On General Discussion

**Topic: The Death of Hope & Bleak Future**

The poem, ‘The Darkling Thrush’ of Thomas Hardy appears to me as a sense reflected on the topic, mentioned above.

Ans.

~ “My own meaning when I would be very fine,

But the fact is that I have nothing plann’d,

Unless it were to be a moment merry,

A novel word in my vocabulary.’’

Thus, Hardy has deromanticised nature taking even the capacity for renewal. Romantics such as William Wordsworth often depicted nature as awe-inspiring in the process of the natural world. Though he has mediated on nature of life, he has found no life in nature. Even the thrush, the harbinger of hope, is ‘’aged’’ and on its last song. By using the exhausted landscape as a symbolic projection of the speaker’s own life, Hardy makes a bleak comment on the potential of human nature as well.

“Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!

I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

The speaker of ‘The Darkling Thrush’ is a typical Hardy character: a watcher, a thinker, one who projects onto the physical world his own emotional turmoil. The speaker, leaning on a gate looks at the darkening countryside. The landscape around him is gloomy and barren. He finds the setting sun as ‘’a weakening eye’’, and the land like a grey-ghost. Paradoxically, the world revolves around the speaker, yet also seems to ignore him. This intense inwardness is seen in how the speaker characterizes other people. It is not just some people or some families that are lost but ‘’all mankind’’ that has retreated from nature’s threatening landscape and ‘’sought their household fires.’’ The speaker is all alone in the wintry, frosty night on a barren landscape, with no hope of getting any warmth.

“We paused amid the pines that stood

The giants of the waste,

Tortured by storms to shapes as rude

With stems like serpents interlaced.’’

The poem presents an image of desolation. Even the song of ‘’joy illimited’’ does not relieve the poet’s depression. There is no transformation from the mood of death into joy of optimism, so the contrast of the thrush’s song serves to heighten the poet’s despair. The corpse of the old century never gives way to the birth of the new. Thus, the poem speaks of a bleak future.

The speaker is so engrossed in his thoughts of hopelessness that even the joyful song of the thrush does not herald any hope for the future in the new century. The thrush, the symbol of hope is depicted as a pitiful creature, in danger of being overpowered by the elements. The situation is reflected in the words ‘’blast-beruffled’’ that emphasise the power of the wind and the puny status of the thrush. The thrush chooses to ‘’fling his soul/ Upon the growing gloom’’. ‘’Fling’’ is a verb that seems to hint at a careless, hopeless action, as if the thrush were seeking in vain to represent the forces of hope. The uncertainty is picked up in the final line of the poem. There the speaker reflects that even if the thrush does know of some reason for hope, he is unaware of any such reason to hope for a bright future.

The word ‘darkling’ has a history in poetry. The word goes back to the mid-fiftieth century. Milton, in Paradise Lost, Book III described the nightingale ‘the wakeful Bird/Sings darkling, and in shadiest Covert hid/ Tunes her nocturnal Note…’.Keats used the word in his ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ “Darkling, I listen….’’. Matthew Arnold, in ‘Dover Beach’ wrote about the ‘darkling plain’. Similarly there is a tradition of poems about birds like Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, Shelley’s ‘To a Skylark’ and a number of poems by Wordsworth.

In the last stanza the poet reveals his lack of faith. There is “So little cause for carolings’’, he asserts. The bird’s ‘’ecstatic sound’’ is not founded in reason or faith. For a moment perhaps there is a note of hope, he ‘’could think’’ there was some hope for the frosty world, but he cannot sustain his belief. In the end, the speaker has no hope; he only observes with a touch of irony that the thrush seems to have hope.

The thrush sings a song of evening rather than morning. The song of the thrush symbolizes the speaker’s fervourless spirit, but the thrush himself is aged, ‘’frail, gaunt and small’’. It does not symbolize new life but clings to the dying old century. Even after hearing the thrush’s ‘’full-hearted evensong/Of joy illimited,’’ the speaker’s depression is lifted only as far as a state of puzzlement. He comes into the new century unable to think about any reason that can make the thrush, a representative of nature, with a hope.

“Break, break, break,

On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!

And I would that my tongue could utter

The thoughts that arise in me.’’

The word ‘darkling’ corresponds to two meanings in the poem: ‘in the dark’ and ‘obscure’. In the title of the poem, Hardy appears to have consciously used words with a long poetic history. The word ‘Darkling’ means in darkness, or becoming dark. The speaker in the poem is able to see the landscape, but the sun is ‘weakening’, not completely set. The landscape that appears to him is barren and grey like a ghost. The day is ending and the sun is setting, making the twilight desolate.

