

A Sunday Morning Tragedy

I bore a daughter flower-fair,
In Pydel Vale*, alas for me;
I joyed to mother one so rare,
But dead and gone I now would be.

to mother – to be the mother of
now I wish I was dead

Men looked and loved her as she grew,
And she was won, alas for me;
She told me nothing, but I knew,
And saw that sorrow was to be.

Men fell in love with her as soon as they saw her
she had slept with her boyfriend

I knew she was pregnant and it would bring sorrow

I knew that one had made her thrall,
A thrall to him, alas for me;
And then, at last, she told me all,
And wondered what her end would be.

she loved some man as if she was his slave

what would happen to her

She owned that she had loved too well,
Had loved too well, unhappy she,
And bore a secret time would tell,
Though in her shroud she'd sooner be.

She admitted that she had slept with her lover

her pregnancy would soon become obvious
she would rather be dead

I plodded to her sweetheart's door
In Pydel Vale, alas for me:
I pleaded with him, pleaded sore,
To save her from her misery.

I went heavily and sadly to her lover

I begged him to marry her

He frowned, and swore he could not wed,
Seven times he swore it could not be;
"Poverty's worse than shame," he said,
Till all my hope went out of me.

To be poor is worse than to have an illegitimate baby

"I've packed my traps to sail the main" -
Roughly he spake, alas did he -
"Wessex beholds me not again,
'Tis worse than any jail would be!"

traps – belongings; main – the sea

the south west won't see me again

- There was a shepherd whom I knew,
A subtle man, alas for me:
I sought him all the pastures through,
Though better I had ceased to be.

subtle – possibly means expert? or knowing dark secrets?

sought – looked for him in the fields
it would have been better if I'd died

I traced him by his lantern light,
And gave him hint, alas for me,
Of how she found her in the plight
That is so scorned in Christendie.

my daughter found herself to be in trouble (pregnant)
that Christians are so critical of if you are not married

"Is there an herb . . . ?" I asked. "Or none?"
Yes, thus I asked him desperately.
"--There is," he said; "a certain one . . . "
Would he had sworn that none knew he!

Is there a herb that will bring on a miscarriage?
certain – absolutely sure or, maybe, a particular one
I wish he had said he didn't know of one

"To-morrow I will walk your way,"
He hinted low, alas for me. -
Fieldwards I gazed throughout next day;
Now fields I never more would see!

low - he said softly

The sunset-shine, as curfew strook,
As curfew strook beyond the lea,
Lit his white smock and gleaming crook,
While slowly he drew near to me.

the beams from the setting sun at twilight

lit his shepherd's tunic

He pulled from underneath his smock
The herb I sought, my curse to be -
"At times I use it in my flock,"
He said, and hope waxed strong in me.

I sometimes use this on my sheep

I hoped it would work

"'Tis meant to balk ill-motherings" -
(Ill-motherings! Why should they be?) -
"If not, would God have sent such things?"
So spoke the shepherd unto me.

it's meant to terminate unexpected pregnancies

That night I watched the poppling brew,
With bended back and hand on knee:
I stirred it till the dawnlight grew,
And the wind whiffled wailfully.

poppling - bubbling

"This scandal shall be slain," said I,
"That lours upon her innocence:
I'll give all whispering tongues the lie;" -
But worse than whispers was to be.

the scandal of the pregnancy outside marriage
that lours – that is clouding, darkening

"Here's physic for untimely fruit,"
I said to her, alas for me,
Early that morn in fond salute;
And in my grave I now would be.

Here's medicine for your baby conceived outside marriage

early in the morning and giving her a kiss

- Next Sunday came, with sweet church chimes
In Pydel Vale, alas for me:
I went into her room betimes;
No more may such a Sunday be!

betimes - early

"Mother, instead of rescue nigh,"
She faintly breathed, alas for me,
"I feel as I were like to die,
And underground soon, soon should be."

instead of being rescued from my trouble

From church that noon the people walked
In twos and threes, alas for me,
Showed their new raiment--smiled and talked,
Though sackcloth-clad I longed to be.

raiment - clothes

sackcloth – rough fabric worn for mourning and distress

Came to my door her lover's friends,
And cheerly cried, alas for me,
"Right glad are we he makes amends,
For never a sweeter bride can be."

he (her lover) has put it right

My mouth dried, as 'twere scorched within,
Dried at their words, alas for me:
More and more neighbours crowded in,
(O why should mothers ever be!)

