

Courage from Above

Analysis of "The Darkling Thrush" by Thomas Hardy
By Rebecca Andersen

*I leant upon a coppice gate
When Frost was spectre-gray,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted nigh
Had sought their household fires.*

*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*

In the poem "The Darkling Thrush" by Thomas Hardy, we see in the thrush an example of optimism, determination, and courage in a world of sorrow and despair. The speaker, who observes the thrush, is facing a world that appears harsh and difficult, and learns to turn outward to discover courage in a higher power. Hardy highlights the contrast between despair and courage by using character and imagery, diction, and the contrasting sections of the poem. The first section illustrates the discouragement and frustration that comes from failure and hardship. The second half, introduced by the song of the thrush, shows that courage can be found, but it must be looked for in higher sources. This poem displays the theme of courage needed and found through contrasting parts to the poem.

The character of the speaker in "The Darkling Thrush" is seeking for courage. He is a person discouraged, "fervourless," and weary of the winter that surrounds him. He is leaning "upon a coppice gate," or thickets in which he sees nothing but "tangled brine-stems." These images represent that time where courage has been eclipsed by doubts, just as the forest's natural beauty has been eclipsed by the grasp of winter. The speaker is blessed, however, with the peculiar clarity of thought that is found in such times, and he knows that in

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order to find hope he must look elsewhere. While the others have “sought their household fires,” their own personal comforts, for the warmth and peace they seek, he recognizes the fact that he will not find the peace he needs anywhere he has already looked.

This poem shows that when faced with heartache and failure, a person will begin to review life, and the speaker in this poem finds his life presently sorrowful and miserable, as evidenced by his description of the forest on this cold evening. The speaker’s perception of his surroundings is a clue to his feelings, for what is seen is tainted by what one decides ahead of time they are going to see, and even a beautiful landscape becomes harsh and uninviting to the depressed of spirit. Hardy uses very vivid metaphors in the description of the speaker’s surroundings and says the land is a corpse, the frost covers as a mist of gloom, and the bare branches of the thicket are to his eyes a song unsung and a melody lost. Hardy uses this imagery to present a time in the speaker’s life when his pursuits have fallen short of their goals and his will to continue is lost in the pains of frustration and discouragement.

The diction in this poem supports the theme of courage sought and found by using contrast. The first half of the poem displays the bramble of doubt and discouragement. Hardy uses words that specifically convey a mood of death and despair. He compares the frost to “spectre-gray,” the branches of the thicket to “strings from broken lyres,” and the landscape to “the Century’s corpse outleant.” All is lifeless and hopeless. It was not always such, as hinted by the phrases “The ancient pulse of germ and birth/Was shrunken hard and dry.” The life that was once fruitful and prosperous has been replaced by frustration and failure. The speaker has seen the brilliant sunlight hours, but the “Winter’s dregs made desolate/The weakening eye of day.” There was a time when the speaker was happy, but recent failures and misfortunes have embittered him to the joys that he normally found.

The second half of the poem contradicts this despair to convey a sense of hope and shows us that hope can be found in heavenly things. The voice of the little thrush “arose” from “among/The bleak twigs overhead,” just as the glorious sound of faith discovered becomes a beacon of hope arising from the shadows of discouragement. The bird’s “full-hearted evensong” is the first inkling of hope distilled upon the speaker, and he turns his gaze “overhead” to find the source thereof. The courage necessitated by trial is only found by looking up. After looking everywhere else, in all the things around him, the speaker finally finds the hope he needs when he looks towards the heavens and is inspired by the thrush’s song.

Also to highlight the difference between despair and hope through diction in the two parts of the poem, the sounds are repeated much more frequently in the second half. For example, “At once a voice arose among” repeats sounds to create a singsong flowing to the lines. The line “Of such ecstatic sound” also uses repetition to create this flow. This alliteration allows a flowing, song-like feeling, presenting the reader with a clearer sensory connection to the poem. The song’s courageous melody is nearly audible as the poem is read, and we are able to understand the reason why this little thrush was so important to the

speaker. The speaker is seeking courage, and the song of the darkling thrush inspires him to look to the source of all hope and “joy illimited.”

The little bird, found in the second half of the poem, had undergone his share of trials and becomes the perfect example of finding hope and courage and displaying it for others to see. The bird is an “aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,” with a “blast-beruffled plume.” He had been through the storm and he exploded a stronger creature, more capable of feeling joy and having courage even when all seems lost. The “growing gloom” has no effect upon the thrush, except perhaps to make him all the more determined to sing away the distresses of life, and the speaker of the poem finds in this bird a model for endurance and courage that was obtained by not fixating on the world but turning to more heavenly sources of strength.

The little bird is said to be “fling[ing] his soul” upon the world, unafraid of trial and the bitterness of the winter. The thrush arises from the bleakness and pours out his soul to his Creator in great “carollings,” the connotations of which are generally songs of exceeding joy and praise for religious reasons. We also see that the speaker can find no cause for the thrush’s apparent joy in “terrestrial things/Afar or nigh around.” Although the world appears to hold no source of courage and hope, the little bird is able to reach beyond the world and find this hope unseen, and in so doing, guides the speaker to the same.

The theme of seeking courage is shown in the overall mood of the poem. The thrush becomes a model of valor amidst the oppressions of failure and trial as he “flings his soul upon the growing gloom.” When to the speaker “every spirit on earth/Seem[s] as fervourless as I,” and it appears that to discover hope and a he turns to a being he trial and emerging with a unknown to the innocent storms that have rendered feathers disheveled and the famines that have weakened him have not broken his will to sing praises to the Being who has given him life and hope. The thrush possesses courage because he has discovered where to look for it.

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There are two terms in this poem that are unnecessarily capitalized to help emphasize the contrast between despair and courage. At the beginning of the poem, the second line states “When Frost was spectre-gray.” The Frost represents all that was dark and cold in the speaker’s world; it was all the reasons he felt discouraged and disheartened. It represents the coldness and lifelessness of his innermost being because he cannot find courage.

The other unnecessary capitalization appears at the end of the poem and serves as a contradiction to the lifeless frost mentioned before. The last stanza states that the thrush’s happy song revealed, “Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew/And I was unaware.” This Hope represents a power above our own that gives us the ability to feel that everything is going to work out all right in the end. The speaker sees this hope in the “happy good-night air” of the

thrush. The truest source of courage in this life is through the peace and joy of higher sources. This hope pulls us through trials and sustains us in despair.

When we, like the little bird, fling our souls outwards in searching for some inkling of hope that has become eclipsed by the winter and our own discouragement, we are brought to a higher level of searching, and our eventual discovery is of the pure hope and joy that comes from a loving God. In his poem, "The Darkling Thrush," Thomas Hardy shows us that courage and hope can be found in the dusks of life when bitterness and doubt overshadow the joys that we once possessed if we simply look overhead, above and beyond the worldly. True courage can be found when it is sought in the right places.