES 9-12

The land's sharp features seemed to be
The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament.

At the end of stanza 1, the speaker further suggests that his or her patient, careful description of the landscape he or she surveys is not entirely literal: it might serve, instead, as an extended metaphor for the decline of Western civilization.

In lines 9-12, the speaker expands and supports this suggestion with a series of metaphors. The speaker compares the landscape's "sharp features"—that is, its rugged topography—to the "corpse" of the "Century." Since the poem was written at the start of the 20th century, in December 1900, most readers assume that this refers to the century just past: the 19th century. The lines thus contain a double metaphor. First, the century is like a dead human body; second, the rugged landscape looks like that dead body.

In the following two lines, the speaker continues the metaphor begun in lines 9-10: if the landscape is like a corpse, then the sky is like the crypt or tomb where the corpse rests, and the wind that whistles through the sky is like the song of mourning sung after its death. The speaker's metaphors in these lines follow a relatively set pattern: they take something natural and compare it to something dead or linked to death. Each of these metaphors also personifies the landscape, first by turning it into a (deceased) human body and then by making its sounds into a song that humans would ordinarily sing. In this sense, the metaphors in lines 9-12 transform the landscape through the lens of the speaker's sense of despair and isolation.

Though these lines largely continue the formal pattern established in the first stanza—they are alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, rhymed *ABAB*—they do diverge in one important respect. In the first eight lines, every other line was enjambed. But only line 9 is enjambed here; lines 10-12 are all end-stopped. As the speaker begins to articulate his or her metaphors for the landscape, each metaphor gets its own line and acts as its own conceptual and poetic unit. However, the speaker binds these lines together with a pattern of alliteration and consonance in the strong /c/, /s/ and /r/ sounds through lines 9-11:

> The land's sharp features seemed to be
> The Century's corpse outleant.
> His crypt the cloudy canopy,

Line 9 also has strong assonance on an /ee/ sounds ("The land's sharp features seemed to be"). These sounds help unite the lines, creating a sense of continuity across the end-stops. Though each metaphor is discrete, the speaker creates the sense that each builds on the previous. Indeed, the speaker seems trapped in a vicious cycle: just as his or her feelings of despair and isolation shape the way he or she views the landscape, so too does each element of the landscape seem to

reinforce his or her despair. At this point in the poem, the cycle has no obvious exit.

LINES 13-16

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

In the poem's first 12 lines, the speaker has described a bleak, desolate landscape and suggested that that desolation is an extended metaphor for the decline of Western civilization.

In lines 13-14, the speaker suggests the decline he or she describes is permanent and irreversible. The speaker describes an "ancient pulse"—in other words, a cycle or repeated burst of energy—of "germ and birth." These words are roughly synonymous: one describes the birth of new plants, the other of new animals. In other words, the speaker is talking about the way that life renews itself. Though all creatures eventually die, their offspring take their place; in that way, life overcomes death. This is a cycle with potentially religious significance: the cycle of life, death, and rebirth is often used as a symbol for the Christian resurrection in English poetry. However, in the case of this poem, this cycle has been cut short: as the speaker notes in line 14, it is "shrunken hard and dry." The natural and religious cycles through which the world renews itself have failed, which suggests that the decline that the speaker describes is permanent and irreversible.

For the speaker, this is a global condition—a universal despair that can't be escaped. In line 15-16, the speaker notes that "every spirit upon earth" seems just as "fervourless"—as despairing—as the speaker him or herself. The poem thus paints a portrait of total despair and desolation, which has overtaken everyone and everything, and which cannot be repaired. At the midpoint of the poem, it seems there is no solution to this endless despair.

However, the poem's regular form continues, untroubled by the despair the speaker describes. Like the previous lines, these feature alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, rhymed *CDCD*. The ballad form itself is capable of absorbing this despair without being significantly ruffled by the speaker's display of emotion. By keeping these formal features steady, the poem subtly suggests that maybe there is some underlying hope beneath the speaker's desolation—a suggestion that quickly comes to life in the next stanza.

LINES 17-20

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

The break between stanza 2 and stanza 3 serves as a major turning point in the poem. Indeed, one might compare it to the *turn* or *volta* in a Petrarchan sonnet: over the poem's final 2 stanzas, the speaker's arguments and ideas are fundamentally reshaped.

This process begins in lines 17-20 with "a voice" entering the poem. The speaker does not specify yet whose voice this is; it could belong to an animal, human being, or even a supernatural presence. Instead, the speaker focuses on the context from which the voice emerges. The "voice," it becomes clear, is part of the landscape the speaker describes with such despair; it emerges from the "bleak twigs" that hang over the speaker's head.

But though it comes from this "bleak" context, the voice itself is not bleak or full of despair. Instead, the speaker describes it as "full-hearted" and full of "joy illimited." The world may be bleak and frozen, but the voice itself is so full of joy that there seem to be no boundaries or limits to it. Furthermore, the speaker characterizes the voice in religious terms. In one of the only metaphors to appear in the second half of the poem, the speaker notes that the voice's song is like "evensong," the evening prayers and songs performed as rituals in the Anglican Church. In the first two stanzas, the speaker suggests that the possibility of renewal and resurrection has faded from the world. But the voice that appears in line 17 seems to the speaker like an embodiment of a Church ritual—and reminder of the Church's promise of resurrection. (When the reader learns, in the next four lines, that the voice comes from a bird, it will become clear that this moment is an instance of personification: even when the speaker is describing the natural world in positive terms, he or she cannot help describing in terms of human bodies and institutions).

As the poem makes this conceptual shift, its form remains largely consistent. Despite the change its mood and argument, the poem continues to be a ballad: alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, rhymed *ABAB*. There is one major formal shift in these lines, however. In the first half of the poem, the poem has generally alternated between enjambed and end-stopped lines. The result is that the first two stanzas feel both highly organized and slightly constrained or stilted. But at the beginning of the third stanza, that constraint breaks open: there is only one end-stop in lines 17-20 (line 20). The stanza opens with three straight enjambments. This change gives the poem a sudden sense of openness and possibility after the rigid feel of the first two stanzas.

LINES 21-24

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

In lines 17-20, a cheerful, hopeful, and seemingly religious voice enters the poem. In lines 21-14, the speaker goes on to describe the source of that voice in considerable detail.

It is not a human voice, though the speaker often describes it as such, personifying it. Instead, it belongs to a "thrush"—the "darkling thrush" of the poem's title, which is, in a literal sense, a small bird common in England. In many ways, this thrush belongs to the bleak, despairing world the speaker describes in the first half of the poem: it is weak and thin, its feathers ruffled by the strong winds that whip across the landscape. Yet the thrush chooses to "fling his soul" out—to sing boldly and loudly into the "growing gloom" that surrounds him. Hence the word "darkling" in the poem's title, which means "growing dark." The thrush himself is not growing dark, but the world around him is. At the heart of the poem, then, is a tension between the gloomy world—to which the thrush belongs—and the bright, hopeful song that emerges from him.