"Ha-ha! Such well-kept news!" laughed they,
Yes--so they laughed, alas for me.
"Whose banns were called in church to-day?" -
Christ, how I wished my soul could flee!

it was kept a secret

the banns of marriage were called in church today

"Where is she? O the stealthy miss,"
Still bantered they, alas for me,
"To keep a wedding close as this . . ."
Ay, Fortune worked thus wantonly!

stealthy – hiding herself away

bantered - teased

close - secret

wantonly – in a way that takes a delight in unhappiness

"But you are pale--you did not know?"
They archly asked, alas for me,
I stammered, "Yes--some days-ago,"
While confined clay I wished to be.

"'Twas done to please her, we surmise?"
(They spoke quite lightly in their glee)
"Done by him as a fond surprise?"
I thought their words would madden me.

Her lover entered. "Where's my bird? -
My bird--my flower--my picotee?
First time of asking, soon the third!"
Ah, in my grave I well may be.

picotee – possibly sweet flower?

To me he whispered: "Since your call--"
So spoke he then, alas for me -
"I've felt for her, and righted all."
- I think of it to agony.

"She's faint to-day--tired--nothing more--"
Thus did I lie, alas for me . . .
I called her at her chamber door
As one who scarce had strength to be.

No voice replied. I went within -
O women! scourged the worst are we . . .
I shrieked. The others hastened in
And saw the stroke there dealt on me.

scourged – whipped, flogged

There she lay--silent, breathless, dead,
Stone dead she lay--wronged, sinless she! -
Ghost-white the cheeks once rosy-red:
Death had took her. Death took not me.

I kissed her colding face and hair,
I kissed her corpse--the bride to be! -
My punishment I cannot bear,
But pray God NOT to pity me.

January 1904.

* Pydel Vale is presumably the countryside to the north-east of Dorchester, Hardy's Casterbridge, the county town of Dorset. The river there is the Piddle; Piddle means marsh or marshy stream.

Hardy wrote this ballad in January 1904 although he sets it at some unspecified time in the 1860s, just as he wrote 'A Trampwoman's Tragedy' in 1902 but set it eighty years earlier. Both this ballad and 'A Trampwoman's Tragedy' were considered unsuitable for family reading by the editor of the periodical to whom they were offered, and Hardy commented on its 'lurid picturesqueness'. York Notes comments on 'A Trampwoman's Tragedy' that it shows Hardy as 'the historian documenting a vanishing way of life.' To some extent this is also true of 'A Sunday Morning Tragedy'.

The story is told by the mother, whose daughter is as beautiful as a flower. Even in the opening verse she tells how she was happy to be the mother of so lovely a daughter but now she wishes that she (the mother) were dead. So the tone is set for tragedy.

The daughter tells her mother that she has 'loved too well' – in other words, that she has slept with her lover and is pregnant. In the censorious and judgemental Victorian society, this spells disaster: the girl will be ostracised, the baby an outcast for its illegitimacy. (An illegitimate child could not even be buried in a churchyard, should it die.) The heavy-hearted mother 'plodded to her sweetheart's door', that is, the sweetheart of the daughter, and pleads with the man to save her daughter from misery, that is, from bearing an illegitimate child. The lover says that marrying the

daughter would make him too poor; he has packed his 'traps' (his belongings) and is off to sail the seas. According to the lover, poverty is worse than the shame of having an illegitimate child – a different and more selfish set of values than that of the mother, who would do anything to help her daughter. So the distraught mother goes to a shepherd and asks him if there is any herb he knows of that would bring on an abortion. The shepherd produces a herb that he sometimes uses on his flock of sheep. 'Tis meant to balk (bring an end to) ill-motherings' (unwanted pregnancies). The mother makes a brew with this herb, and watches the 'poppling' simmering water. The daughter takes the brew made from the herb, but it kills her. Neighbours crowd into the mother's house on their way back from church, teasing her that she kept the news of her daughter's engagement so secret. The bans of marriage between daughter and lover have just been read out in church, but the selfish lover never thought to let his girlfriend and the mother know his intentions. The lover appears and admits that he has thought more about it since the mother called on him, and has realised what it would be like for his girlfriend to bear an illegitimate child. But the daughter lies in bed, 'silent, breathless, dead.' The mother describes her as 'sinless' (Hardy also subtitled *Tess of the D'Urbervilles, A Pure Woman*, to the outrage of the critics).

