Despair and Hope in *The Darkling Thrush*

By: Katie Minton

New Year’s is an embraced celebration that holds all the greatest hopes and expectations for the future. Traditionally, crowds gather for parties, parades, and the famous dropping of the glass ball in Times Square. Personal resolutions are made for betterment and improvement and a sense of fresh change floats through the air.

Yet for some, New Year’s does not hold the precious assurance of hope; At least not directly. Thomas Hardy’s poem, *The Darkling Thrush*, offers just such a perspective. Published at the turn of the twentieth century, it demonstrates the hopelessness some felt with the coming of this new age. This poem, however, is much more than simply doom-and-gloom as it addresses a balance of both dread and unknown hope for the future.

The poet chooses to tell the story by introducing the narrator strolling through the countryside. His thoughts center on the coming of the New Year and new century and as he observes his surroundings, he suggests the rest of the world feels much the same hopeless anxiety for the future. Yet among the gloom he hears a weather-beaten thrush begin to sing and he ponders the possibility of an unknown hope. Ultimately, the question left with the reader is whether the future is as ominous as it appears or if there is reason to hold out hope for brighter days.

Hardy brings this balance of doom and hope to life through the poem by using several different forms, one of the most important being symbolism. The most evident element of symbolism is the thrush. This songbird, though pelted by the might of winter, is singing cheerfully from a branch overhead. The narrator questions why this bird is so cheerful and in the
last stanza indicates that perhaps the bird knows something. Knowing what the creature symbolizes is a little different from what it does though. What do birds often represent in literature? The answer might often include hope and divine presence (Lutwack 46). This is such the case in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by Coleridge, where the albatross represents good luck. Birds in the Bible, such as doves, are associated with divine presence or hope on multiply occasions. This is no different in Hardy’s poem. This bird is a symbol of hope, as it reminds both the narrator and the reader of the light of a better day in the future.

Another representation of symbolism is the landscape. As Charles Locks suggests, the dreary winter scene which the poet describes is an extension of the narrator’s mood (Locks). Hardy sets the stage from the very first lines and guides the reader along from there. In line one, it reads, “I leant upon a coppice gate” (Hardy 1). The key word here is “coppice” as its reference is to an area of vegetation which has been cut back to promote new growth. This can be explained in the manner that as death then promotes new growth, so the end of one year or century breathes life into the next. This use of this word also provokes the image of nature rather than civilization. Furthermore, the presence of phrases such as “tangled bine-stems scored the sky” and “land's sharp features” paint a picture of a harsh winter landscape in which “all mankind that haunted nigh / Had sought their household fires” (Hardy 5, 7-9). The scene is drenched in darkness, doom, and isolation, as much a visual expression of the narrator’s mood as a literal setting. By using such language to set the tone of the poem, the poet relates the message of gloom.

On a line-to-line basis, the poem calls on another format to relate the message to the audience—simile and metaphor. In several instances, similes and metaphors open the door of thought for the reader. For example, take the first simile the reader runs into on lines 5-6. “The
tangled bine-stems scored the sky/ Like strings of broken lyres” (Hardy 5-6). This is to say the bine stems are, figuratively speaking, scorching their image into the sky, resembling the broken cords of a stringed interment. Score also has a musical connotation as well setting the imagery of music, which is paralleled, in the third stanza by the lyrical thrush. The metaphor is far more powerful to the overall message, however. It explains:

“The land's sharp features seemed to be,
The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament.” (Hardy 9-12)

The poet goes into this elaborate, multi-lined metaphor to tell the reader exactly how he feels about the coming New Years. He sees the landscape around him almost as the dying corpse of the nineteenth century, and just as the wind laments this death, so does he. This is yet another tactic to both convey his message and bring the reader to think more deeply about the subject.

The speaker’s voice is another manner Hardy uses to establish the theme of despair and of hope. In this case, it is shown through the narrator, and it sets up to tell by telling the audience how hopeless everything looks. Using words such as “Spectre gray”, “dregs”, and “desolate” in the first paragraph alone informs the reader of the poem’s tone (Hardy 2-3). This is a depressing and sad tone that remained throughout the majority of the poem. There are times in the poem when just as the overall theme does, the words turn to hope. Words such as this include “evensong”, “illimited” “ecstatic” (Hardy 19-20, 26). These words, having a positive connotation, hint at hope. As for Poetic voices, as is often the case with poems, they represent a list of people/animals/objects which contain a presence in the content. Here along with the Narrator, audience-reader, and Thomas Hardy, the poem voices the presence of the Thrush, the
“Century’s corpse”, “The eye of day”, and “Every spirit upon earth” (Hardy 4, 10, 15). This serves to connect others to the poem, nature and humans. It demonstrates everyone who feels the emotion on this experience. It tells the reader who is feeling this balance of despair and hope.

The tone, however, does not cling to despair forever. Half-way through, it shifts to the second point. The thrush is introduced in the third stanza. It is described as “frail, gaunt, and small, / In blast-beruffled plume,” yet he “Had chosen thus to fling his soul / Upon the growing gloom” despite his condition and surroundings (Hardy 21-24). To signal this shift, the poet does something not unusual in the world of poetry. He breaks the meter, or in other words, changes the pattern of speech the poem had held up to this point. Effectively causing the reader to slow down with the unexpected break in the flow of speech, the poet exclaims, Look! Something new is being introduced! This is the introduction to the Thrush and to hope.

Bringing all the discussed elements together, Hardy pulls on the idea that there is a balance of hope and despair. The first half of the poem – the first two stanzas – addresses the theme of despair. Everything is gloomy. The vegetation and landscape is described in terms of decay and death. Meanwhile the human/animal life is almost nonresistant. No one else is outside. Everyone is inside by his or her fireplaces staying warm. The narrator is isolated from human life. The only sign of life is winter. From this description, it is not difficult to see why this person feels despair and very likely anxiety for what the future might hold. The shift comes in the second half upon the bird’s introduction. The Thrush is a symbol of hope. This is not blind hope. The narrator does not end the poem with expressing unbound or overflowing hope, but the as such of spotting a dim light off in the distant darkness. This is a pessimistic hope, but hope nonetheless, for a new century of uncertainty. Of course it should be acknowledged that, to the contrary, some scholars such as Charles Locks would argue that the poem actually mocks hope.
This belief stems from the perspective of how Hardy develops the connection between the narrator and thrush as a simultaneous event, therefore implying the thrush to have the same lack of hope as the narrator (Locks). This argument, however, has little to support its reasoning. Ultimately, Hardy uses the opposing themes of despair and hope to level this poem out that the reader might reflect upon each with consideration to the other.

In closing, we reflect upon the hope and despair the future holds. With the start of the upcoming New Year, will we seem the gloom of our surrounding and give into hopelessness as the narrator of this poem was tempted to do, or will our enthusiasm for the future be saved by the dim light of hope the thrush represents?
Works Cited

