

After the Last Breath (written in 1904 on the death of Hardy's mother, Jemima Hardy, 1813-1904)

There's no more to be done, or feared, or hoped;
None now need watch, speak low, and list, and tire;
No irksome crease outsmoothed, no pillow sloped
Does she require.

list - listen
irksome - annoying

Blankly we gaze. We are free to go or stay;
Our morrow's anxious plans have missed their aim;
Whether we leave to-night or wait till day
Counts as the same.

The lettered vessels of medicaments
Seem asking wherefore we have set them here;
Each palliative its silly face presents
As useless gear.

bottles of pills
palliative – medicine to relieve pain; silly - ?foolish
gear - clutter

And yet we feel that something savours well;
We note a numb relief withheld before;
Our well-beloved is prisoner in the cell
Of Time no more.

savours – feels good

We see by littles now the deft achievement
Whereby she has escaped the Wrongers all,
In view of which our momentary bereavement
Outshapes but small.

deft - skilful
Wrongers – sufferings of old age?
outshapes – appears, has the outer shape of

Hardy writes this elegy as if immediately after his mother's death. All the business of nursing, the anxiety, the little tasks that surround the sickbed are now unnecessary. In the first verse, Hardy keeps repeating, 'no more to be done'; 'none now need watch (stay awake at night by the sick woman's bed)'; 'no irksome crease outsmoothed' (crease in the sheets to be smoothed out). The emotional tensions are over: 'no more ...feared, or hoped'; so are the specially quiet behaviour and constant observation of the invalid: 'watch (stay awake through the night), speak low, and list (listen)'. The exhausting nature of the nursing is suggested through the considerable number of verbs: 'done', 'feared', 'hoped', 'watch', 'speak', 'list', 'tire', 'outsmoothed', 'sloped'. Although the focus is on all the actions of those who have been caring for the sick woman, the spotlight is really on her. It is not until the second verse that we even know who has performed these actions. It is 'we'; Hardy, as so often, writes in the first person, here the first person plural, probably the family group gathered around Jemima Hardy.

The next verse continues the feeling of a pattern that has suddenly stopped, a structure to the days and nights around the sickbed that is no longer needed. This time, instead of the repeated 'no more'

and 'none ... need', everybody's strange sense of confusion is conveyed through a disrupted rhythm.

Blankly we gaze. We are free to go or stay;
Our morrow's anxious plans have missed their aim;
Whether we leave tonight or wait till day
Counts as the same.

The cesura after 'gaze' completely unsettles the rhythm, the pattern. Then the third line runs on to the fourth – another disruption of the line structure where one line slides into the next. The sense of lost pattern is reinforced through the assonance of 'blankly' and 'anxious plans' which links the relevant words. Whenever people leave the house 'Counts as the same.' The rhymes and word patterns (x or y) reinforce this sense: 'go or stay', 'leave tonight or wait till day'. It all 'Counts as the same'. The first verse focused on actions and feelings about the sickbed. The second verse is centred on the sudden end to the pattern of behaviour and plans.

In the third verse Hardy describes the irrelevance, now, of the bottles of pills all of which proved useless.

Each palliative (something to ease symptoms) its silly face presents
As useless gear (clutter).

I think the rather surprising adjective 'silly' both picks up the ll in 'palliative' and shows how silly and ineffectual palliatives are when someone is dying of old age. How can you palliate that?

After the first three verses describing how useless all the fuss around the dying woman now seems, the poem takes a different direction in the fourth verse. 'And yet'. Those gathered around the dead woman sense something new and unexpected. 'We feel', 'We note' 'Our well-beloved', 'We see'. What they feel and note and see about their well-beloved is that there is something good in this death, a new sense of relief, and they perceive that 'she has escaped', she is 'prisoner in the cell / Of Time no more.' Compared to her 'deft (skilful) achievement' of escape from the sufferings of old age, 'the Wrongers', the family's bereavement appears insignificant. (Hardy seems to have coined the word 'outshapes' meaning appears; at least, the Oxford English Dictionary gives Hardy as its only user.) Hardy gives Time and the Wrongers capital initials, to emphasise their power: they keep old people prisoner, they inflict suffering upon the old. On the other hand, Tim Armstrong in *Thomas Hardy Selected Poems*, thinks that Wrongers refers to gossips in general, or the fact that Hardy was upset by comments in the press, after his mother's death, on her humble origins and the suggestion that he neglected her.

Hardy experiences and depicts an unexpected feeling of wellbeing in this poem, perhaps surprising in an elegy on his mother. But he does so in other elegies: for example, in 'Thoughts of Phena' Hardy delights in 'the best of her' and this, too, is an elegy on the occasion of the death of a loved relation. In his dark ode on the death of the century, 'The Darkling Thrush', he finds 'some blessed hope' that he had not looked for. Hardy's poetry is full of surprises.

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