The Darkling Thrush

The photograph shows a coppice gate in winter. This is like the site of the first poem we shall consider. Cold and bleak was the onset of the Twentieth Century.

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 seem'd 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
    Seem'd fervourless as I.

read by Simon Beale

We must start our journey through the poetry of the 20th Century with a poem that was published at the beginning of the century (or after the century's first year, depending on when you date the transition). *The Darkling Thrush* begins with the desolation of winter. A coppice (or copse) is a group of trees that have been cultivated to provide wood. The main trunk of the tree is cut back causing the tree to sprout numerous bine-stems that grow rapidly over the next few years. The stems are then harvested for firewood or poles. This technique maintains the trees in juvenile form – they never grow old, and the rate of wood-production is much higher than in mature trees. Hardy likely enjoyed the sound-similarity of coppice and corpse. Coppices are wonderful places for spring flowers such as bluebells since the leaf canopy is reduced.

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 carollings
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 blessèd Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

The song-thrush is a small to medium bird native to Southern England. It may or may not migrate during winter. It has a pleasant song. Its Latin name *Turdus philomenos* refers to the mythological Philomena who had her tongue cut out by Tereus after she was raped. The gods then took mercy and changed her into a songbird, though the story usually denotes a nightingale.

The idea of "some blessed hope" brings up the idea that optimism is necessary even in the worst of times. A recent book by Jonathan Lear about the defeat of the Crow Indians in the US West is called *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (2008):

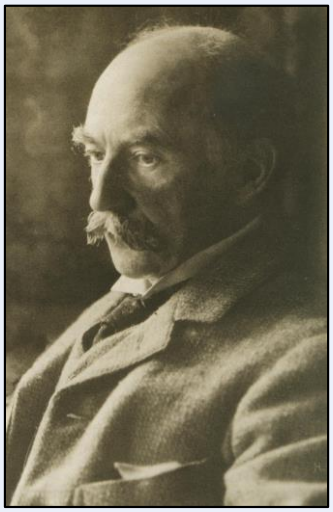
> "Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it."

The other famous quotation about hope is from Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* (1734):

Hope springs eternal in the human breast;
Man never is, but always to be blessed:
The soul, uneasy and confined from home,
Rests and expatiates in a life to come.

However this is quite different from *The Darkling Thrush* wherein there is no thought of comfort in the life to come.

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)



When Hardy was born in a village in Dorset, the doctor pronounced him stillborn, but the nurse insisted that he was alive. At 16 he was articled to an architect. After his early novels were published, he was able to work full-time as a writer. His novels *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Return of the Native* (1878) and *Tess of the d'Urbevilles (1891)* were set in Wessex, a fictional region equivalent to the actual British Southwest. These were very successful, but their questioning of religion and conventional morality evoked severe criticism. After *Jude the Obscure* (1896), he ceased writing novels and devoted himself to poetry.

The author of *The Darkling Thrush* was Thomas Hardy. His Wessex novels portrayed passionate characters working out their lives in a world where the old Christian religion no longer applied. And the forces that control our destinies pay us no special attention. The late Victorian age bequeathed to the 20th Century the ideas that human beings evolved rather than were created, that morality involves principles that we work out rather than to be obeyed, that perhaps there is no God.

The decline in religion in Europe had begun with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Over the course of the 19th Century, the churches retreated. The mumbo-jumbo died but the comfort and consolation that religion provided were sorely missed.

"God is dead" comes from Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* (1882). This statement became a byword of the 20th Century. Nietzsche was more poet than philosopher. The statement comes from a madman, who is making a point about atheism. Who gave us the right to dispense with God and who will control things once He is dead? I think that Nietzsche was trying to say that we are not yet ready to take on the universe.

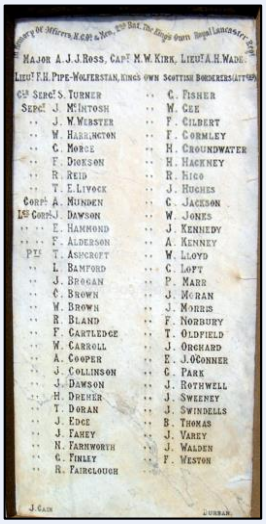
One of Hardy's poems was *God's Funeral* (1910):

How sweet it was in years far hied
To start the wheels of day with trustful prayer
To lie down liegely at the eventide
And feel a blest assurance he was there.

And who or what shall fill his place?
Whither will wanderers turn distracted eyes
For some fixed star to stimulate their pace
Towards the goal of their enterprise?

