

The Blinded Bird

So zestfully canst thou sing?
And all this indignity,
With God's consent, on thee!
Blinded ere yet a-wing
By the red-hot needle thou,
I stand and wonder how
So zestfully thou canst sing!

zestfully – with enthusiasm and energy
treatment that makes one lose one's dignity
consent - agreement
ere – before; a-wing – you could fly

Resenting not such wrong,
Thy grievous pain forgot,
Eternal dark thy lot,
Groping thy whole life long;
After that stab of fire;
Enjailed in pitiless wire;
Resenting not such wrong!

grievous - severe
lot – what you were fated to experience in life
enjailed – imprisoned; pitiless wire – of a birdcage

Who hath charity? This bird.
Who suffereth long and is kind,
Is not provoked, though blind
And alive ensepulchred?
Who hopeth, endureth all things?
Who thinketh no evil, but sings?
Who is divine? This bird.

suffereth - endures
ensepulchred - buried

Apparently songbirds, caught to be kept in cages, were often blinded in the belief that they would then sing better. Hardy asks the bird how it can sing so zestfully (with such enthusiasm and energy), when God has allowed it to be treated with such indignity (in a way that makes Hardy feel ashamed of what has been done to it). The bitterness against God, or against the power behind the universe, is characteristic of Hardy.

Throughout the poem, Hardy stresses the searing pain the bird must have endured and its continuing suffering: 'blinded ... /by the red-hot needle'; 'grievous pain'; 'Eternal dark thy lot / Groping thy whole life long, / After that stab of fire.' It is kept imprisoned, virtually buried, in a small cage: 'Enjailed in pitiless wire' 'alive ensepulchred' (buried alive). Perhaps the repetition of the first and last line in each verse represents the prison from which it cannot ever escape.

Hardy ends the poem with a series of questions and answers.

'Who hath charity? This bird.
Who suffereth long and is kind ...
Who hopeth, endureth all things?
Who thinketh no evil, but sings?
Who is divine? This bird.'

charity - love

This verse is almost word for word a transcription of the famous passage from St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 13 in the New Testament of the Bible. 'Charity (love) suffereth long, and is kind.... Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil. Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.' And, ironically, it is not man who achieves any of this love, the greatest of all qualities. It is the bird he has so cruelly treated. Another stabbing irony is that birds are created to fly free and in literature frequently represent freedom. This poem represents yet another indictment by Hardy of the way humans treat the natural world. It is based on a contrast between life and beauty – 'zestfully ... sing' – and cruelty, pain and evil.

Literary terms

Very often writers highlight important words. They do this with:

Alliteration – several words starting with the same letter or sound, for example, 'bleared and black and blind'.

Assonance – same vowel sound in different words, for example, 'abode', 'sloped'.

Cesura – a break or pause in the middle of a line of poetry.

Consonance – same consonants in words that contain different vowel sounds, for example, 'bode', 'boughed'.

Enjambement or run-on lines – when there is no punctuation at the end of a line of verse and it runs straight on to the next line.

Onomatopoeia – the effect when the sound of a word reflects its meaning, like 'plash'.

Personification – when something that is not human is referred to as if it is a person, for example, the Titanic, 'still couches she'. The effect is usually to exaggerate some aspect of the topic.

Repetition – repeated word or meaning.

Rhyme – very similar to assonance; same vowel sound and final consonant, for example, 'say', 'decay'. Masculine rhyme – when the final syllable is stress, as in 'say' and 'decay'. Feminine rhyme – when the final syllable is not stressed, as in 'growing', 'showing'.

Rhythm – the musical beat of the line, with stressed and unstressed syllables (the stressed syllables will be the important ones). The different rhythms have different names. Trochee (trochaic): strong light, strong light; iamb (iambic): light strong, light strong; dactyl: strong light light, strong light light; anapaest: light light strong, light light strong. If puzzled, try Wikipedia which is very clear on the subject.

Then there are technical words for the number of lines in a verse or stanza.

Quatrain – four lines in a verse

Sestet – six line

Octave – eight lines