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ENGL1B

13 July 2012

Considering the Arrival of a New Century through Poetry

The moment where one century ends and another dawns represents a rare opportunity for a person to firmly delineate the known past from the unknown future. Time is suddenly measured in the puissant quantity of 100 years, lending unique depth and meaning both to recent history, and also to the connected but unforeseeable events which are to follow. In his work "The Darkling Thrush", Thomas Hardy seizes this moment in such a way that he is able to produce a greater context for his poem, simultaneously enhancing the reader's perspective while heightening the relevance of his subject. Published on December 31st, 1900 (755), the poem efforts to reflect the time of its writing through the ominous details of a frigid and unwelcoming land. Amongst this backdrop of emptiness and desolation, a sole source of life appears when a thrush begins to sing a song in the dead of winter. Instead of engendering joy, this surprise does little more than mystify the speaker, a response which proffers frightening implications for the 19th century. In his brooding, Hardy's use of diction and structure juxtaposes the events of the last 100 years with a rare surfacing of beauty in the present, serving to create a foreboding and ambiguous allusion to the 20th century.

Delivered in only four stanzas, the first half of the poem communicates an abstracted state of the world through the harsh qualities of the speaker's wintry surroundings. The environment is further brought to life through a number of thoughtful word choices and carefully constructed passages. When Hardy's lines are read aloud there are many instances where certain sounds are repeated through the careful staging of alliterative effects. When he writes, "And Winter's dregs made desolate" (754), the sibilant of the letter "s" and the dental of the letter "d" are almost perfectly alternated, and both work to emphasize the chill which permeates the scene. One can easily hear these sounds and then imagine walking along a *slippery* and *icy* path through the *sting* of the cold; meanwhile clumps of snow fall from tree branches and make warning *thuds* against the ground. In a latter set of lines the appearance of the land is given even more dimensions through sound: "The land's sharp features seemed to be / The

Century's corpse outleant, / His crypt the cloudy canopy, / The wind his death-lament" (754). This time a grouping of the sibilant "s" and "c" are immediately followed by a rapid repetition of "Kuh" sounds from the alternate pronunciation for "c." One might associate these sounds with the "sharp" features of the land, where five *slicing* sounds are quickly followed by four *cutting* sounds. This gives to the trees and rocks a variety of strongly jagged and pointy shapes.

Hardy employs a number of powerful, concrete words in his labors to grant even greater substance to the features of the land, which in turn serve to reflect the true subject of his writing. Many of these are bleak and intimidating—such as "spectre-gray" and "haunted"—while others suggest deceptive and treacherous meanings—such as "fervorless" and "shrunken." These different words work in conjunction with the natural and severe setting offered by the winter season to convey the idea that the world is in a state of death and dying. Mankind has receded from this world and has instead chosen to seek "their household fires" (754). While there seems to be a nearly even balance of Latinate and Germanic words, all of them tend to be specific and formal. They only hint at grander meanings when the reader remembers Hardy's intended association of the land with the important event of the turning of the century.

At the beginning of the second half a marked change occurs: the focus shifts from the descriptions of an unforgiving wilderness to something which seemingly stands in complete opposition: "At once a voice arose among / The bleak twigs overhead / In a full-hearted evensong / Of joy illimited" (754). A thrush is singing, providing the speaker with a source of brightness which directly contradicts the world's gloom. This produces an immediate and stark contrast to the imposing characteristics of the land, making the appearance of the thrush all the more impactful by a sudden interruption of the pervading darkness.

In many ways it is natural to receive the thrush's presence as a positive representation of the fervency of life and the renewing qualities of nature—on the first read it is almost impossible for the reader not to be carried by the dramatic shift in tone. At first it seems as if Hardy has changed entirely from the negative to the positive to emphasize something which represents a kind of redemption. His use of cacophony in describing the land in the first half of the poem is swiftly changed to a use of euphony for the thrush in the second half, seemingly providing the reader with a sense of rightness in the process.

However, closer readings reveal more. Important details are found in the bird's physical characteristics: "An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small, / In blast-beruffled plume" (754). The thrush is old and weakened by its environment, and the uplifting song it shares is inconsistent with its own health and wellbeing. One might consider the land to be carrying a sickness so strong that even great beauty cannot remain unafflicted. This is supported in the lines "So little cause for caroling / Of such ecstatic sound / Was written on terrestrial things / Afar or nigh around" (755). The thrush itself is, like everything else in the land, also included in these "terrestrial things," and is unable to escape its deleterious effects. The poem concludes with the speaker recognizing the bird's song as a "blessed Hope" (755) and only ponders from where it came in the overpowering throes of the world in which both he and the thrush exist.

By taking advantage of the significance of an event which occurs once every 100 years, Thomas Hardy was able to endow his poem "The Darkling Thrush" with a quality which could not have been produced by any other means. If not for the special date of its release, the poem would have lost a great deal of its meaning because nothing in the writing associates it with the turning of the century. Through the auspices of this unique opportunity, Hardy powerfully communicates the fragility of the world and presents a careful pragmatism when considering what is to come in the next century: he implies only a more pronounced version of the world his poem attempts to describe. Within 15 years after its publication Queen Victoria's reign of nearly 65 years ended, breaking an established British identity and way of life (Damrosch 1924), and the first World War was well underway.

Works Cited

Damrosch, D., et al. *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. Harlow: Longman, 2010.