Boer War 1899-1902

The battle of Spion Kopf was fought in January 1900 between British troops attempting to relieve the siege of Ladysmith and the Boers. The British were defeated and suffered large losses. Most of the dead were buried in a communal grave, with some officers having separate burials.



Major A. J. J. Ross, Capt M. W. Kirk, Lieut A. H. Wade
Lieut F. H. Pipe-Wolferstan, Kings own Scottish Borderers (att'd)

Colr Serjt	S. Turner	..	C. Fisher
Sergt	J. McIntosh	..	W. Gee
..	J. Webster	..	F. Gilbert
..	W. Harrington	..	F. Cormley
..	C. Morse	..	H. Groundwater
..	F. Dickson	..	H. Hackney
..	R. Reid	..	R. Rice
..	T. E. Livock	..	J. Hughes
Corpl	A. Munden	..	C. Jackson
1st Corpl	J. Dawson	..	W. Jones
.. ..	E. Hammond	..	J. Kennedy
.. ..	F. Alderson	..	A. Kenney
Pte	T. Ashcroft	..	W. Lloyd
..	L. Bamford	..	C. Loft
..	J. Brogan	..	P. Marr
..	C. Brown	..	J. Moran
..	W. Brown	..	J. Morris
..	R. Bland	..	F. Norbury
..	F. Cartledge	..	T. Oldfield
..	W. Carroll	..	J. Orchard
..	A. Cooper	..	E. J. O'Conner
..	J. Collinson	..	G. Park
..	J. Dawson	..	J. Rothwell
..	H. Dremer	..	J. Sweeney
..	T. Doran	..	J. Swindells
..	J. Edge	..	B. Thomas
..	J. Fahey	..	J. Varey
..	N. Farnworth	..	J. Walden
..	C. Finley	..	F. Weston
..	R. Fairclough		

The 20th Century began in time of war. The Boer War lasted from 1899 to 1902. The British waged the war to assert sovereignty over the independent Orange Free State and South African Republic. Initially the Boers defeated the British, but large numbers of soldiers were then brought in from the empire to ensure a British Victory.

In the Hardy poem "kopje" (Dutch, head) is a small hill, the "veldt" (Dutch, field) is the dry open grassland of inland South Africa, "Karoo" (a native word for desert) is the a broad expanse of semi-desert beyond the mountains east of Cape Town, "gloam" is twilight, "west" means to move toward the West (the constellations rise in the East and set in the West.)

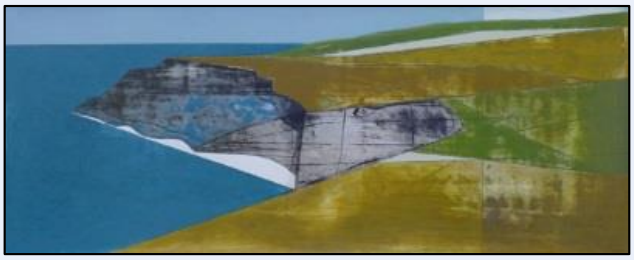
This scene is from the 2006 film *The History Boys* based on the play by Alan Bennett. The teacher "Hector" (Richard Griffiths) is coaching Posner (Samuel Barnett) for the Oxford Entrance Examinations in History.

In 1874 Hardy married Emma Gifford, the bright and beautiful daughter of a Plymouth solicitor. In 1870, she was staying with her sister, who had married the rector of a small Cornish Church, which Hardy was assessing for renovations. Emma was the basis of Elfride Swancourt, the heroine of the novel *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873).

Their marriage was not a happy one. Nevertheless, when Emma died in 1912, Hardy was devastated. He re-visited many of the places where they had spent time together when they were first in love. In his grief he wrote the searing *Poems of 1912-1913*.

The novel *A Pair of Blue Eyes* tells of an episode on Beeny Cliff. One of Elfride's suitors, out riding with Elfride, while chasing his wind-blown hat slips in the rain-soaked grass to the edge of the cliff, and is in danger of falling over. This is one of literature's first "cliffhangers." Elfride rescues him by making a rope out of her underclothes.

Beeny Cliff is in Cornwall just north of Boscastle. It looks westward out over the Celtic Sea. Hardy's novel calls it the "Cliff without a Name."



Vanessa Gardiner 2014

– Still in all its chasmal beauty bulks old Beeny to the sky,
And shall she and I not go there once again now March is nigh,
And the sweet things said in that March say anew there by and by?