For the speaker the century that has passed is now a ‘’corpse outleant.’’ The sense of loss is everywhere, even in the procreative powers of nature itself-‘’*the ancient pulse of germ and birth*,’’ which is now ‘’shrunken hard and dry.’’ There is just a sense of gloom that generalizes everything. For him, the world is going from bad to worse, and the century’s passing is merely a way to keep time of misery’s march.

If the bird is “in the dark”, singing at night and flinging its soul into the “growing gloom”, it appears to be singing for obscure reasons. Whatever prompts the bird’s song is not evident to the poet. The “illimited joy” of the song and “blessed hope” it signifies appears to be a small compensation for the pain men and women endure and have endured through the century. If the bird sings while humanity confronts the desolation of its existence, the thrush’s joy can only be heard as an ironic comment on humanity’s joyless state. The song of the bird at night though full of joy and hope, does not bring any hope for the future and is as obscure as night. Thus, ‘The Darkling Thrush’ is an apt title for the poem.

The Darkling Thrush was written by Thomas Hardy in 1899. Originally titled ‘By the Century’s Deathbed, 1900’, it was published on December 29, 1900, in The Graphics, a weekly newspaper. In this poem, the poet describes his feelings and also the feelings of an entire nation passing of a century and the transition between Victorian era (1837-1901) and the Modern era. The Victorian era was marked by intense and rapid change in polity, society and religious beliefs due to the developments in science and technology. These changes created a feeling of hopelessness and bleak future in poet’s mind which is reflected in the poem.

Hardy was disillusioned with the ways in which industrialization was changing human beings and their relation to their environment. During the Victorian era, technologies such as their railways, electricity, steam engines, and suspension bridges re-shaped the working lives of millions of British. Many of them flocked to cities to work in factories and live in row houses. The agricultural depression of the 1870s further depleted the number of remaining farmers. By the turn of the century, more than 80 percent of Britain’s population lived in cities. Due to these developments, people wanted to believe that their lives have purpose, and that the future will be better for them. However, all of the evidence during Hardy’s time belied any hope for a bright future. The wars (e.g. the Boer War of 1899-1902), which the British Empire waged all over the world in the name of civilizing ‘’ignorant’’ people*s*, as well as the degrading living conditions of the working class toiling in poverty in industrialized cities was depressing. These urban labourers were now not only cut off from any relationship to the land but also cut off from the products of their work. Technological progress and scientific knowledge had not brought enlightenment to the masses. On the contrary, they brought more misery and pain. Hardy’s hopelessness was rooted in his lament for the now abandoned farms of the countryside and for the loss of rural customs and traditions.

“What I aspired to be,

And was not, comforts me.’’

The second stanza extends this death-sense to include time as well as space. The landscape seems to represent the corpse of the century that is ending, or dying. Thus, the very ‘’pulse’’ of creation is dead and nature is at a standstill. There is no hope for the next spring to come.

“….Behold, we know not anything;

I can but trust that good shall fall

At last-far off- at last, to all,

And every winter change to spring.”

In the first two stanzas of the poem, the world appears to be physically dead. There is little to see in the ‘’spectre-grey’’ landscape; the ‘’eye of day’’ is weak. “Winter’s dregs’’ offer little to satisfy the human need of warmth. Heaviness characterized the sense of touch, as suggested by Hardy’s use of ‘’leant’’ to describe the speaker’s physical posture in the scène: finally, there is no sound at all. The image of tangled bine-stems resembling strings of broken lyres vividly conveys the utter silence of the scene.

The poet feels himself as an isolated man. He has lost his connection with the 19th century and has no hopes for the coming 20th century. Hardy, like the people of his era, witnessed the challenges posed by the growth of Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory and the new social and scientific ideas. He yearns for that simpler, truer world, and seeks to recapture something that is lost, but old century is dead and outlook for the new century is bleak.

In the last stanzas, nature as represented by the singing thrush, displays a sudden vigour. Here, too, nature is ‘’senseless’’, in as much as the song does not arise from anything perceived in ‘’terrestrial things.’’ That is, the song is not inspired by anything in the immediate scene, or anything that the poet might understand as a reason for the song. The frailty of the bird itself, “gaunt and small’’ with ‘’blast-beruffled plumage’’, also prevents any song.

“To lie before us like a land of dreams,”

Thus, the entire poem has portrayed a bleak picture of nature and the gloom is emphasized far more than the joy.

#except setting and critical evaluation, answer has been followed on basis of standard reference book, with *History of English Literature*.