



الشعر الحديث / المرحلة الرابعة

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The Listeners

WALTER DE LA MARE

'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.
But no one descended to the Traveller;
No head from the leaf-fringed sill
Leaned over and looked into his grey eyes,
Where he stood perplexed and still.
But only a host of phantom listeners
That dwelt in the lone house then
Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight
To that voice from the world of men:
Stood thronging the faint moonbeams on the dark stair,
That goes down to the empty hall,
Harkening in an air stirred and shaken
By the lonely Traveller's call.



And he felt in his heart their strangeness,
 Their stillness answering his cry,
While his horse moved, cropping the dark turf,
 'Neath the starred and leafy sky;
For he suddenly smote on the door, even
 Louder, and lifted his head:—
'Tell them I came, and no one answered,
 That I kept my word,' he said.
Never the least stir made the listeners,
 Though every word he spake
Fell echoing through the shadowiness of the still house
 From the one man left awake:
Ay, they heard his foot upon the stirrup,
 And the sound of iron on stone,
And how the silence surged softly backward,
 When the plunging hoofs were gone.

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Summary

The poet Walter de la Mare in his poem 'The Listeners' speaks about a traveller on horseback, who had visited an empty house in a forest, on a moonlit night. He knocked on the door hoping against hope to get an expected response. To his utter dismay, the only listeners were a host of ghosts. The message that he attempted to pass over to the person in the house, was only reverberated back. He had kept his promise. The silence that welcomed him was only broken with the plunging hoofs of the traveller's horse as he retreated.



The lonely traveller on his horseback, reaches a lone house in the forest to deliver a message. He was greeted by a bird, which flew out of the turret above his head, when he knocked on the door. There was a tinge of eeriness. The second time he knocked louder, and shouted to find out if there was anybody in.

With no one descending the stairs, nor anyone peering over the window-sill fringed with leaves, he stood baffled and still. The air was stirred by the traveller's call. Whilst waiting for a reply, he had a strange feeling within. It was a starry night, and the thick boughs hung over. He smote on the door and shouted even louder, lifting his head giving the message to tell them that he had come; but no one answered. He shouted once again, that he had kept his word.

Every word he spoke, echoed through the still house: the sound of his foot upon the stirrup and the clank of the horses' hoofs on the stone with the retreating hoofs, leaving behind the listeners.

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Analysis

Walter de la Mare's well-known poem is set in the dead of night, and tells the story of a traveller's arrival at a house in the wood. The poem is composed in a simple four-line masculine rhyming scheme. The majority of lines end with a punctuation mark, such as a comma or a semi-colon, keeping a steady tempo. The poem is written in a very basic style, with no stanzas or metre. This means that it is much more accessible for children, so that it can be read in the style of a story, but is also open to deeper scrutiny from adults.

The traveller is depicted 'knocking on the moonlit door'. This generates an eerie tone, and implies that something mysterious and supernatural is about to take place. The light of the moon is cited repeatedly throughout the poem – perhaps the writer hopes to convey the idea that the phantoms thrive from moonlight, or indeed are components of the moon. The idea of the 'turret' directly suggests darkness yet again. It persuades the reader to imagine a



high tower projecting a large shadow over the doorway, thus encompassing the traveller in absolute darkness.

The juxtaposition of the words 'silent' and 'champed' immediately introduces a contrast, as the onomatopoeic word 'champed' suggests the sound of eating. This implies that the noises of the horse are alone in their disturbances, and that it is the only sound to be heeded. This is accentuated again by the alliteration in the words: 'Of the forest's ferny floor;' the repeated 'f' sounds symbolising the horse's chewing.

Imagery is used throughout the poem in order to present the hosts as ghost-like, chilling entities. The word 'descended' suggests floating and feather-like falling; this is the initial suggestion of the supernatural. This imagery is sustained by the employment of the words 'phantom listeners', again introducing the concept of ghosts. The writer uses an inversion in the line: 'Never the least stir made the listeners.' Although this may have been done to retain a steady rhythm, it is also possible that the inversion was employed to alienate us even more from the phantoms, emphasizing the fact that they are from a different world, and thus normal language does not comply with them. The phantoms are made to seem yet more alien and eerie by the use of the phrase 'that voice from the world of men...' This imagery of ghosts continues to be prominent throughout the poem.

De la Mare's use of the word 'host' when referring to the phantoms implies two things. Not only does it suggest that there is a large assembly of listeners, but it also indicates that they are (or were) the owners of the house, and are therefore the hosts. Perhaps de la Mare intended to present these listeners as the residents, who had, somehow, perished.