The verse form and story line are typical of the ballad: the story is tragic, the language simple (although the local dialect words may cause problems to readers, the language is basically unsophisticated), the story is told through dialogue and action, there is a certain amount of repetition of phrases, like a refrain (helpful in early folk ballads because they were mostly handed down orally, so the repeated refrain helped people to memorise them). The fact that the second and fourth line have the same rhyme throughout the poem makes the poem easily memorable. Here Hardy is consciously taking a form that is centuries old – several poets did this, such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Oscar Wilde. Thus in Hardy's hands, it becomes a literary ballad rather than an anonymous folk ballad. The verse form, too, is typical of a ballad: simple rhyming four-stress and three-stress lines, which help to convey the stark, tragic story in a simple and immediate way. Characteristically for Hardy, the story is deeply ironic.

The opening verses have a similar structure. The first line tells what happens:

'I bore a daughter flower-fair'
'Men looked and loved her as she grew'
'I knew that one had made her thrall' (a slave)
'She owned (admitted) that she had loved too well'
'I plodded to her sweetheart's door ...'

The second line adds a little to the storyline, and ends 'alas for me' (first three verses), 'unhappy she' (fourth verse), 'alas for me' (fifth verse) making a mini-refrain in the repetitions. The last line underlines the misery and tragedy:

'But dead and gone I now would be.'
'And saw that sorrow was to be.'
'And wondered what her end would be.' (what would happen to her)
'Though in her shroud she'd sooner be.'
'Till all my hope went out of me.'

There is no doubting the tragedy that will somehow unfold. The irony of the story begins quite early on, at the end of verse 4 'Though in her shroud she'd sooner be', because, of course, very soon the poor girl will be in her shroud. Society says, death rather than dishonour, and in effect the pressures of society bring about her death.

An aspect of the way Hardy tells the story that begins to force itself upon the reader, is the element of Christianity in the poem. For a start, it's called 'A Sunday Morning Tragedy' (as opposed to Tuesday or any other day of the week). Half way through the story, the mother tells the shepherd who supplies the abortion-prompting herb

... how she (the daughter) found her in the plight (desperate situation)

That is so scorned in Christendie. (Christian countries)

Christians have apparently conveniently forgotten that Jesus was presumed by Joseph, Mary's fiancé, to be illegitimate. The day the girl dies is Sunday, the day especially dedicated to worship of God:

Next Sunday came, with sweet church chimes

But it is too late. The beloved daughter tells her mother 'I feel as I were like to die'. And the point is underlined by the neighbours' news as they crowd into the house.

"Ha-ha! Such well-kept news!" laughed they,

Yes – so they laughed, alas for me.

"Whose banns were called in church to-day?" –

Christ, how I wished my soul could flee!

The plan to make the daughter's position 'respectable' has been conventionally made public in church on Sunday, but the true betrayal of the girl by her lover and by society's judgemental moralism has already taken place, fatally. Hence the mother's much more heartfelt call upon God in her exclamation, 'Christ.' At the end of the story, the mother describes the daughter as 'wronged, sinless she!' – wronged means betrayed and sinless means pure and virtuous, even though she may not be sinless in the condemning eyes of society.

Hardy hammers home the irony at the end: 'I kissed her corpse – the bride to be!' There is also the stark contrast between the light-hearted change of mind: 'Done by him as a fond surprise' and the tragic facts that have brought about the death of the girl. Finally, ironically, the mother takes the guilt upon herself for having found and administered the herb that would bring about the miscarriage. She considers herself a murderess.

My punishment I cannot bear,

But pray God NOT to pity me.

But of course the true guilt lies with the callous lover, and with a hypocritical and judgemental society; also, to some extent, Hardy implies, with indifferent (unfeeling) Fortune. (You might look at his views on Fortune in 'Hap' – which means chance, much the same as fortune.) 'Fortune worked thus wantonly!' (wantonly means gratuitously brutal – brutal just for the fun of it).

The shepherd in the story seems to be a well-meaning shepherd whose offered herb somehow tragically kills the beautiful young woman. But another reading would be to see the shepherd as allied with the forces of darkness. He is 'subtle' and, as she looks back on the story, the mother bewails that fact, 'alas for me.' The mother finds him in his fields by his 'lantern light', so presumably it is dark. He 'hinted low', he comes to the mother at sunset, and indeed the mother makes the brew by night. I am inclined to think that this is because the mother and the shepherd are discussing something that society has condemned, so it all has to be conducted very quietly and under cover of darkness.

As is the case in 'The Trampwoman's Tragedy' and in 'The Ruined Maid', Hardy presents the situation of the mother and her beloved daughter very sympathetically. He conveys their emotional

pain and – at least, so it seems to me – reserves judgement for the society whose attitude causes their pain, and for the man who, in a male-dominated society, can do as he wishes without censure.

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