What if still in chasmal beauty looms that wild weird western shore,
The woman now is – elsewhere – whom the ambling pony bore,
And nor knows nor cares for Beeny, and will laugh there nevermore.

read by Tom O'Bedlam

Hardy often created the form to fit the poem that he was writing. In this poem, the lines are much longer than is usual in English poetry. Rhyming triplets are even more unusual. Hardy likes to use archaic English words in preference to Latinate. "Mews" are gulls, (the word comes from their mewling cry), to "prink" is adorn or show off, the "main" in this context is the open sea. Hardy enjoys alliteration – the "purples prink the main" and "wild weird western shore."

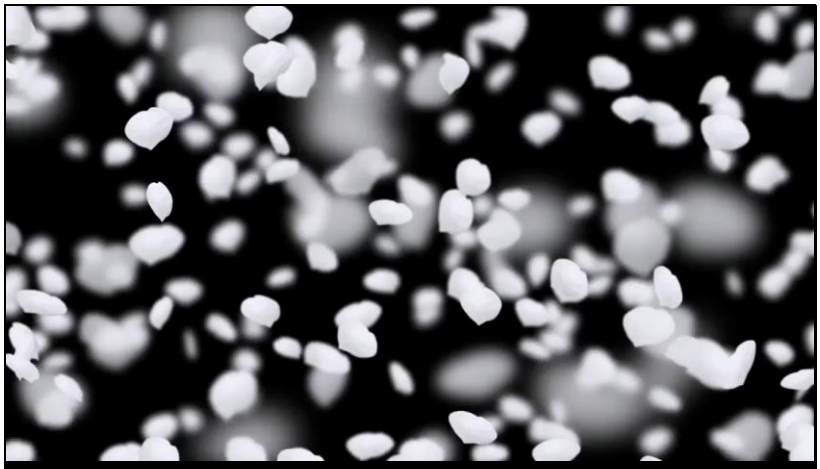
Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

After an unsuccessful career as a college lecturer, Pound emigrated in 1908 to England where he worked for various literary magazines. He was instrumental in getting T. S. Eliot's *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* and James Joyce's *Dubliners* published. He and Hilda Doolittle (H. D.) contributed to the Imagism movement.

In a Station of the Metro: "I got out of a train at, I think, La Concorde, and in the jostle I saw a beautiful face, and then, turning suddenly, another and another, and then a beautiful child's face, and then another beautiful face. All that day I tried to find words for what this made me feel."

1913 Photograph by Alvin Langdon Coburn

Ezra Pound was one of the main forces behind the modernist movement in English poetry. He contributed to the Imagist movement, which used vivid imagery to convey meaning and emotion. He was fascinated by the brevity and conciseness of Japanese and Chinese poetry.



The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

The poem does not follow the exact format of a Japanese *haiku* (5-7-5 syllables) but it conveys the same intense simplicity.

Hilda Doolittle, H. D. (1886-1961)

After dropping out of Bryn Mawr College, Doolittle went to England in 1911 to become a writer. Her poetry was promoted by Ezra Pound, who suggested that she use "H. D. Imagiste" as her *nom de plume*. She was married to the writer Richard Aldington for a brief period, but later entered into a much longer relationship with Annie Winifred Ellerman, and underwent counseling with Sigmund Freud in an attempt to understand her bisexuality.

Slide 13

Alan Davis
Drake

Rose, harsh rose,
marred and with stint of petals,
meagre flower, thin,
sparse of leaf,
more precious
than a wet rose
single on a stem—
you are caught in the drift.

The poem describes *Rosa rugose* (wrinkled rose), also known as "sea, beach or salt-spray rose." This flower was imported from China. It is a hardy plant that grows on seaside sand dunes. The multiple flowers have a single set of wrinkled white to red petals. In the autumn, these become large red rose hips, which can be used to make jam.

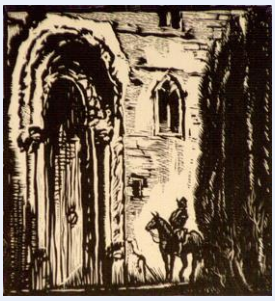
HD uses compares this wild rose to the spice rose that is raised in gardens. The sea rose has a different beauty and survives more easily in the harsh environment of the sea shore. It perhaps suggests a normal woman, rather than one bred for beauty. .

1912 Photograph by
Hector Murchison

Walter de la Mare (1873-1956)

After attending St Paul's Cathedral Choir School, de la Mare worked in the offices of Standard Oil. In his free time he wrote poetry, horror stories and books for children. He is buried in the cathedral where he sang as a choirboy.