The speaker underlines this tension with the slant rhyme between lines 21 and 22, "small" and "soul." The slant rhyme emphasizes the discrepancy between the size of the thrush's body and the size of his soul. Though he is a weak and small bird, his song is nonetheless bright and bold. This suggests an underlying moral that the speaker does not fully articulate: a bleak appearance may contain something hopeful and beautiful.

These lines continue the poem's formal pattern: they extend the ballad, with its alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter and alternating rhyme, *CDCD*. And they continue the new arrangement of enjambment and end-stop that emerged at the beginning of stanza 3. As in lines 17-20, there is only one end-stop in lines 21-14 (line 24). Once again, the speaker has expanded the range of the poem, creating a sense of possibility and movement where before there was constriction and containment.

LINES 25-28

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,

In stanza 3, the speaker notes the discrepancy between the bird's song and its surroundings: the song is full of hope, but its surroundings are just as bleak as they've ever been. In the poem's final stanza, the speaker reflects on this discrepancy more explicitly—eventually wondering what the bird knows that the speaker doesn't.

The speaker begins this meditation lines 24-28 by noting how little reason there is for the bird to be "caroling"—singing religious songs—with such joy and ecstasy. The bird's hope and joy seems frankly unreasonable to the speaker.

In line 27, however, the speaker makes a crucial concession. The speaker can see no cause for such hope written in "terrestrial things." That is, hope is not apparent in the earthly landscape the speaker has described with such care throughout the poem. But the "terrestrial" realm is implicitly opposed to another realm: the heavenly. The speaker does not discuss the heavenly realm, but by passing over it in silence, the speaker subtly admits that there may be reasons for hope, joy, and even ecstasy written in heaven itself—although the signs of such joy do not appear on earth.

In contrast to the speaker's religious pessimism in lines 13-14, where he or she argues that there is no longer any possibility of resurrection or renewal, here the speaker seems to touch on the possibility that there may be cause for hope after all. (Of course, the final lines of the poem reveal that the speaker remains "unaware" of this hope, so how fully transformed the speaker really is remains up for debate.)

As the poem makes these subtle shifts, its form continues unperturbed. Like the previous stanzas, this one is a ballad, with alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, rhymed *ABAB*. Like stanza 3, it contains only one end-stop, at the end of line 28. Unlike the end-stops that appear in stanza 3, however, this one is very weak. It is technically possible to regard lines 25-28 as a complete sentence, but line 29 clarifies that they are, in fact, the opening dependent clause of a longer sentence that stretches through the entire stanza. So while line 28 is technically an end-stop, most readers will experience it as an enjambment—rightfully so. The sense of possibility that emerged in stanza 3 with its more relaxed end-stops expands here, to the point that the whole stanza feels enjambed.

LINES 29-32

That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

In lines 25-28, the speaker completes the long sentence begun in lines 25-28. Since there is no cause for joy or religious hope evident in earthly things, the speaker assumes that there is, in the thrush's "happy" song (his "air"), a "blessed Hope," which the thrush knows about but the speaker does not.

Once again, the speaker describes the thrush's song in religious terms, calling its content "blessed." This suggests that the "Hope" that thrush knows about is religious in nature, perhaps even a specifically Christian hope for resurrection. This suggestion is strengthened by the way the speaker capitalizes "Hope:" it is not just any general "Hope," but rather something specific and important. The idea of this precious hope is also highlighted by the caesura that appears in line 31—practically speaking, the poem's only strong caesura. The caesura separates the "Hope" from the "thrush" and his knowledge of it; that is, it implies that the "Hope" has an existence independent of the "thrush," in much the same way that Christians believe Jesus Christ has a reality independent of the people who believe in him.

The appearance of thrush in the second half of the poem thus expands and changes the extended metaphor the speaker

introduced in the poem's first two stanzas. In those early stanzas, the speaker made the bleak winter landscape into a metaphor for the decline of Western civilization. But here, the thrush and his hopeful song suggest that society can move forward from this state of desolation and revive this declining civilization through a recommitment to religious ritual and faith. The speaker's solution to the changes that 19th century industrialization and urbanization have wrought is thus fundamentally conservative: it calls for people to return to an earlier moment of religious piety and unity.

Alternatively, the bird's song could be read as a testament to its blindness and obliviousness to the reality of the world; in this more pessimistic reading, religious hope is just as doomed as the rest of society.

As the speaker introduces this solution to the decay the poem describes, the poem's form remains unchanged. Throughout the second half of the poem, the speaker maintains the poem's ballad form. And in lines 29-32, the speaker continues to alternate lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, rhymed *CDCD*. Despite the spondaic (stressed-stressed) substitutions that appear throughout—with one in line 30:

> His hap- | py good- | night air

—the ballad itself seems to acknowledge the thrush's hope without shifting or losing its footing. This perhaps reflects the ballad's status as an old folk form in English poetry: it reflects an underlying cultural stability that the speaker hopes to access and bring into the turbulent present.

SYMBOLS

FROST

Frost is a kind of ice that forms in cold weather. It tends to fall on the ground or on low-lying plants and shrubs, often killing or damaging the plants that it touches.

When the speaker mentions the "spectre-grey" frost that marks the winter landscape, he or she is likely referring to the literal weather conditions. But frost is also symbolically rich: because it damages plants and prevents them from growing, it symbolizes death itself. And because spring symbolizes renewal, rebirth, and resurrection, the frost stands in symbolically for the forces that block such rebirth. In this poem, the frost likely symbolizes not just death, but death in the absence of Christian resurrection—death as a permanent, irreversible loss. It is the symbolic opposite of the "germ and birth" that the speaker describes in line 13.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Frost"

EYE OF DAY

"Eye of day" is a metaphor for the sun. Because it is round and bright, the sun is often compared to an eye in poetry, a comparison that personifies the sun, giving it human characteristics.

Underlying this metaphor, however, is a broader symbolic significance. The sun commonly understood as a rich symbol in English poetry. Because the word "sun" sounds a lot like the word "son," poets often use the sun as a symbol for Jesus Christ himself, the son of God. Moreover, like Christ, the sun appears to vanish and then rises again. The speaker does not make an obvious, heavy-handed reference to this tradition, but it is nonetheless present. The speaker thus quietly suggests that Christ himself, with his promise of renewal and resurrection, is disappearing from this desolate scene, leaving behind a bleak and unredeemed world.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "eye of day"

LYRE

A lyre is a stringed instrument: a small harp, played with one hand. Traditionally, the lyre was the instrument played by Greek poets like Homer and Sappho to accompany their poems.

