

One We Knew

(M. H. 1772-1857)

She told how they used to form for the country dances -
"The Triumph," "The New-rigged Ship" -
To the light of the guttering wax in the panelled manses,
And in cots to the blink of a dip.

names of dances
manses - mansions
cots – cottages; dip – tallow candle

She spoke of the wild "poussetting" and "allemanding"
On carpet, on oak, and on sod;
And the two long rows of ladies and gentlemen standing,
And the figures the couples trod.

dancing in a circle; a German dance
oak – wooden floors; sod – out of doors on the grass

She showed us the spot where the maypole was yearly planted,
And where the bandsmen stood
While breeched and kerchiefed partners whirled, and panted
To choose each other for good.

kerchiefed - scarves

She told of that far-back day when they learnt astounded
Of the death of the King of France:
Of the Terror; and then of Bonaparte's unbounded
Ambition and arrogance.

far-back – long ago
the Terror – French Revolution

Of how his threats woke warlike preparations
Along the southern strand,
And how each night brought tremors and trepidations
Lest morning should see him land.

tremors – shaking with terror

She said she had often heard the gibbet creaking
As it swayed in the lightning flash,
Had caught from the neighbouring town a small child's shrieking
At the cart-tail under the lash . . .

gibbet – the gallows
the cart-tail – the back part of a cart

With cap-framed face and long gaze into the embers -
We seated around her knees -
She would dwell on such dead themes, not as one who remembers,
But rather as one who sees.

She seemed one left behind of a band gone distant
So far that no tongue could hail:
Past things retold were to her as things existent,
Things present but as a tale.

band – group of people
hail – greet, call to

This poem was published in December 1903. It is dedicated to the memory of Hardy's father's mother, Mary Hardy, who lived from 1772 – 1857. For the first sixteen years of Hardy's life she lived with his family in Bockhampton. The poem focuses directly on the old lady as well as on her memories, with stanzas beginning, 'She told', 'She Spoke, 'She showed', 'She said', 'She seemed', and in mid-stanza, 'She would dwell'.

The poem recounts the old lady's stories of her youth, memories reaching back to the late eighteenth century. In the first two verses, the memories are of the country dances. 'The Triumph' and 'The New-rigged Ship' are names of country dances, and the light was provided in the smarter houses (manses) by wax candles, but in the cottages (cots) by the blink of a tallow candle (dip). Tallow is cheaper than wax, being made from rendered-down animal fat, but the flame gives less light. The panelling that Hardy refers to in the mansions is the wooden panelling on the wall. In the second verse the old lady tells of the wild poussetting (dancing in a circle) and allemanding (dancing a German dance), the dance floor being made either of carpet or oak in the grand houses, or 'sod', grass when they danced out of doors. The 'figures' are the set movements in a dance, perhaps when a couple are dancing between two long rows of 'ladies and gentlemen' as in Strip the Willow. Again in the third verse the old lady describes the dancing, this time around the maypole – already a dying custom in Hardy's day. 'Kerchiefed' means that people had scarves round their necks, and the dancing was evidently pretty energetic 'whirled, and panted'.

Then the memories move on to the historical events of those 'far-back day(s)'. The French Revolution (1789-1799), when the King of France was guillotined, in January 1793 and the Reign of Terror began. Then Napoleon Bonaparte's attack on Europe and threats to England provoke 'warlike preparations' in verse five, along the south coast ('strand'). Each night people are fearful (tremors are terrors, as are trepidations) that they will wake to find he has landed in England.

In the old days times were very hard, not least in the way justice and retribution was dispensed. The old lady remembers how she 'often heard the gibbet creaking / As it swayed..' The gibbet is the gallows. That is one horrible sound associated with capital punishment. Another terrible sound of punishment is 'a small child's shrieking / At the cart-tail under the lash'. The cart-tail is the back part of the cart to which offenders were tied to be whipped as they were dragged through the streets. Old Mrs Hardy remembers a child being whipped in this way. It is being lashed as it is pulled through the streets of the neighbouring town and its shrieks carry into the surrounding countryside. The ... at the end of the stanza suggest other stories, untold.

Then the poem moves forward to the time when Hardy was sitting listening to these tales of the past. He was seated with his brothers and sister 'around her knees' while the old lady gazed into the embers of the fire, with her face framed by the cap she wore (married women wore caps). But for her, these 'dead themes' were not memories, but something that she saw even as she told her grandchildren about them. To her they had the reality and immediacy of 'things existent' whereas things that happened in the present seemed more like a story. Hardy adds, 'She seemed one left behind of a band gone distant / So far that no tongue could hail.' You could no longer greet someone from so long ago. Yet in her memory, long ago was now.

Hardy's grandmother (his father's mother) remembered the exact details of what she was doing when she heard of the execution of Marie Antoinette (including the pattern of the gown she was ironing at the time). She remembered, too, the tranter, their nearest neighbour in the cottage

opposite, beating out time for dancing. It seems possible, too, that when she was in her twenties, and before her marriage, she was committed to the Bridewell, or House of Correction, at Reading for stealing a copper tea-kettle, and remained there for three months. Had she been charged with the crime when her case came up – and mercifully she was not – she would have been hanged. The law of 1771 stated that ‘all persons guilty of larceny above the value of 12 pence shall be hanged.’ In addition the judicial whipping of women was not abolished until 1820 and there were certainly brutal scenes in some Bridewells. Apparently Hardy’s father provided several anecdotes about convicts, transportations and hangings from a past age.

(Information in this paragraph is from *Thomas Hardy’s Later Years* by Robert Gittings, publ Atlantic-Little, Brown Books 1978.)

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