

## The Voice

Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me,  
Saying that now you are not as you were  
When you had changed from the one who was all to me,  
But as at first, when our day was fair.

Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you, then,  
Standing as when I drew near to the town  
Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then,  
Even to the original air-blue gown!

the town – Boscastle near where Hardy met Emma

Or is it only the breeze, in its listlessness  
Travelling across the wet mead to me here,  
You being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness,  
Heard no more again far or near?

listlessness - lack of purpose, energy

wan wistlessness – pale inattentiveness

Thus I, faltering forward,  
Leaves around me falling,  
Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,  
And the woman calling.

faltering - stumbling

norward – the north

In 'The Voice' Hardy hears Emma calling to him, saying that now she is as Hardy first knew her at their meeting in March 1870 in Cornwall where Emma lived. He questions whether it really is Emma that he hears, or is it only the breeze blowing that he mistakes for her voice.

Although the poem is obviously addressed to Emma and is written in the autobiographical first person, Hardy does not name her, referring to her as 'Woman much missed,' and 'you'. He opens the poem with a strongly accented series of dactyls (strong light light), a falling rhythm that conveys his yearning. The emphasis is thrown conspicuously onto the key words: 'woman', 'missed', 'call', 'call', 'now', 'not', 'were'. Even in the first line there is clearly a tension between the lovingly remembered past and the empty present, highlighted by the alliterated 'much missed', and made even more explicit in the second line with its stress on 'now' and 'were'. The dactylic rhythm is also the ideal vehicle for the echoing effect of her voice: 'how you call to me, call to me'. This effect is emphasized by the triple rhyme of 'call to me' with 'all to me', in the first verse and in the second, the internal rhyme of 'you' with 'view' in the first line and 'knew' in the third.

The poem opens with an exclamation, 'how you call to me, call to me.' The second verse initiates a series of questions: 'Can it be you that I hear?' and in the third verse 'Or is it only the breeze ...?' The exclamation and the questions are indicative of his unsettled state of mind, living in the happy past 'when our day was fair', longing to see her, "Let me view you then'. The extent of his longing is conveyed through the word 'you' which is constantly repeated – three times in the first verse and four in the second. But 'our' occurs only once; otherwise they are separated, 'me' and 'you'. In the second verse, his question is in the present tense, 'Can it be you that I hear?' but his memories are, of course, in the past, 'as when I drew near ... where you would wait ... as I knew you then'.

The third verse takes place in an uncertain present, 'is it only the breeze?' The energy and momentum generated by his passionate desire to see Emma have given way to a lifeless list of words drained of vitality: 'listlessness', 'dissolved to wan wistlessness', 'no more'. Wan means pale and Hardy coined the word wistlessness, perhaps thinking of the opposite of wistful meaning yearning. These words, with their onomatopoeiac sibilance (repeated s sounds) convey the sound of the breeze. They conform to the dactylic rhythm of the first two verses but have none of the earlier energy. The last line of the third verse ushers in the stumbling loss of rhythm in the last verse. 'Heard no more again far or near?'

The verbs and the sense of movement have been shared between Hardy and Emma. In verse one he misses her, she calls saying that now she is as she was when they first met. In verse two he asks if it is her he hears, he begs to see her, he remembers drawing near to the town (as he hopes he is doing to her voice now). Meanwhile she is (in his memory and heart) standing, waiting for him. But in the third verse it is only the breeze travelling, not the woman he longs to see. She is dissolved, heard no more. And the verbs (apart from 'is') are present participles, 'travelling', 'being'; they have no impetus. Everything is falling apart. And in the fourth verse, whose rhythm falters just as Hardy says he does, the present participles persist: 'faltering', 'falling', 'oozing', 'calling'. There is no finite verb in the verse; no source of energy at all. The present participles reflect the poet's hopelessness. Nothing is happening. Emma cannot be rediscovered. He is left with a sense of her calling in the winter of his despair.

Hardy, as so often, provides a wintry setting to convey his misery: 'leaves ... falling, / Wind ... from norward (northward, the coldest quarter)'. The insistently alliterated 'thin through the thorn' gives a feeling of pain from the thorn bush, and vulnerability to the cold with the word 'thin' even though technically it describes the wind's passage. The dactylic rhythm has disintegrated completely by this point, in fact there is no sustained rhythm in the verse. The sense of disintegration is added to by the emphatic caesura in the first line:

Thus I; faltering forward,  
Leaves around me falling,  
Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,  
And the woman calling.

The 'aw' sound in 'faltering' and 'calling' is repeated throughout the verse in 'forward', 'falling', 'thorn' and 'norward'. The rhythm actually enacts the faltering; the poet's virtual inability to go forward and his sense of cold misery (norward) and of the woman 'calling' is given us through the repeated vowel sound that echoes throughout the verse. The last words in each line are feminine rhymes, forward and norward, falling and calling. Each is followed by a comma except for the last with its full stop. Somehow this has the effect of reflecting the poet's stumbling, halting attempts; the stress (the poet's effort) followed by the light syllable (drained of energy) and then all progress paused or stopped at the comma and final full stop. Brilliant.

## 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