Because of its close associations with poetry—and because it is now rarely played—the lyre in a poem is almost always a symbol for poetry itself, rather than a literal instrument. More broadly, it symbolizes the cultural achievement of Western civilization: its great poetry, music, and philosophy. For the strings of the lyre to be "broken" (as noted in line 6) thus suggests that poetry itself—and Western civilization more broadly—have fallen into decline. The speaker sees evidence of this decline in the poorly managed landscape he or she surveys (the "tangled bine-stems") and imagines that it extends to all corners of Western civilization.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "lyres"

FIRES

The "fires" at the end of line 8 play a complicated symbolic role in the poem. On the one hand, they represent warmth and security in a cold and desolate landscape: with the exception of the speaker, all the human

figures in the poem have gone home to the solace and security that their fires provide on a cold day. In this sense, the fires are a positive symbol of human resilience in the face of a hostile natural world.

On the other hand, however, fire is often a symbol of destruction. It calls to mind burning libraries and ruined cities: the destruction of civilization and its artifacts. This second symbolic sense is only implicitly present in the line, but it is strengthened by the rhyme between "household fires" and "broken lyres." The rhyme encourages the reader to seek a connection between the "broken lyres" and the "household fires," and the connection lies in fire's hostility to human culture. As a symbol, then, fire is double-edged, representing both security and destruction. It thus demonstrates for the reader how narrow the difference between the two can be and suggests that perhaps the people who are cozily nestled by their fires at home are actually participating in a form of destruction by refusing to face how bad the world has gotten.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "fires"

GERM AND BIRTH

In line 13, the speaker describes the renewal of two different kinds of life: animal and plant. Animals are born, while plants germinate, sending up saplings and shoots. Taken together, "germ and birth" thus symbolize the renewal of life and its rebirth. (And this renewal is linked to a specific season, spring, when plants "germ" and animals are often born.)

More broadly, this idea of renewal and rebirth can be taken as a Christian symbol. Often in poetry, the return of spring is used as a symbol for resurrection: the rebirth of the faithful, after death, in heaven. For the speaker, however, this possibility of rebirth has disappeared: its "ancient pulse" is "hard and dry." The symbol is cancelled even as it's brought into the poem; there may have once been the possibility of renewal and rebirth, but that possibility has been buried by the cold and desolate landscape the speaker surveys.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** "germ and birth"

HOPE

Literally speaking, "hope" is an expectation—with or without justification—that something good is going to happen. The speaker may use the word here in that simple, neutral sense: the world of the poem is so bleak that any hope, even a relatively generic hope, is exciting and revelatory.

But the word might also symbolize a specific kind of hope: the Christian hope of resurrection and life after death. Indeed, 19th-century Christians often referred to their expectation of going to heaven as their "hope." That the speaker capitalizes the bird's "Hope" and refers to it as "blessed" further strengthens the sense that this is a specifically religious hope. In this sense, the word is not simply literal, but also symbolic: it symbolizes Christian faith and embodies its boldest expectations.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 31:** "Hope"

THRUSH

When the "thrush" (a type of bird) first appears in the poem in stanza 3, the speaker dedicates a considerable amount of attention to its literal, physical details: he or she describes its weight, its size, even its feathers. However, as the poem progresses, it becomes clear that the thrush also carries significant symbolic weight in the poem: the thrush is a symbol of hope. The speaker tells the reader as much in line 31, where he or she interprets the thrush's beautiful, cheerful song—hearing in it the knowledge of "Some blessed Hope" that stands apart from the bleak world the poem otherwise describes.

The hope that the thrush symbolizes also seems to be at least implicitly religious. The speaker consistently interprets the thrush's song in religious terms, describing it as "evensong"—the evening prayers in the Anglican church—and as "blessed." The hope that the thrush symbolizes is might, then, be the hope of Christian resurrection and renewal.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 21:** "thrush"

POETIC DEVICES

ENJAMBMENT

"The Darkling Thrush" uses enjambment in a distinctive and significant pattern. In the first two stanzas, the poem generally alternates enjambed and end-stopped lines. For example, line 5 is enjambed, while line 6 is end-stopped. These units of enjambment and end-stop correspond with the poem's metrical units: each pair of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter lines forms its own grammatical unit that concludes with an end-stop. This pattern repeats in lines 7-8 and holds throughout the first half of the poem, except lines 10-12, where each line is end-stopped. In the first half of the poem, the end-stops are never farther than two lines apart. This creates a highly regular, even constricted reading experience: the poem feels so well-organized as to be oppressive.

However, this rigid reading experience transforms in the second half of the poem. The third stanza has only two end-stops: one line 20 and one in line 24. (Lines 21 and 22 might look like end-stops because they end with punctuation—and elsewhere in the poem enjambed lines are unpunctuated. However, the description of the "aged thrush" is grammatically incomplete until the end of line 24, so these lines are technically enjambed.) The same is true of stanza 4: there are end-stops only in lines 28 and 32 (and the end-stop in line 28 is very weak: many readers will experience it as an enjambment). The number of end-stops has been cut in half: now they appear every four lines instead of every two.

After the tight organization of the poem's opening two stanzas, this change feels almost liberating—it's a radical expansion of possibility. When the thrush enters the poem, he reshapes the reader's experience of the poem, transforming a constrained, organized world into an open, fluid space. The use of enjambment thus underlines the poem's argument: the thrush is a sign of hope for both reader and poet, and believing in this hope can be freeing.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "gate / When"
- **Lines 3-4:** "desolate / The"
- **Lines 5-6:** "sky / Like"
- **Lines 7-8:** "nigh / Had"
- **Lines 9-10:** "be / The"
- **Lines 13-14:** "birth / Was"
- **Lines 15-16:** "earth / Seemed"
- **Lines 17-18:** "among / The"
- **Lines 18-19:** "overhead / In"
- **Lines 19-20:** "evensong / Of"
- **Lines 21-22:** "small, / In"
- **Lines 22-23:** "plume, / Had"
- **Lines 23-24:** "soul / Upon"
- **Lines 25-26:** "carolings / Of"
- **Lines 26-27:** "sound / Was"
- **Lines 27-28:** "things / Afar"
- **Lines 29-30:** "through / His"
- **Lines 30-31:** "air / Some"
- **Lines 31-32:** "knew / And"

END-STOPPED LINE

"The Darkling Thrush" uses end-stop and enjambment to register the shifts in the speaker's sense of possibility and hopefulness as the poem progresses. Likewise, the poem's end-stops and enjambments shape the reader's experience of the poem, giving the reader insight into the speaker's experiences of constraint and, eventually, possibility. In the first half of the poem, the speaker uses end-stop in at least every other line (and in lines 10-12, in every line). In these lines the poem is highly organized, even constrained.

