

Thoughts of Phena *At News of Her Death*

Not a line of her writing have I
Not a thread of her hair,
No mark of her late time as dame in her dwelling, whereby late time – how things were for her recently
I may picture her there;
And in vain do I urge my unsight unsight – the fact that I can't see her
To conceive my lost prize conceive – picture, imagine
At her close, whom I knew when her dreams were upbrimming with light full to the brim
And with laughter her eyes.

What scenes spread around her last days,
Sad, shining, or dim?
Did her gifts and compassions enray and enarch her sweet ways *
With an aureate nimb? aureate nimb – glowing light like a rainbow
Or did life-light decline from her years,
And mischances control mischances – misfortune, bad luck
Her full day-star; unease, or regret, or forebodings, or fears **
Disennoble her soul? disenoble - take away the nobility (of her soul)

Thus I do but the phantom retain retain - keep
Of the maiden of yore yore – long ago
As my relic; yet haply the best of her--fined in my brain ***
It may be the more the more – all the more
That no line of her writing have I,
Nor a thread of her hair,
No mark of her late time as dame in her dwelling, whereby whereby – to help me
I may picture her there.

- * enray – light up; enarch draw an arch over, surround
- ** day-star – probably the sun, in other words, the light she shed around her
- *** haply – perhaps; fined – refined; relic – something to remember Tryphena by

Phena was Hardy's cousin, Tryphena Sparks, who died in the spring of 1890. He looks back over the time he knew her, as a young woman, and wonders what happened to her during 'her last days'. The first person narrative gives the poem a very personal feeling.

Given that Hardy is so often gloomy and that this poem is written 'at news of her (Tryphena's) death', you would imagine this to be an occasion for depression. The first verse begins with a series of negatives:

Not a line of her writing have I,
 Not a thread of her hair,
No marks of her late time....

And in vain...

The second stanza poses questions about her last days:

What scenes spread around her last days ...?

Did her gifts and compassions ...?

Or did life-light decline from her years....?

Unease, or regret, or forebodings, or fears

Disennoble her soul?

The last verse reiterates the opening negatives, 'no line of her writing have I, / Nor a thread of her hair, / No mark of her late time...' But the tone is one of acceptance, even welcome, of the fact that what he keeps refined in his brain is 'the best of her' – the memories of the youth they shared.

The rhythm is not gloomy, either: it is a rising anapest rhythm – light, light, strong. 'Not a thread of her hair.' Although the first stanza opens slowly, with commas ending the first two lines, as the verse progresses, the lines spill over, running onto the lines following, filled with feeling.

And in vain do I urge my unsight

To conceive my lost prize (*picture*)

At her close, whom I knew when her dreams were upbrimming with light

And with laughter her eyes. (*full to the brim*)

Characteristically, Hardy coins the word 'unsight' (like 'unblossoms' in 'Hap' and 'uncoffined' in 'Drummer Hodge') so that it reminds the reader of what he cannot see. At this early stage in the poem, he wants to be able to see her in his mind: the words 'picture', 'unsight' and 'conceive' in consecutive lines insist on his desire to see her. He feels close to her; she is 'my lost prize', the girl he did not win (he is supposed to have been in love with her when they were both young). He remembers her in her youth, using words like 'dreams', 'upbrimming', 'light', 'laughter' and 'eyes'. 'Dreams' and 'upbrimming' are linked by their shared ms; 'light' and 'laughter' by the alliterated ls, 'light' and 'eyes' by the repeated 'eye' vowel sound. The eye vowel sound runs throughout the stanza, in 'I', 'time', 'unsight', 'my ... prize', taking the reader from the writer, 'I', through his failure to picture Phena, to his delighted memory of her. The stanza is full of the pronouns 'I' and 'her': it is focused on the two of them and, especially, on her. The fact that he can't picture her encourages the reader to try to picture her.

The second verse asks what her last days were like. Hardy remembers her 'gifts and compassions' lighting up what she did: 'enray' (light up), 'aureate nimb' (glowing light). He wonders whether her 'life-light' declined and whether her 'full day-star' was darkened. Not only does he associate her with light, but he thinks of things she did and the feelings with which she did them: 'gifts and compassions' and 'sweet ways'. She had, he thinks, a noble soul. The verse is structured round the contrast between the light and sweetness of her youth and the possible darkness of her old age 'unease, or regret, or forebodings, or fears ...'

Although Hardy only keeps ('retain') in his memory the phantom of the girl he knew long ago, he feels that this may be the 'best of her', the more so because he has no physical memento. Hardy ends the poem with the same four lines that he began with. But instead of feeling trapped by his lack of knowledge, trapped by the identical beginning and ending suggesting that he is stuck, he has moved emotionally. He is no longer 'urg(ing his) unsight / to conceive'. Instead, he feels that he has 'haply the best of her – fined (refined) in my brain / It may be the more'.

This poem is written 'at news of her death', yet with its focus on the light Hardy associates with her, its focus on her and his memory of the best of her, its structural contrast between what she was like then and what she may have been like in her old age, leaving him with his memory of her as 'the maiden of yore', and its rising anapest rhythm, it is far from being a gloomy poem.

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