

I Look into my Glass

I look into my glass,
And view my wasting skin,
And say, 'Would God it came to pass
My heart had shrunk as thin!'

wasting – shrivelled, withered
Would God it came to pass – I wish it would happen

For then, I, undistress
By hearts grown cold to me,
Could lonely wait my endless rest
With equanimity.

wait my endless rest – wait for my death
equanimity – composure, serenity

But Time, to make me grieve,
Part steals, lets part abide;
And shakes this fragile frame at eve
With throbbings of noontide.

frame – body; eve – the evening of life, old age

I was rather disconcerted to find that Hardy was only 57 when he wrote this (probably in 1897). Gloomier than ever after negative criticism of his novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* in 1891 and of *Jude the Obscure* in 1895, he was estranged from his wife, though they lived in the same house, and his admiration of Florence Henniker was not reciprocated ('hearts grown cold to me').

The tone is reflective; the pace is slow except for the final two lines of passion. Hardy is both looking at his reflection in the mirror and painting in words an emotional self-portrait. The poem is thus very much focused on himself: 'my glass', 'my wasting skin', 'my heart', 'my endless rest.' The poem seems to be concerned with how appearance belies reality; how other people see him (his elderly appearance) and how he really feels (passionately).

In the first verse, words to do with age predominate: 'wasting', 'shrunk', 'thin'. The contrast is made between physical appearance ('wasting skin') and feelings ('heart'). Instead of a quiet mind ('equanimity') he experiences 'throbbings of noontide'.

Hardy illustrates the intensity of his feelings in the first verse when he writes 'Would God it came to pass / My heart had shrunk as thin'. He bursts out, passionately, with 'Would God' (I wish to God that ...). In the second verse he expresses his distress, his pain at 'hearts grown cold to me'. In the third verse he explicitly describes how his heart throbs just as it did when he was a young man in his prime. He paints his prime as the 'noontide' or midday of his life which he now sees as being in its 'eve or evening. Again, as in 'Hap', Hardy uses the structure of a syllogism but he changes the order of the logical stages. A syllogism's structure is: if ... but ... therefore the answer / solution is In this poem Hardy structures it 'if only' ('Would God ...') ... For then.....But.' As so often with Hardy, the ending stresses the lack of any solution.

Time is personified in the last verse stressing its proactive part in Hardy's bitter experiences in a sudden proliferation of verbs.

Time, to make me grieve,

Part steals, lets part abide;
And shakes this fragile frame ...

Hardy repeats the sense of 'shakes' in the last line 'throbbings' (passion) to stress what he feels. There is a clear contrast between 'eve' (old age) and 'noontide' (prime of life). The alliterated 'fragile frame' insists on the physical age which belies his youthful emotions. The penultimate line runs over into the last line, speeding up the pace – the emotions spill over. Actually, this is so in all three stanzas: line 3 always runs on into line 4. In the first stanza I think this marks the intensity of emotion; in the second maybe it reflects the longed for equanimity, with no punctuation to interrupt the rest.

Hardy seems to depict himself as being a sufferer at others' hands. He wishes he were 'undistrest' so obviously he is distressed 'by hearts grown cold to me.' He expresses this feeling in the passive mood, putting himself in the position of the sufferer. The coldness of other people's hearts is emphasised by the assonance of 'grown cold' making Hardy in the next line 'lonely' – the continued assonance showing the effect of this coldness upon him. He is also a sufferer at the hands of malevolent Time in verse three.

Time, to make me grieve,
Part steals, lets part abide;
And shakes this fragile frame at eve...

Assonance again ensures that we associate Hardy's 'grieve'(ing) with the robbery of Time 'steals' in his old age 'eve'. Internal rhyme and assonance help us to link another source of Hardy's pain: 'Time to make me grieve... shakes this ... frame.' The ms in 'Time', 'make me' and 'frame' help to make almost unconscious connections between the words and their meanings.

The last line, with its passionate plosives, the double bs of 'throbbings' leaves us with Hardy's pain. The poem's verbs start in the present, move into the conditional in lines 3 – 8 (the 'if only' section), and return to the present. Hardy's pain is in the present: now.

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