1924 Lithograph by
Raymond McGrath



The Listeners

'Is there anybody there?' said the Traveller,
  Knocking on the moonlit door;
And his horse in the silence champed the grasses
  Of the forest's ferny floor:
And a bird flew up out of the turret,
  Above the Traveller's head:
And he smote upon the door again a second time;
  'Is there anybody there?' he said.

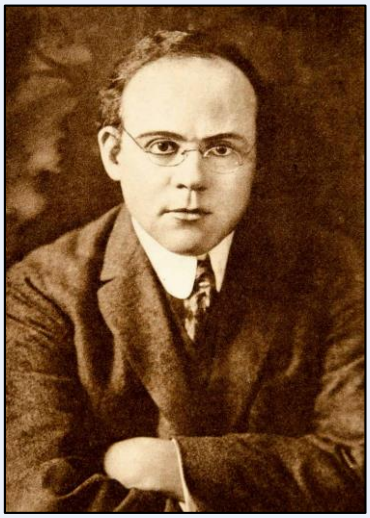
Read by Alex Jennings

The Listeners is by far de la Mare's most famous poem. It tells of a traveler who comes to the door of a lonely castle to ask if anyone is there. No one answers and the traveler departs. Exactly what it means is open to interpretation. The listeners may be the powers who run the universe and who either refuse to communicate or are unable to communicate with us. We should nevertheless travel to the castle and try to communicate with them. This is something we are bound to do – as though we sometime, somewhere, somehow made a promise.

The uncanny dreamlike atmosphere of the poem is similar to that in the later stories of Franz Kafka, particularly *The Castle* (1922) wherein a land surveyor tries to gain access to the authorities who live in the castle and control the village in which he is staying. In de la Mare's poem there is no real evidence that there is anyone in the castle. It may be that our attempts to reach God are doomed to failure because God died long ago.

Edgar Lee Masters (1868-1950)

Masters spent his adolescence in Lewistown, Illinois. He became qualified in law, and after several years of practice became a partner with Clarence Darrow in Chicago. After this partnership dissolved, he spent some time writing poems about the people of Lewistown, using their imagined epitaphs in the Oak Hill Cemetery. These poems were published in the St. Louis *Reedy Mirror,* and ultimately gathered together in a book called *The Spoon River Anthology*.



Modernism began early in the United States with the publication of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855-1892). Whitman's poems used free verse – there are no rhymes and the rhythms are those of everyday speech. Edgar Lee Masters captured the lives of a whole town in brief free-verse poems. These are written as if they were the epitaphs in the town cemetery but they are longer than would fit on any normal gravestone. Some of these poems link to each other. Thus the poetess Minerva Jones died during an unsuccessful abortion performed by Doctor Meyers, who "tried to help her out." The death of the "village poetess" led to the doctor's disgrace

Suppose it is nothing but the hive:
That there are drones and workers
And queens, and nothing but storing honey
(Material things as well as culture and wisdom)
For the next generation, this generation never living,
Except as it swarms in the sun-light of youth,
Strengthening its wings on what has been gathered,
And tasting, on the way to the hive
From the clover field, the delicate spoil.
Suppose all this, and suppose the truth:
That the nature of man is greater
Than nature's need in the hive;
And you must bear the burden of life,
As well as the urge from your spirit's excess
Well, I say to live it out like a god
Sure of immortal life, though you are in doubt,
Is the way to live it.

Lucinda and Davis Matlock are a married couple. Both lived full lives and became wise. Both give good advice Lucinda tells us that "It takes life to love Life" and Davis urges us to "live it out like a god sure of immortal life"

Edison had made an early recording of Whitman in 1890 but no other US poetry recordings were made (or have survived) until the 1930s when the Speech Laboratory at Columbia University recorded a series of American poets, among them Edgar Lee Masters. These can be downloaded from the Penn Sound website:

http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Speech-Lab-Recordings.php

Robert W. Service (1874-1958)

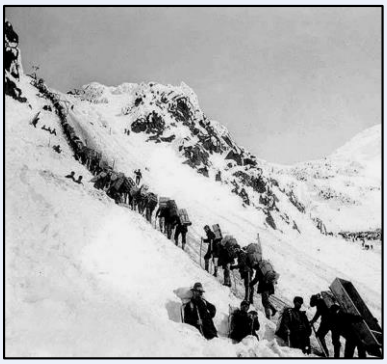
Born in Lancashire, he emigrated to North America in 1894. After traveling around, he obtained a job with the Bank of Commerce in British Columbia, who posted him to the Yukon in 1904. He published *Songs of a Sourdough* (also known as *The Spell of the Yukon*) in 1907. This book contained his most famous ballads: *The Shooting of Dan McGrew* and *The Cremation Sam McGee*. Though he later professed to loathe these poems, they made him rich and famous. He served in World War I as a Red Cross driver. After the war he lived mainly in France and wrote novels rather than poetry.

