

Afterwards

When the Present has latched its postern behind my tremulous stay, postern – back door
And the May month flaps its glad green leaves like wings,
Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk, will the neighbours say,
'He was a man who used to notice such things'?

If it be in the dusk when, like an eyelid's soundless blink,
The dewfall-hawk comes crossing the shades to alight dewfall-hawk – night-hawk
Upon the wind-warped upland thorn, a gazer may think, thorn bush distorted by constant wind
'To him this must have been a familiar sight.'

If I pass during some nocturnal blackness, mothy and warm,
When the hedgehog travels furtively over the lawn,
One may say, 'He strove that such innocent creatures should come to no harm,
But he could do little for them; and now he is gone.'

If, when hearing that I have been stilled at last, they stand at the door, been stilled – died
Watching the full-starred heavens that winter sees,
Will this thought rise on those who will meet my face no more,
'He was one who had an eye for such mysteries'?

And will any say when my bell of quittance is heard in the gloom, funeral bell
And a crossing breeze cuts a pause in its outrollings, outrollings – sound of the bell
Till they rise again, as they were a new bell's boom,
'He hears it not now, but used to notice such things'?

In this poem Hardy writes, as it were, his own elegy (he was 77 when it was published as a part of *Moments of Vision and Miscellaneous Verses* in November 1917). It was, in fact, read at a memorial service for Hardy shortly after his death in 1927. And what he imagines people saying of him after his death are what they would say of someone steeped in knowledge of the countryside, not of a famous novelist and poet.

Hardy begins with a typically self-consciously literary way of describing his death:

‘When the Present has latched its postern behind my tremulous stay ...’

‘Postern’ means back door so, in other words, Hardy is saying, when my life (the Present) has shut the back door on the house of my transient time in this world - that is, when I’ve died. And it’s springtime, ‘the May month’. Will the neighbours say of me, he was the kind of chap who noticed every detail of nature in the month of May?

The same pattern holds good for each verse. So in verse two, ‘If it (Hardy’s death) be in the dusk...’ and again the word ‘when’ (the time at which his death occurs). There follows minute detail of what happens at twilight, a ‘dewfall-hawk’ (a night-hawk) alights on a thorn bush. And then, what the neighbours (or, this time, ‘a gazer’) think:

‘To him this must have been a familiar sight.’

Verse three: 'If I pass (if I die) during' this time it's during a summer's night when (the word 'when' – the exact time of Hardy's death – occurs in each verse) hedgehogs travel across the lawn (Hardy was a great supporter of the RSPCA). Again we have the neighbour's probable comment: 'One may say, "He". In verse four Hardy imagines himself to have been 'stilled at last' (died) during a winter night and envisages the neighbours' comments. The last verse's 'when' pictures the bell tolling at Hardy's funeral, and the poem ends with a neighbour's remark.

There are other repeated patterns within the structure of each verse. The lines in which Hardy imagines the time of his death are in the first person: 'If I pass...' The reaction of the neighbours is, of course, in the third person, and Hardy, 'I', becomes 'He'. The vivid consciousness of life in the first person (conveyed through the minute detail of May, the dusk, the summer night, the winter skies) is reduced to an outsider's comment.

The tenses change constantly. In the first verse, Hardy starts, 'the Present has latched'. He sets it in the past tense to signify his death – and the juxtaposition of 'Present' and 'has latched' are strikingly effective. Then he moves to the eternal present of the seasons. 'the May month flaps its glad green leaves like wings...' This change of tense helps to illustrate the 'tremulous' (transient) nature of his 'stay', his life, with the past tense set against the season's present. Then the verse's tense moves to the future: 'will the neighbours say...' and of course what they say is in the past tense because they are speaking of the dead Hardy: 'He was a man who used to notice such things.'

In the second verse Hardy moves from the present in a future sort of sense, 'If it be ...' and in the third, 'If I pass...' Again, the natural detail establishing the time of his death, is in the present tense. Nature lives now. So 'the dewfall-hawk comes ...' and 'the hedgehog travels ...' And the comment of acquaintances is in the past: 'To him this must have been...' and, 'But he could do little for them.' The tenses in the fourth and last verses are similarly patterned.

The timeless cycle of the seasons becomes clear when you look at the details of nature that Hardy has chosen. In the first verse, the leaves and fledglings of May; in the second, the night-hawk at twilight; in the third, a hedgehog during a summer's night; in the fourth, the stars in the winter sky; in the last verse, the wind blowing across the sound of the funeral bell. The cycle moves from daytime (I assume, since the leaves are unfolding and the young birds flying), to twilight, to summer's night to winter's night. And from spring to summer to winter. Perhaps the cycle of the seasons moves alongside the cycle of a man's life, with a winter's night being the equivalent of death. Or perhaps the ever-renewing natural cycle presents a contrast to the brief 'stay' of a man's life on this earth.

The natural detail that Hardy selects reflects some of the infinite variety of nature. He describes spring leaves in colour and texture, a bird, an animal, the stars, the wind, all details that only a true countryman would know.

In the first three verses, the natural detail involves some sort of movement, of travelling. Hardy describes his death as a shutting of the back-door on life, like a traveller setting out. 'The May month flaps its glad green leaves like wings / Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk' suggests a very new beginning with words like 'delicate-filmed' and 'new-spun'. Is Hardy suggesting here the contrast between his death and the new spring, with its fledglings and new leaves? His description of twilight focuses on 'the dewfall-hawk comes crossing the shades (the dusk)'. Perhaps this reminds

us of Hardy's spirit crossing from life to death at the end of a day (a day being a common image for human life). In the third verse 'the hedgehog travels furtively' and Hardy's spirit, too, is travelling. The fourth verse contains a far bigger picture, that of 'the full-starred heavens that winter sees'. This is a reminder of how small a figure man is, a fact Hardy frequently noted in his novels. But still he has been conscious of the beauty and mystery of the stars. Finally we hear his funeral bell, briefly silenced by a 'crossing breeze'. The verbs conveying Hardy's death are rather still, inactive verbs: 'if it be'; 'if I pass'; 'I have been stilled', and finally no verb at all, 'my bell of quittance'. Whereas the verbs of nature's activities are far more active: 'flaps'; 'comes crossing ... to alight'; 'travels'. Nature is always alive and moving.

As you would expect, Hardy describes with great beauty the moments of the natural world that meant so much to him.

the May month flaps its glad green leaves like wings,
Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk...

The overall impression is of the happiness of spring. The first line is made up of monosyllables, brief and joyous. Each word has a link to the next: 'May month' are alliterated; 'flaps' and 'glad' share assonance (same vowel sound) and liquid, sap-filled 'ls'. 'glad' and green are alliterated; 'green' and 'leaves' share the vowel sound; 'wings', 'filmed' and 'silk' share the vowel sound and 'filmed' and 'silk' also share the 'il' – the very light 'eye' sound and the lusciousness of the 'l'. 'Spun' and 'silk' are alliterated. And so on. You have in these two lines, the new leaves unfurling, like wings to fly with, which conveys the idea of the nestlings flying. Yet the youth and fragility of all this newness is also there, in 'Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk'. You have colour 'green' and touch 'new-spun silk'. And all this poetry and beauty is juxtaposed to the much more prosaic and everyday 'will the neighbours say / 'He was a man who used to notice such things'? No poetic images; just a factual announcement that forms a stark contrast with Hardy's awareness of the natural world and his joy in it. What other people say hardly begins to convey what the living man experienced.

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