

A Church Romance

She turned in the high pew, until her sight
Swept the west gallery, and caught its row
Of music-men with viol, book, and bow
Against the sinking sad tower-window light.

the gallery at the back of the church

She turned again; and in her pride's despite
One strenuous viol's inspirer seemed to throw
A message from his string to her below,
Which said: "I claim thee as my own forthright!"

viol - violin
his string – one of the four strings on a violin
forthright – at once

Thus their hearts' bond began, in due time signed.
And long years thence, when Age had scared Romance,
At some old attitude of his or glance
That gallery-scene would break upon her mind,
With him as minstrel, ardent, young, and trim,
Bowing "New Sabbath" or "Mount Ephraim."

bond – agreement? union?
minstrel – musician; ardent - passionate
New Sabbath, Mount Ephraim – hymn tunes

In the nineteenth century, music in village churches was quite often provided by a few players, not by the church organ. In a village near Hardy, there was a group of eight players seated up behind the congregation in a gallery. They played both wind and strings. But at Hardy's own very small village church there were just four players: the builder Thomas Hardy (our Hardy's grandfather) with his cello, his sons James and Thomas (our Hardy's father) and their neighbour James Dart all playing violin. Jemima Hand, who was to become Hardy's mother, watched the Hardy family arriving at Stinsford Church on Sunday mornings. Many years later, her son wrote down her description:

They were always hurrying, being rather late, their fiddles and violon-cello in green-baize bags under their left arms. They wore top hats, stick-up shirt collars, dark blue coats with great collars and gilt buttons, deep cuffs and black silk 'stock' or neckerchiefs. ...He (grandfather Hardy) wore drab cloth breeches and buckled shoes, but his sons wore trousers and Wellington boots.

At this time (mid 1830s) Jemima Hand was working at Stinsford House, so she went to Stinsford Church. Hardy calls this poem 'A Church Romance (Mellstock circa 1835).' Mellstock is Hardy's name for Stinsford in his Wessex novels, where he gives all the villages and districts fictional names. Hardy paints the scene inside the church with its pews and gallery, its windows and music. His parents married in 1839 and he was born the next year.

For once, the form suits the content: Hardy writes a sonnet about a love that lasts all through the marriage. This is a Shakespearean or English sonnet, of four quatrains and a final rhyming couplet.

The first quatrain is full of verbs and therefore of movement: 'She turned ... her sight / Swept ... and caught its row / Of music men.' And the movement at this point is all initiated by the woman, 'she'. Although she is in church, it seems her thoughts are not wholly focused on devotion;

although she is in a high pew, she is able to swivel round and see the men behind her in the music gallery. And the movement overruns the ends of all the lines in enjambement. So the setting (church, high pew) is confined and the iambic pentameter lines in the sonnet are a contained discipline, yet the verbs move beyond the containing frame. This feeling of moving beyond confines is further stressed by the alliteration which spans the lines

... until her sight

Swept the west gallery

The idea of a confining frame is again suggested through the rhyming pattern, which goes 'sight', 'row', 'bow', 'light' – in other words, the first word 'sight' rhymes with the word at the end of the fourth line, 'light' – a rhyme scheme which contains the other two rhymes in lines 2 and 3. Is there a hint of mischievous wit in the idea that in this formal, devotional church atmosphere, she is thinking about love, and deliberately looking round to see her man?

'She turned again ...' at the start of the second quatrain, so that form and structure are echoing the storyline. She seems quite flirtatious; not just one quick look for her. And there is a response from one particular musician in the gallery:

One strenuous viol's inspirer seemed to throw (viol - violin)

A message from his string to her below ...

Again the run-on line suggests the intensity of the passion, the vigour of the 'throw'ing of the music from the young violinist to Jemima below. And the pronouns also insist on the relationship: She, her, his .. to her ... I... thee. This time, after the initial verb, 'She turned' the movement (verbs) comes from the young man, 'throw ... a message .. which said, I claim thee.' The rhymes are the same as in the first quatrain; these eight lines are set in the past, when the 'hearts' bond' of Hardy's parents began.

The last six lines of the sonnet - the last quatrain and the final rhyming couplet - move forward in time. 'Thus their hearts' bond began' – 'bond' here means not bondage but something that forms a bond or unites you with somebody else. Many many years later ('long years thence'), when both Hardy's parents are so old that there is none of the initial romance left in their feelings, a fleeting look or movement on the part of Hardy's father will bring back to his mother a vivid memory of their early days of courtship. 'New Sabbath' and 'Mount Ephraim' are the names of the hymn tunes he bowed (played) in church. You can look them up on Google and listen to them. It's the physical memories that come flooding back: 'some ... attitude of his or glance', some characteristic position, some way he had of looking at her. She remembers exactly how he used to be, 'ardent, young and trim', that is, passionate, young and neat, smart, slim, fit. As the memories come back, so the lines, which have become rather steady and stately and end-stopped with age, run over:

At some old attitude of his or glance

That gallery-scene would break upon her mind...