A bunch of the boys were whooping it up in the Malamute saloon;
The kid that handles the music-box was hitting a jag-time tune;

Some people consider the poetry of Robert Service as inferior doggerel telling trivial stories. I find his verse rhythmic and exciting. I am happy to surrender myself to the melodrama. Service is very similar to Kipling in his control of sound and story. Kipling was also criticized, but even T. S. Eliot recognized his poetic genius. The kind of poetry written by Kipling and Service developed into the country-western songs, cowboy poetry, and even rap.

Klondike Gold Rush (1896-1905)

Spurred by reports of gold to be panned from the creeks feeding the Klondike River, some 100,000 men from various parts of North America traveled to the Yukon Territory. The journey through the mountain passes (the "Trail of 98") was arduous, taking up to two years. Less than half those who set out made it to Dawson City, and most arrived to find that every claim had already been staked. The city itself was a centre for banking, drinking and prostitution.



Chilkoot Pass, 1898

The Gold Rush in the Klondike involved so many men, exerting so much work and effort. Yet for most of them it came to naught.

The Shooting of Dan McGrew

A bunch of the boys were whooping it up in the Malamute saloon;
The kid that handles the music-box was hitting a jag-time tune;
Back of the bar, in a solo game, sat Dangerous Dan McGrew,
And watching his luck was his light-o'-love, the lady that's known as Lou.

Hank Snow, recorded 1968

These are the simple facts of the case, and I guess I ought to know.
They say the stranger was crazed with "hooch",
and I'm not denying it's so.
I'm not so wise as the lawyer guys, but strictly between us two –
The woman that kissed him and – pinched his poke –
was the lady that's known as Lou.

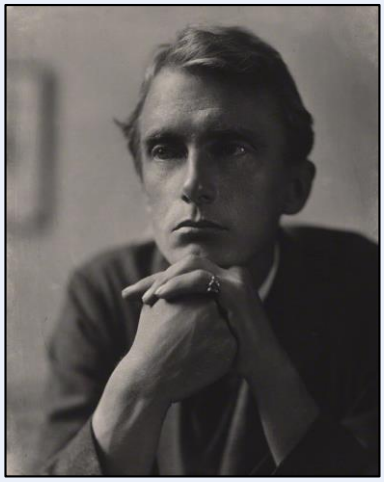
Robert Service, recorded 1958

The form of *The Shooting of Dan McGrew* appears unusual on first look. The long lines (in the text these have been arbitrarily cut) seem unprecedented. However, they basically represent the age-old ballad form. Ballads were written with four-line stanzas. The lines alternated between tetrameter and trimester (four and three stresses). The rhythm was mainly iambic but could be irregular. Anapests (o o /) are common – they give the rhythm a lilt. The second and fourth lines rhymed. All that service has done is join the second line to the first and the fourth line to the third. The first two lines could thus be represented in ballad form:

A bunch of the boys were whooping it up o / o o / o / o o /
In the Malamute saloon; o o / o / o /
The kid that handles the music-box o / o / o o / o /
Was hitting a jag-time tune; o / o o / o /

Edward Thomas (1878-1917)

After graduating from Oxford, Thomas became a journalist, and scraped together a living from reviews and nature articles. He reviewed and championed Robert Frost's first book of poems *A Boy's Will* (1913), and the two became abiding friends. Frost encouraged him in his serious writing. Thomas enlisted in 1915, and was killed in France in 1917. His poetry is infused with a deep love of the English countryside.



Photograph by E.O Hoppé, 1913

Adlestrop

Yes, I remember Adlestrop
The name, because one afternoon
Of heat the express-train drew up there
Unwontedly. It was late June.

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.
No one left and no one came
On the bare platform. What I saw
Was Adlestrop - only the name

And willows, willow-herb, and grass,
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,
No whit less still and lonely fair
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang
Close by, and round him, mistier,
Farther and farther, all the birds
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

Adlestrop is a tiny village in Gloucestershire in central England. On 24 June 1914, Thomas was riding on the Oxford to Worcester train when it stopped briefly at Adlestrop station. The poem describes the sensuous beauty of the English countryside – the flowers, the mown grass, the sunshine and the sound of the birds. There is nothing like its serenity. The station is no more. The countryside has changed. There is an innocence to the poem. Perhaps like the innocence that was lost as the world entered into the horrors of the Great War.