However, in the poem's final two stanzas, the speaker uses end-stop much less frequently. Each stanza has only two end-stops: in lines 20, 24, 28, and 32. What's more, line 28 is a very weak end-stop; it could be read as the close of a grammatical unit, but it is more natural to read it as the dependent clause of the sentence that continues in line 29. After the careful organization and rigid feel of the poem's opening stanzas, these stanzas feel light and loose. They convey a sense of energy and possibility which had previously been missing from the poem—and in this sense, they convey the transformation of the speaker's mood, reflecting the increased sense of hope and possibility the speaker feels after seeing the thrush. The speaker's decreased use of end-stop in these later stanzas imparts that mood to the reader.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** " spectre-grey,"
- **Line 4:** "day."
- **Line 6:** "lyres,"
- **Line 8:** "fires."
- **Line 10:** "outleant,"
- **Line 11:** "canopy,"
- **Line 12:** "death-lament."
- **Line 14:** "dry,"
- **Line 16:** "I."
- **Line 20:** "illimited;"
- **Line 24:** "gloom."
- **Line 28:** "around,"
- **Line 32:** "unaware."

CAESURA

"The Darkling Thrush" contains surprisingly few caesuras for a poem of its length. Indeed, there are no caesuras at all in the poem's first two stanzas. There are a few caesuras in line 21: "An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small." But because these caesuras are part of a list, they do not significantly affect the meaning of the line or the way it sounds to the reader.

The poem's only significant caesura falls in line 31: "Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew." This caesura divides the "blessed Hope" from the bird who knows about it. This suggests that the hope is somehow separate from the bird; it seems to have a reality independent of the thrush who sings about it. In this way, the poem subtly reinforces the sense that the "Hope" in question is religious, and specifically Christian. If the "Hope" is Jesus Christ, for example, then it makes sense to treat it as an independent entity, with its own reality apart from those who believe in it.

This caesura also works in coordination with the enjambment at the end of line 31. Just as the bird is separated from the "blessed Hope," so too is the speaker separated from the bird. The lines suggest a chain or hierarchy, with the "Hope" at the top, the bird close to it, and the speaker beneath or beyond

both, distant from hope and yet still connected to it.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 21:** “, ,” “, ,” “, ”
- **Line 31:** “, ”

ALLITERATION

The Darkling Thrush” contains a number of notable instances of alliteration. Indeed, at points in the poem, it feels as though the speaker is showing off: an alliteration like “His crypt the cloudy canopy” in line 11 is self-consciously literary. However, the alliteration is not simply showy: it reinforces the speaker’s metaphor, binding together the “crypt” and the “cloudy canopy,” suggesting a close relationship between these two very different things.

In other places in the poem, the alliteration is less obvious but no less significant. For instance, lines 5-6 contain alliteration on /b/, /st/ and /sk/ sounds: “The tangled bine-stems scored the sky / like strings of broken lyres.” The /b/ alliteration is perhaps hard to hear, since it requires reading across the heavy alliteration on the /sk/ sound at the end of line 5. But it is important to the poem, since it once again brings together two very different things—the shoots of climbing plants and a musical instrument—that are being compared to each other with a simile. The alliteration reinforces the work that the simile is doing and suggests a kind of validity to the comparison the speaker is making. Thus, though the poem's alliteration is sometimes showy, it's often used in sophisticated ways that reinforce the work of other devices—and support the poem’s argument more broadly.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “g”
- **Line 2:** “W,” “w,” “g”
- **Line 3:** “W,” “d,” “d”
- **Line 4:** “w,” “d”
- **Line 5:** “b,” “s,” “t,” “sc,” “sk”
- **Line 6:** “st,” “b”
- **Line 7:** “th,” “h”
- **Line 8:** “H,” “th,” “h”
- **Line 10:** “C,” “c”
- **Line 11:** “c,” “c,” “c”
- **Line 15:** “s”
- **Line 16:** “S”
- **Line 17:** “A,” “a,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 21:** “A,” “a”
- **Line 22:** “b,” “b”
- **Line 24:** “g,” “g”
- **Line 25:** “c,” “c”
- **Line 26:** “s,” “s”
- **Line 27:** “W,” “w”
- **Line 28:** “A,” “a”
- **Line 29:** “Th,” “th,” “th,” “thr”
- **Line 30:** “H,” “h”
- **Line 31:** “H,” “w,” “h”
- **Line 32:** “w”

ASSONANCE

“The Darkling Thrush” uses both alliteration and consonance in controlled and sometimes ostentatious ways. The poem’s use of assonance is more subtle and less consistent, but the poem does contain significant strings of assonance. For example, line 7 features two strong repeating /a/ sounds (the longer /a/ of "and" and the more closed sound of "all"):

> And all mankind that haunted nigh

The chain of /a/ sounds binds the line together and links the concepts it presents: it seems, by the end of the line that “haunting” is simply what “mankind” does. In this sense, assonance reinforces the poem's conceptual work of critiquing society at the end of the 19th century.

In other places, the use of assonance supplements the speaker's use of alliteration and consonance. For example, line 9 contains assonance on an and /ee/ sound: "the land's sharp features seemed to be." In the absence of strong alliteration (and with only slight consonance on an /s/ sound), the assonance binds each part of the line together. The /ee/ sound emphasizes how much the speaker's perspective shapes the appearance of the landscape, drawing a close link between the ideas of "seeming" and "being."

Assonance plays a similarly subtle role in many other spots throughout the poem, often gently reinforcing the links that the speaker makes between seemingly different concepts (such as the "bine-stems" and the "sky" in line 5).