A contrast is introduced by the juxtaposition of the words 'quiet' and 'voice'. As these two words are placed so near to one another, it almost implies that the voice from the traveller was a weak, hushed voice, and that he is barely heard above the silence. The writer then employs a paradox in order to accentuate the silence of the phantoms, perhaps to reiterate their



role as observers, rather than participants, in the world of men. He writes: 'Their stillness answering his cry...' Obviously stillness cannot be a response, as it is not a sound, and is in fact the reverse. Therefore, it highlights the immense silence and stillness of these ghost-like figures.

The writer uses a significant number of words to underline the desolate and lonely atmosphere, such as 'lone' and 'empty'. This is a simple method to add to the eerie and haunting atmosphere, making it a more chilling poem to read. There are also countless words to suggest darkness and gloom, such as 'dark' and 'shadowiness'. Again this makes the poem more ghostly. De la Mare writes: 'Stood thronging the faint moonbeams on the dark stair...' The use of the word 'stair' here immediately sends a chill down the reader's spine, as it can be taken to have a double meaning. When it is read aloud, the reader will visualize a pair of eyes staring with contempt. The idea that one is being observed, especially when alone, is indeed particularly evocative.

The dialogue in the poem sustains the reader's attention and interest throughout by making the story seem more immediate and real. This has two effects: it is made more gripping, and therefore it is also made more chilling to the reader, as the story becomes more plausible. Furthermore, de la Mare makes use of sibilance in the second last line, the crux of the poem, when he writes '...the silence surged softly backward...' The repeated 's' sound is perhaps imitating whispers. The listeners have been silent during their contact with the world of men, but as the traveller draws back, they begin to murmur to one another. This is indeed an unnerving idea. The sound also suggests contempt, as it is associated with the snake, the animal that represents evil.

This poem is an excellent example of what is known as evocative supernaturalism. The author's use of words and rhetorical devices evoke the spooky and supernatural atmosphere, without really asserting the truth of the paranormal, other than the mention of phantoms.



At first glance, there is no obvious purpose or hidden meaning to the poem, and indeed T.S. Eliot said that it was ‘an inexplicable mystery’. There are two possible explanations for the existence of these phantoms. Perhaps, as many people believe, the proprietors of the house died from the bubonic plague (a valid explanation considering that there was no knowledge of their deaths, and that the whole family died). Another less likely explanation is that the traveller himself was a ghost. This explains his inability to attract the attention of those inside, and can also explain his reason for being there – perhaps he is caught in a limbo-type state, still holding moral obligations in the real world.

Nonetheless it is clear that Walter de la Mare’s intention was to unnerve the reader, and it is undeniable that he has succeeded in doing so. The combination of rhetorical devices and use of particular words enabled him to create a supernatural and indeed paranormal atmosphere that was prominent throughout the poem. Perhaps that was his only aim – to keep the reader awake at night!

The poem is a metaphor for the journey of life. We go through life seeking answers to many questions. But, we do not always whether we go looking for them in religion, science or in ourselves. The poem is metaphor for the reader's journey through life with all its unanswered questions. The Traveller calls out for answers but is met with silence.

When in life, we face troubles, we seek God, or knock at his door. This our spiritual self where we are Travellers in search for spiritual satisfaction. God becomes the Silent Listener. The horse depicts the baser nature that seeks physical satisfaction from life.

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Themes

1. Supernatural Eavesdropping

When we are alone in a house or a desolate tract of country, many of us sometimes sense that a ghostly presence is observing us. Such moments tend to occur when the sun is down, the moon is up, and an eerie stillness surrounds us. In “The Listeners,” the man identified as “the Traveller” senses that otherworldly beings are eavesdropping on him. And he



responds to them. They do not respond to him, however. They are there only to listen.

2. Mystery

The poem is a metaphor for the mysteries we ourselves encounter as listeners or as callers rapping at a door. We go through life asking why, and then seek answers. But we do not always get them, whether we are looking for them in religion, science, social interaction, or in ourselves.

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Figures of Speech

Alliteration

forest's ferny floor (line 4)

smote upon the door again a second time (line 7)

suddenly smote (line 25)

Louder, and lifted his head (line 26)

silence surged softly backward (line 35)

Anaphora

Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight

To that voice from the world of men:

Stood thronging the faint moonbeams on the dark stair,

That goes down to the empty hall



Metaphor

in an air stirred and shaken

Comparison of the air to a thing that can be shaken

Paradox

Their stillness answering his cry

Stillness (inaudibility) is giving an answer.

Ay, they heard his foot upon the stirrup,

 And the sound of iron on stone,

And how the silence surged softly backward (lines 33-37)

They heard . . . how the silence surged. (One cannot hear silence.)

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Symbolism

1. The door: The door symbolizes the boundary between world of the living and the world of the dead.

2. The bird: The bird represents the one being who can cross the boundary between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

3. The traveller's grey eyes: The grey eyes of the traveller represent the unknown and blurred world he is entering.

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