The recitation is by Anton Lesser.

Robert Frost, 1913

Robert Frost (1874-1963)

Though born in San Francisco, Frost spent most of his life in New England. After studying briefly at Harvard he went to England in 1912. There he was able to publish his first books, *A Boy's Will* in 1913 and *North of Boston* in 1914. One of his good friends in England was Edward Thomas, who reviewed his books and joined him on walks in the English countryside. Frost returned to New England and went on to become the most loved American poet of the 20th Century. He read his poetry at the inauguration of J. F. Kennedy in 1961.

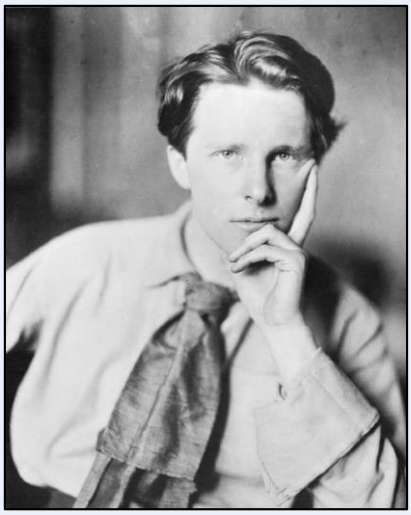
Frost's poem about apple picking has many levels. Initially one reads it as a description of the apple harvest and the tiredness that comes from hard work. At another level it is about the poet's creative work – "of the great harvest I myself desired." And deeper still it is about death that comes as inevitably as winter.

The performance is by Cynthia Herman. (DVD *Robert Service: New England in Autumn*)

This is probably Frost's most famous yet most misunderstood poem. Most people remember the idea in the poem's last three lines and consider these to represent its meaning: one should decide to take untraveled paths, and thereby achieve that which would otherwise be impossible.
Yet this is not what the poem states. Frost is really not sure why he took one road rather than the other. Indeed, the more he thinks about it the paths were really not much different: "the passing there had worn them really about the same." He repeats this fact so that he and we are quite sure of it: "both that morning equally lay in leaves no step had trodden black."

He thinks that in the future he will remember that he took the path less traveled, but this is not what happened. Our memories are interpretations of what happened and we often distort them to make ourselves more like our ideals. What we remember becomes what we would like to have happened.

Frost leaves open why one road was taken and not the other. Was there some reason that he now cannot remember? Was it a random choice? Was it something that was determined by everything that had preceded? Did this occur without any intervention of free will, as some recent thinkers might have us believe? Are all our interpretations of why we choose to do something simply rationalizations of what is determined by causes that are actually beyond any conscious control?



Rupert Brooke (1887-1915)

Brooke attended Rugby School and then went on to Cambridge University, where he studied literature and was a member of the Apostles. After graduation, he wrote poetry and was associated with the Bloomsbury Group. As part of his recuperation from a nervous breakdown in 1910 he traveled extensively.

Read by Douglas Hodge

Rupert Brooke was the "handsomest young man in England" (Yeats). His nervous breakdown was largely related to his coming to terms with his bisexuality. After graduating from Cambridge, he lived for a while at the Old Vicarage in Grantchester, a village on the Cam River southwest of Cambridge. The 2-mile walk from Cambridge to Grantchester through the Grantchester meadows is a popular student and tourist pastime.

Brooke's poem varies in tone from simple nostalgia to gentle parody. It is lovely to listen to but impossible to read without realizing what was about to happen in Europe. The world was darkling.

The recitation (just the ending) is by Jasper Britton

Temperamentvoll: high-spirited

das Betreten's not *verboten*: entering is not forbidden

έίθε γενοίμην (*eithe genoimen*): literally "if only I could be" This is the Greek expression for nostalgia for home. It is common in ancient Greek literature, e.g. Odysseus yearning for Ithaka. Browning's *Home Thoughts from Abroad* is another English example.

his ghostly lordship – Byron, who swam in what is now known as Byron's Pool near Grantchester, and also across the Hellespont.

Anadyomene – rising from the sea. Usually with *Aphrodite Anadyomene* since Aphrodite (Venus) was born as an adult woman from the sea. Botticelli's painting is a famous representation of this.