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “o,” “o”
- **Line 2:** “e,” “o,” “e,” “ey”
- **Line 3:** “e,” “a,” “a”
- **Line 4:** “eye,” “ay”
- **Line 5:** “i,” “y”
- **Line 6:** “y”
- **Line 7:** “A,” “a,” “a,” “a,” “au,” “i”
- **Line 8:** “a,” “ou,” “i”
- **Line 9:** “ea,” “ee,” “e”
- **Line 10:** “ou”
- **Line 11:** “ou,” “y,” “y”
- **Line 12:** “i,” “i,” “ea,” “e”
- **Line 13:** “e,” “i”
- **Line 15:** “e,” “ea”

- **Line 16:** "e," "ou"
- **Line 17:** "a," "a," "a"
- **Line 18:** "ea"
- **Line 19:** "e"
- **Line 20:** "i," "i," "i"
- **Line 21:** "a," "u," "ai," "au," "a"
- **Line 22:** "u," "u"
- **Line 23:** "o," "u," "o," "i," "ou"
- **Line 24:** "o," "i," "oo"
- **Line 25:** "i," "o," "i"
- **Line 26:** "O," "u"
- **Line 27:** "i," "i"
- **Line 28:** "A," "i," "a"
- **Line 29:** "l," "ough"
- **Line 30:** "i"
- **Line 31:** "o," "e," "e," "o," "ew"
- **Line 32:** "l," "a," "u," "a"

CONSONANCE

"The Darkling Thrush" often uses consonance alongside alliteration, usually as a way of reinforcing the connections that the alliteration highlights. For example, lines 9-11 contain strong alliterations on a hard /c/ sound and equally strong consonance on an /r/ sound and /s/ sound:

> The land's sharp features seemed to be
> The Century's corpse outleant.
> His crypt the cloudy canopy,

The alliteration in line 11 underlines and reinforces the speaker's metaphor, furthering the idea that the landscape is a stand-in for a human corpse (which is itself a layered metaphor for the death of Western civilization). Working with the alliteration, which begins in line 10 with "corpse," the consonance crosses lines 10 and 11 and binds them together. The use of consonance here helps to establish connections across a series of end-stopped lines, each of which presents its own metaphor. The consonance subtly encourages the reader to see these metaphors as parts of an ensemble which, taken together, present a comprehensive portrait of the landscape and its meaning—at least as the speaker sees it.

Consonance is thus the glue of the poem; it often holds it together and provides an added sense of integrity across lines that seem quite different from one another. It performs this role subtly: because the poem contains so many showy alliterations (as in "crypt the cloudy canopy"), the reader's attention is likely distracted from the less ostentatious consonance that pulses underneath and unifies the poem.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "t," "p," "p," "p," "g," "t"
- **Line 2:** "W," "s," "t," "w," "s," "s," "t," "g"
- **Line 3:** "n," "d," "W," "n," "t," "s," "d," "s," "d," "d," "s," "t"
- **Line 4:** "w," "n," "d"
- **Line 5:** "t," "b," "n," "s," "t," "s," "s," "c," "sk"
- **Line 6:** "L," "k," "st," "r," "b," "r," "k," "n," "l," "r," "s"
- **Line 7:** "nd," "nd," "th," "h," "n," "d," "n"
- **Line 8:** "H," "d," "s," "th," "h," "s," "h," "d," "s"
- **Line 9:** "s," "t," "s," "s," "t"
- **Line 10:** "C," "t," "s," "c," "p," "s," "t," "t"
- **Line 11:** "c," "p," "c," "c," "p"
- **Line 12:** "d," "d"
- **Line 13:** "Th," "n," "n," "r," "r," "th"
- **Line 14:** "s," "n," "n," "r," "d," "d," "d," "r"
- **Line 15:** "n," "r," "r," "n," "r"
- **Line 16:** "S," "r," "r," "ss," "s"
- **Line 17:** "c," "c"
- **Line 18:** "h," "d"
- **Line 19:** "n," "ll," "h," "d," "n"
- **Line 20:** "ll," "d"
- **Line 21:** "d," "f," "l," "t," "m," "ll"
- **Line 22:** "b," "l," "t," "b," "ff," "l," "l," "m"
- **Line 23:** "H," "n," "s," "l," "h," "s," "s," "l"
- **Line 24:** "n," "g," "g"
- **Line 25:** "S," "l," "l," "c," "s," "c," "l," "s"
- **Line 26:** "s," "c," "s," "c," "s"
- **Line 27:** "W," "w," "r," "tt," "n," "n," "s," "s"
- **Line 28:** "r," "r"
- **Line 29:** "Th," "t," "c," "d," "th," "k," "th," "r," "t," "r," "d," "th," "r"
- **Line 30:** "H," "h," "pp"
- **Line 31:** "S," "ss," "H," "p," "w," "h," "w"
- **Line 32:** "w," "w"

PERSONIFICATION

The Darkling Thrush" describes a number of natural landscape features as well as the "thrush" of its title. Although the speaker describes these natural phenomena in considerable physical detail, the speaker also consistently personifies them. The landscape's "sharp features" are compared to a human corpse; the frost resembles a "spectre" or a ghost; the bird's song is compared to "evensong," the evening prayers in the Anglican church. Through these examples and others, speaker consistently gives the natural things he or she describes human characteristics.

These moments of personification play a key role supporting several of the poem's other poetic devices: its similes, metaphors, and, most importantly, its central extended metaphor. The poem uses the landscape as an extended metaphor for the decay of Western civilization—and offers the thrush as a solution to that degeneration, suggesting that renewed religious commitment is the only way to rescue this barren world. For the landscape to bear this heavy

metaphorical weight, it must take on the characteristics of human civilization. And similarly, for the thrush to offer a solution to the cultural decay the poem describes, it must acquire associations with human religious. Personification allows the landscape and the bird to be more than literal things, and to carry the heavy metaphorical weight they eventually take on in the poem.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- Line 2
- Line 4
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 17-20
- Lines 21-24
- Lines 25-29
- Lines 29-32

SIMILE

"The Darkling Thrush" contains two similes, one in its first stanza and one in the second.

In line 6, the speaker compares the "tangled bine-stems"—the stems of climbing plants—that "scored the sky" to the "strings of broken lyres." A lyre is a stringed musical instrument (like a small, hand-held harp). Traditionally, it was the instrument that ancient Greek poets like Homer and Sappho strummed while they performed their poems. As a result, it is often a symbol for poetry itself—and, more broadly, for the cultural accomplishments of Western civilization. For the strings of a lyre to be "broken" suggests that Western civilization itself has been damaged or destroyed. The simile is thus powerful and transformative: it takes a minor feature of the natural landscape and turns it into an image of a failed or failing civilization and a broken historical tradition. This simile sets the stage for the rest of the poem: the landscape is both a literal space and a symbolic expression of moral and cultural deterioration.

In this sense, the landscape gains its meaning from the speaker's feelings and ideas. That is, a winter landscape can certainly be bleak—but it could also be cozy. The speaker's sense of despair and desolation shapes his or her interpretation of the landscape. The speaker makes this explicit in lines 15-16, where the poem's second simile appears. Here the speaker compares "every spirit upon earth" to "I"—and finds that all these other people all seem to be as "fervourless" (as depressed and despairing) as the speaker him or herself. Here, the speaker's emotional state forms the standard against which "every spirit upon earth" is measured. This simile again takes part of the broader world (in this case, everyone in the world except the speaker) and transforms it into a vivid reflection of the speaker's mood and beliefs.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "The tangled bine-stems scored the sky / Like strings of broken lyres"
- **Lines 15-16:** "And every spirit upon earth / Seemed fervourless as I"

METAPHOR

"The Darkling Thrush" contains a large number of metaphors, particularly in its first two stanzas.