'Break upon' suggests the power and energy of love, like the waves breaking on the shore.

Unlikely as it seems, we again have the idea of the church service being in fact a place where the young lovers wooed.

With him as minstrel, ardent, young, and trim, (him - young lover; minstrel - musician)

Bowing 'New Sabbath' or 'Mount Ephraim'. (the hymns in the church service)

The rest of the congregation may have thought the young man was accompanying their hymn-singing but actually he was a minstrel, bowing (playing to) his lady love. Instead of the frequently gloomy or cynical irony in Hardy's poems, this unlikely setting for lovers to woo adds a twinkle in

the eye to the proceedings. If you want to hear the tune of Mount Ephraim, the link is <http://www.wgma.org.uk/PandG/tunes.htm>

This is a Shakespearean sonnet, three quatrains and a final rhyming couplet. But there is no full stop after the last quatrain. Instead there's a brief comma, because of the force of the scene which 'break(s)' upon her mind of the young man playing his violin as we head for the last couplet. This last quatrain starts quite slowly and sedately, as is appropriate for an elderly couple, but suddenly the pace picks up as old Mrs Hardy remembers the ardent young man who courted her. The pronouns, which in the octave are 'she' and 'he', or 'her' and 'him', are now combined in the partnership of their long marriage - 'their', except when memories of the past return, with 'him' and 'her'.

The poem is concerned with love; love in youth, love in older age. Even constraining circumstances can't constrain love. Romance blossoms in a church service.

Hardy uses the same two rhymes right the way through the octave: sight, light, despite, forthright and row, bow, throw, below. It seems to be that the first in each quatrain belongs to the young woman, 'sight' and the second to where the young man is, 'tower-window light', and again 'her pride's despite' and his determination to overcome her pride immediately 'forthright'. The rhyming words in the middle again trace the movement from her 'caught its row' to him 'and bow', from him 'to throw' to her 'her below.' In the sestet the romance and glance of the early days dance through the more sedate official detail of the marriage 'signed' and her older 'mind'. And we end with the ardent young lover playing his !! hymn tunes.

From Thomas Hardy's Preface to the 1896 edition of *Under the Greenwood Tree*, a novel first published in 1872

This story of the Mellstock Quire and its old established west-gallery musicians, ...is intended to be a fairly true picture, at first hand, of the personages, ways, and customs which were common among such orchestral bodies in the villages of fifty or sixty years ago.

The zest of these bygone instrumentalists must have been keen and staying to take them, as it did, on foot every Sunday after a toilsome week, through all weathers, to the church, which often lay at a distance from their homes. They usually received so little in payment for their performances that their efforts were really a labour of love. In the parish I had in my mind when writing the present tale, the gratuities received yearly by the musicians at Christmas were somewhat as follows: From the manor-house ten shillings and a supper; from the vicar ten shillings; from the farmers five shillings each; from each cottage-household one shilling; amounting altogether to not more than ten shillings a head annually—just enough, as an old executant told me, to pay for their fiddle-strings, repairs, rosin, and music-paper (which they mostly ruled themselves). Their music in those days was all in their own manuscript, copied in the evenings after work, and their music-books were home-bound.

It was customary to inscribe a few jigs, reels, horn-pipes, and ballads in the same book, by beginning it at the other end, the insertions being continued from front and back till sacred and secular met together in the middle, often with bizarre effect, the words of some of the songs

exhibiting that ancient and broad humour which our grandfathers, and possibly grandmothers, took delight in, and is in these days unquotable.

The aforesaid fiddle-strings, rosin, and music-paper were supplied by a pedlar, who travelled exclusively in such wares from parish to parish, coming to each village about every six months. Tales are told of the consternation once caused among the church fiddlers when, on the occasion of their producing a new Christmas anthem, he did not come to time, owing to being snowed up on the downs, and the straits they were in through having to make shift with whipcord and twine for strings. He was generally a musician himself, and sometimes a composer in a small way, bringing his own new tunes, and tempting each choir to adopt them for a consideration. Some of these compositions which now lie before me, with their repetitions of lines, half-lines, and half-words, their fugues and their intermediate symphonies, are good singing still, though they would hardly be admitted into such hymn-books as are popular in the churches of fashionable society at the present time.

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