The speaker compares the "Frost" to a "spectre"—a ghost or spirit—in line 2 and the sun to an "eye" in line 4. In stanza 2, the speaker compares the topographical features of the landscape he or she surveys to a "corpse," the cloudy sky to a "crypt," and the wind to the corpse's "death-lament." (The first instance could technically be considered a simile because of its use of the word "seemed" in line 9, but because these three instances of figurative language are so closely linked to one another, it's simpler to think of them as three aspects of the same larger metaphor.)

These metaphors follow a general pattern. With the exception of the fairly conventional metaphor comparing the sun to an "eye," they each take a natural object or phenomenon and compare it to something dead or associated with death—ghosts, corpses, and tombs. These metaphors often personify the landscape, turning it into a human body and making its sounds into human sounds. Then, in a second layer of metaphor nested within the first, these three metaphors make the "corpse" into a symbol of the 19th century, now dead and entombed. The use of metaphor thus completely transforms the landscape: it ceases to be an actual space and instead becomes a register of the speaker's sense of despair and desolation.

In the second half of the poem, however, the speaker only uses one basic metaphor: the description of the thrush's song as a human musical form. The speaker uses different words for different instances of this metaphor ("carolings" in line 25 or "good-night air" in 30), but the most important instance falls in line 19, where the speaker describes the thrush's song as "evensong." Evensong is the set of evening prayers sung and chanted in Anglican churches. Once again, the metaphor transforms a natural thing—in this case, a bird—into a human thing: a religious ritual. The metaphor suggests that the bird appears in the poem as an expression of religious feeling and human hope.

This final metaphor is thus in opposition to the metaphors that appear earlier in the poem. Where the earlier metaphors emphasize death and decay, the metaphor associated with the bird introduces Christianity, with its promise of resurrection as a source of hope for the speaker and for the decaying culture he or she describes in the first two stanzas. Taken together, the

poem's various metaphors track the speaker's changing attitude toward the world, from the despair of the first two stanzas to the dawning hope of the conclusion.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "Frost was spectre-grey"
- **Line 4:** "eye of day"
- **Lines 9-12:** "The land's sharp features seemed to be / The Century's corpse outleant, / His crypt the cloudy canopy, / The wind his death-lament."
- **Line 19:** "full-hearted evensong"
- **Line 25:** "carolings"
- **Line 30:** "good-night air"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

"The Darkling Thrush" describes a winter landscape and a bird that flies across it, singing a hopeful song. It is apparently a literal description of these events; they are described in considerable detail. (For instance, the speaker even describes the bird's feathers in line 22). However, there are hints throughout the poem that the speaker's narrative is not entirely literal but also serves as an extended metaphor for the decay of Western culture—and its possible regeneration.

In lines 5-6, the speaker compares the "bine-stems" of climbing plants to the "strings of broken lyres." The lyre is a potent symbol for the accomplishments of Western culture, so "broken" lyre strings suggest the decay and destruction of that culture. Similarly, in stanza two, the speaker compares the landscape to "the Century's corpse" and develops a detailed set of images conveying how the natural world represents various aspects of death. Taken together, this accumulation of similes and metaphors suggests that the landscape the speaker describes is actually an extended metaphor for the speaker's perception of Western culture in decline.

The appearance of the thrush in the final two stanzas both transforms and expands this extended metaphor. The speaker consistently characterizes the thrush in religious terms. Its song is like "evensong"—the evening prayers performed in Anglican churches—and the hope that the song embodies is described as "blessed." The thrush and his song present a clear alternative to the decay of Western civilization described in the poem's first half, and they suggest that decay can be overcome through renewed religious devotion. Without the extended metaphor, the thrush simply improves the speaker's bleak mood. With the extended metaphor, however, it becomes clear that the thrush's appearance in the poem has broader significance: it offers a solution to the cultural ills described in the first two stanzas.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

VOCABULARY

Coppice (Line 1) - A wooded area. In a coppice, foresters cut back the trees and shrubs that form the forest to stimulate growth. A coppice is thus a natural area that is managed by human beings, for human purposes.

Spectre-grey (Line 2) - Grey as a ghost or a spirit.

Dregs (Line 3) - The sediment or deposits at the bottom of a container that once contained liquid. Thus, metaphorically, the "dregs" often describe the very last (and often somewhat unpleasant) remnants of something.

Bine-stems (Line 5) - The stem of a climbing plant. Usually used to describe hops, it can also refer to plants like the woodbine.

Scored (Line 5) - Cut or marked.

Lyre (Line 6) - A small stringed musical instrument. In the classical tradition, the lyre was the instrument that poets played as they sang their songs.

Haunted (Line 7) - Lived in or hung around the area. The speaker uses the word in a recognizable sense—one might refer to a place where someone used to hang out as their "old haunt." But the word is generally not used in this sense; it more often refers to the activities of ghosts or spirits, who haunt people and places. Alongside the "spectre" in line 2, this sense is probably partially present in the line; one has the sense that the people the speaker describes are somehow already dead or otherwise ghostly.

Nigh (Line 7, Line 28) - Nearby or in the area.

Outleant (Line 10) - Leaning outward or leaning forward.

Crypt (Line 11) - Tomb or catacomb. A place where bodies are buried.

Death-lament (Line 12) - A lament is a song or poem of mourning sung after someone's death.

Pulse (Line 13) - A repetitive urge or a cycle.

Germ (Line 13) - A shortened form of the word "germination." Germination describes the way that a plant or animal grows from a seed by sprouting and putting up a seedling. The word is thus parallel to "birth" later in the line. Where "birth" describes the generation of new animals and people, "germ" describes the birth of new plants.

Fervourless (Line 16) - Literally, without fervor. In other words, the speaker is depressed and dispirited.

Evensong (Line 19) - The prayers, psalms, and songs sung at evening prayers in the Anglican churches. These songs are generally led by the priest and accompanied by a choir.

Illimited (Line 20) - Without limit, unlimited.

Gaunt (Line 21) - Very skinny or even emaciated. The implication is that the thrush might be starving or just barely alive.

Blast-beruffled (Line 22) - Rumpled by the wind. In other words, the bird's feathers have been tousled by a strong wind.

Plume (Line 22) - The feathers or plumage of a bird.

Fling (Line 23) - Throw or cast. In this case, the bird is throwing his voice, singing loudly and clearly.

Carolings (Line 25) - Singing of religious or holy music.

Terrestrial (Line 27) - On or of the earth. The word is in implicit opposition to another adjective: heavenly. Here the speaker says that in all the things that the speaker can see on earth, there is no encouragement or hope. The speaker does not address what might be going on in heaven, or what signs it might provide.

Air (Line 30) - A song or a piece of music.

Whereof (Line 31) - Which or that. In context, the word indicates that the thrush knows about something that the speaker does not.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Darkling Thrush" is a ballad. In keeping with the conventions of that form, it is written in eight-line stanzas, also called octaves. Each octave features alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, rhymed ABABCDCD.

The ballad is a serial form, which means there are no limits to the number of stanzas it might have. (Often, ballads were sung, printed, and reprinted, with new stanzas added and old ones taken out; the poems would grow as their readers' priorities changed). "The Darkling Thrush" is similarly serial in that the poem may be divided into two parts. In the first, the speaker meditates on the bleakness and despair of the landscape around him or her. In the second, the appearance of the thrush provides a rush of hope. The break between stanza 2 and stanza 3 thus operates as a kind of *volta* or *turn*. But the form does not change as the poem's subject matter changes—unlike the sonnet, for example, whose form does change after its *volta*. The ballad continues to hum along, its form smooth and unperturbed, even as the content that fills it shifts. (Though it is worth noting that the poem's pattern of enjambment shifts significantly in its second half).

The ballad is an old form in English poetry: it predates many of the language's prestigious literary forms, like the sonnet. But unlike the sonnet, the ballad has remained a popular form throughout its long history. It was used for a wide range of popular songs and poems—everything from hymns sung in English churches to poems about murderers and outlaws, pasted on the walls of taverns. The form thus has no particular content associated with it: it's just as good for religious poems that take on the most serious and difficult question as it is for poems about the seedy underworld of English crime.

"The Darkling Thrush," seems to follow the more serious, weighty part of the ballad tradition. Certainly there are no tales of murder and romance here. But ultimately what attracted Hardy to the ballad was probably its strong associations with England itself. Though it originated in France, it became over the centuries a form deeply associated with English popular culture and the everyday language of English peasants. For Hardy, the form gave him an intimacy with the English language and its deep history, which is especially useful for a poem critiquing contemporary English culture.

METER

"The Darkling Thrush" is written in ballad meter. It alternates between lines of iambic tetrameter (four poetic feet with a da DUM rhythm, for a total of 8 syllables per line) and iambic trimeter (three poetic feet with a da DUM rhythm, for a total of 6 syllables per line). This rhythm is clear from the poem's opening lines:

I leant | upon | a cop- | ice gate
When Frost | was spect- | re-grey

This is a traditional meter with roots in folk songs. It was used for poetry and music on a wide range of topics, from religious hymns to poems about murder and crime. Hardy likely turned to ballad meter because it is a strongly English tradition. He may have hoped it would allow him to access something deep and authentic in the language. And indeed, he uses the meter in a particularly forceful fashion, even (or especially) as he critiques the culture of England itself.

The meter is often smooth and skillful—note, for instance, the rhyming feminine endings of line 6 and line 8, "broken lyres" and "household fires." It's a difficult move, but the poem pulls it off effortlessly:

Like strings | of brok- | -en ly- | res
Had sought | their house- | hold fi- | res

Though this is a metrical substitution, it hardly feels like one, because the speaker repeats it and because the stressed and stressed syllables rhyme across the two lines. However, the poem also uses some less smooth substitutions, like spondees, which often introduce extra stresses into the line. Compare lines 9, 19, and 30:

Line 9:

The land's | sharp fea- | tures seemed | to be

Line 19:

In a | full-heart- | ed e- | vensong |

Line 30:

His hap- | py good- | night air

The stresses tend to pile up in these lines—as in line 30, which closes with three consecutive stresses. This gives the feeling of rhythmic density and intensity; the lines feel thick and heavy.

This sense of density is often related to its content. For instance, the spondee in line 5 corresponds nicely with the density of the "bine-stems" that partially obscure the sky: their thickness and violence are echoed by the line's weight. (Something similar could be said about the "sharp features" in line 9: the line is as sharp as the features it describes). Later in the poem, when the thrush appears, the spondees mark the intensity and fullness of the speaker's joy. It seems so rich and important that it overflows the boundaries of metrical propriety. In these moments of intensity, the poem does seem to approach something essential to the English language: it seems to revive the heavy stresses and sonic density of Anglo-Saxon poems like *Beowulf*, bringing their sonic character into contemporary English.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Darkling Thrush" follows the typical rhyme scheme of a ballad:

ABABCDCD

Each stanza introduces a new group of rhymes following that same scheme. The rhymes tend to be simple, direct words: even when it rhymes with words of two or more syllables, the poem favors simple diction. Despite this simplicity, the poem often uses rhyme in pointed and significant ways. In some cases, rhyme emphasizes the intimacy between two apparently disparate words.

For example, in lines 6 and 8 rhyme the words "lyres" and "fires" (a nifty double feminine ending, which rhymes both the stressed and unstressed syllables of the two words). At first, it doesn't seem like there's much of a relationship between the lyre, a stringed instrument that poets in ancient Greece played as they sang their poems, and fire. Indeed, the lyres are "broken" while the fires are contained and peaceful, "household fires." The fires seem like the one source of solace in an otherwise bleak and forbidding world. But the rhyme makes the reader pause to think about the relationship between them—and the broken lyres cast an ominous shadow over the "household fires." The lyre is a traditional symbol of poetry—and, more broadly, of the glory of Western civilization—so connecting damaged ones to fires reminds the reader that these seemingly tame "household fires" might have serious consequences for society. Perhaps the poem is suggesting that hiding out at home is actually making things more dangerous for "all mankind," rather than safer.

By contrast, in lines 21-23, there is a slant rhyme between "small" and "soul." Here the failure of the rhyme highlights the speaker's point. Though the thrush may be "frail, gaunt, and small," his soul is not: his soul is full of hope, song, and life. The imperfect rhyme emphasizes the disconnect between the bird's body and its soul. And in so doing, it suggests a broader lesson for both speaker and reader: that the bleak appearance of things may contain a rich and hopeful interior. In this instance, then, the poem's simple rhymes shed light on the broader religious and philosophical questions the poem raises.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "The Darkling Thrush" is an anonymous person. Though the reader does not learn much about details like the speaker's class, race, gender, or age, the poem does reveal about a lot about the speaker's priorities and interests.

Almost the whole poem consists of the speaker describing things—a winter landscape, a singing bird. The reader can learn about the speaker by watching the speaker in action, by seeing the way that he or she describes the world and the things that he or she finds interesting or surprising. It is immediately evident, for instance, that the speaker has an unusually bleak view of the world. As the speaker describes the landscape on a winter's day, he or she focuses on its desolation. The "Frost" reminds the speaker of a "spectre"—a ghost (rather than something cheerful like, say, winter holidays). The speaker's emotions seem to depend on the condition of the natural world. But, at the same time, the speaker's emotions lead him or her to interpret the natural world in severe and dark terms.

However, the speaker's despair is not impenetrable: in the second half of the poem, a singing thrush reminds the speaker that hope and joy are possible. The speaker describes this hope in striking religious terms, calling it "blessed" in line 31. Further, the speaker compares the bird's song to "evensong"—the evening prayers in Anglican churches. This suggests that the speaker's despair is in part a consequence of religious doubts. Perhaps the speaker is experiencing a crisis of faith, or perhaps the speaker's anxieties are related to society more broadly. Hardy wrote the poem in 1900, and it seems to reflect on the previous century, describing it as a "corpse." The speaker may feel that society is failing or losing its promise—and that a return to religion will help restore it and give reason for hope. The unnamed speaker's anxieties are thus deeply personal, but they also expand to include fundamental issues of faith and society, issues that the poem hopes to help resolve.

SETTING

"The Darkling Thrush" is set in a winter landscape, most likely England at the turn of the twentieth century. The poet, Thomas Hardy, spent his life in England and wrote this poem there in the winter of 1900.

The landscape is agricultural and sparsely populated; its topography is rugged and harsh. The speaker seems to be looking out over it, and behind the speaker is a "coppice," a kind forest which people sometimes cut back to stimulate its growth. Though the coppice should be a managed space, it seems to have been poorly maintained. Although it's winter, the speaker notes that his or her view of the sky is obscured by climbing vines—weeds. It has been a while, perhaps too long, since the forest has been cut back. The people who are supposed to take care of it are missing in action. Indeed, the poem itself is largely devoid of human life: the weather is so bad that everyone but the speaker is indoors, at their "household fires." The setting of the poem is thus desolate and unpopulated. It seems to reflect the speaker's mood, which is as bleak as the landscape he or she describes.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Darkling Thrush" is a ballad. The ballad is a very old folk form of English poetry. Over its long history, it was used for a wide range of poetry: from religious hymns sung in English churches, to drinking songs, to popular poems about murderers, thieves, and star-crossed lovers. After he stopped writing novels and dedicated himself exclusively to poetry, Hardy turned often to the ballad. His ballads tend to be morally and intellectually serious, drawing on the tradition of hymns rather than drinking songs or scandalous popular verse. But his interest in the ballad has less to do with its traditional content and more to do with its deep history in English literature.

At the time Hardy wrote his poems, poets in England, France, and Italy were increasingly questioning the traditions and forms of poetry, often inventing new ways of writing. This was called modernism, a broad literary movement that emerged from the rapid urbanization and industrialization of society in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The modernists attempted to develop new literary techniques and forms that would be adequate to the new realities of an industrial society.

Hardy was familiar with these developments, but he responded to his changing society in a different way than the modernists did. Instead of attempting to develop new literary forms, he sought the oldest forms available to him, especially ones that were closely connected with the English language. Although the ballad was invented in France, it is strongly associated with native English poetic tradition and has often been used by poets who want to return to something essentially "English" in their poetry. In this spirit, Hardy hoped that this venerable form would help him recover something authentic about the English language at a time when his society was undergoing rapid transformation. Although Hardy is now better remembered for his novels than his poems, his resistance to modernism and his work reviving the ballad made him important to later of anti-modernist poets. For example, Hardy was a central figure for the group of young British poets called "the Movement" in the early 1950s, which included major figures like Thom Gunn and Ted Hughes.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Darkling Thrush" was written in December of 1900. It reflects on the end of the 19th century: in lines 9-10, the speaker describes the landscape he or she views as "the Century's corpse outleant." The poem takes a bleak view of the historical moment it describes; the speaker seems to feel that all hope and possibility have been stripped from the landscape that he or she views. The speaker does not specify which historical developments inspire this sense of desolation and despair, but the reader can make some guesses based on the way the speaker describes the landscape.

First, the speaker is unable to see any other people; they've all gone inside to sit by their fires. The poem thus expresses a deep sense of loneliness and a loss of human community. This is likely related to the rapid urbanization and industrialization of England in the 19th century, a process which depopulated rural areas (like the one the speaker describes in "The Darkling Thrush"). It also produced large urban populations, in which individuals often felt rootless, anonymous, and cut off from their communities.

The poem meditates on both sides of this social condition: the depopulation of rural communities and the resulting sense of isolation and anonymity, even within large cities full of people. Without people to manage it, the landscape is overgrown and unruly. This is also likely a reflection on the environmental costs of industrialization. The speaker ties the two together, suggesting that industrialization strips the landscape of its people and, in so doing, endangers the landscape itself.

Second, as the speaker describes it, the landscape is a profoundly secular place, stripped of its connection with religion. The possibility of rebirth, so central to Christian theology, seems to have been cut off. As the speaker looks out over the land, he or she sees only death and decay until the thrush appears in stanzas 3 and 4, transforming the world with its incongruous and hopeful song. The speaker describes this song in religious terms, as "evensong"—the traditional evening prayers in an Anglican church—and as something "blessed."

The bird thus seems to offer a renewed sense of religious commitment and religious feeling. It suggests that the speaker has been personally troubled by religious doubts—but it also

suggests that the speaker's society has had its religious difficulties. Indeed, the 19th century was a time of increasing atheism and secularization across Britain. The poem seems to respond to this historical development by calling for a return to Christianity as the foundation of society. In its response to the industrialization and secularization of English society, the poem offers a conservative solution: it subtly recommends a return to pre-industrial models of human and religious community.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- What is Evensong? — St. Thomas Church in New York City offers a brief definition and explanation of evensong. (https://www.saintthomaschurch.org/calendar/events/worship/7428/choral-evensong/sermon)
- The Industrial Revolution — From the British Library, a discussion of the causes and consequences of the Industrial Revolution. (https://www.bl.uk/georgian-britain/articles/the-industrial-revolution)
- Poem of the Week: The Darkling Thrush by Thomas Hardy — Carol Rumens offers a detailed analysis of Hardy's poem in an article for the Guardian newspaper. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/dec/28/poem-of-the-week-the-darkling-thrush-thomas-hardy)
- "The Darkling Thrush" Read Aloud — Tim Gracyk reads "The Darkling Thrush" aloud. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjE9cxQbXP8)
- More About Thomas Hardy — A detailed biography of Thomas Hardy from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/thomas-hardy)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER THOMAS HARDY POEMS

- A Wife In London
- Neutral Tones
- The Man He Killed

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