

Old Furniture

I know not how it may be with others
Who sit amid relics* of householdry*
That date from the days of their mothers' mothers,
But well I know how it is with me
Continually.

I see the hands of the generations
That owned each shiny familiar thing
In play on its knobs and indentations,
And with its ancient fashioning
Still dallying:

indentation – a cut, notch or dent
ancient fashioning – the old-fashioned way it was made
dallying seems to mean playing

Hands behind hands, growing paler and paler,
As in a mirror a candle-flame
Shows images of itself, each frailer
As it recedes, though the eye may frame
Its shape the same.

On the clock's dull dial a foggy finger,
Moving to set the minutes right
With tentative touches that lift and linger
In the wont of a moth on a summer night,
Creeps to my sight.

in the wont of – in the manner of

On this old viol, too, fingers are dancing -
As whilom--just over the strings by the nut,
The tip of a bow receding, advancing
In airy quivers, as if it would cut
The plaintive gut.

whilom - once, as they used to; nut – violin bridge

plaintive – sad, mournful

And I see a face by that box for tinder,
Glowing forth in fits from the dark,
And fading again, as the linden cinder
Kindles to red at the flinty spark,
Or goes out stark.

linden – made of linen

Well, well. It is best to be up and doing,
The world has no use for one to-day
Who eyes things thus--no aim pursuing!
He should not continue in this stay,
But sink away.

* Relic - relic – something from an earlier time especially something with emotional associations;
householdry – personal belongings from the household

From the very opening, Hardy establishes a slow, gentle, thoughtful mood, as he sits and reminisces about the old family furniture around him. It has been handed down through the generations ‘from the days of their mothers’ mothers’. How often Hardy sets the scene with himself somewhere in it: here he is sitting looking at the loved old furniture and the memories it evokes. In ‘The Darkling Thrush’ he is leaning on a gate; in ‘The Photograph’ he is sitting by the fire in the library late at night; in ‘The Last Signal’ he is walking silently up the road from Max Gate to Winterborne-Came churchyard; in ‘After a Journey’ he is being drawn ‘up the cliff, down, till I’m lonely, lost’ near Pentargan Bay in Cornwall. As readers, we can always picture ourselves with Hardy, as he describes his thoughts and feeling in the first person. To me, many of these poems therefore have the effect of diary entries, or sketches in an artist’s notebook. This is not to say that they are unfinished or hastily composed; far from it. Hardy was a consummate craftsman.

Professor Tim Armstrong notes that the idea here is similar to that in William Barnes’s ‘Woak Hill’: ‘my goods all a-sheenen / Wi’long years o’handlen’. Hardy quoted these lines in *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874).

Hardy immediately introduces a contemplative mood through the quiet run-on lines in the opening verse. Only the third line has even a comma, and the whole five-line stanza is one sentence. Thinking briefly of ‘others’ with their family furniture, he then focuses on his own perceptions:

But well I know how it is with me
Continually.

The gentle, meditative atmosphere is enhanced by the feminine rhymes ‘others’ and ‘mothers’ of the first and third lines. Feminine rhymes end with an unstressed syllable; instead of the firm, muscular, definite ending to a line of verse that a masculine rhyme would provide, the feminine rhymes allow Hardy’s train of thought to continue, unchecked.

In the second and third verses, Hardy muses on the hands that for generations have owned, played and dallied with the furniture they used every day and knew so well. He pictures the hands fading as they recede through the generations or perhaps the fading indicates his inability to picture them clearly. He knows his mother’s and grandmother’s hands, but further back?

Hands behind hands, growing paler and paler...

The next two verses focus not just on the hands, but on the fingers. A finger that, very deftly ‘with tentative touches’ sets the minute hand to the right time on ‘the clock’s dull dial’. My grandfather used to do this every Sunday, when he wound the clocks. In the days before digital clocks and clocks powered by a battery, you wound up an eight-day clock once a week, and corrected the time. Hardy repeats the gentle sound of the ls in ‘clock’s dull dial’; he alliterates ‘foggy finger’ and repeats the fg pattern of the words; then he alliterates ‘moving to set the minutes right,’ repeating the ticking ‘t’ in ‘set’, ‘minutes right.’ The finger adjusting the minute hand does so ‘with tentative touches’ that echo the ts of the clock’s loud tick in the previous line. The tentative touches are light, careful; no hefty sounds or movements here. The ls in ‘lift and linger’ pick up the ls in the first line ‘clock’s dull dial’ – the movements are quiet and light. The feminine rhymes that occur in each verse preserve the gentle memories from the intrusion of a thumping masculine rhyme.

I imagine that the dancing fingers on the old violin are those of Hardy’s father, who played the violin. The violinist’s bow recedes and advances, like a dancer itself, and Hardy plays with the expected musical word, quaver, replacing it with ‘airy quivers’. This being well before the days of

synthetic material for strings, the violin is strung with 'gut'. The whole stanza is full of music. There are the words, 'dancing', 'receding, advancing'. There is also the rhythm which sways to and fro:

Fingers are dancing –
As whilom – just over the strings by the nut,
The tip of a bow receding, advancing
In airy quivers ...

It seem to have a lilt, with the stressed syllables followed by lots of bouncing unstressed syllables. The word sounds are light and dancing, with their lightweight repeated 'I' sounds in 'fingers', 'whilom', 'stings', 'tip', 'quivers'. Hardy deliberately sets this some way in the past, using archaic words like whilom for as they did once or as they used to, and nut, the old word for the violin bridge.

Then he moves from hands and fingers to a face, lit for a moment by the spark from a tinderbox. He glimpses a face 'Glowing forth' and quickly 'fading again'. The Wikipedia entry for a tinderbox <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tinderbox> explains how it worked and what the component parts were. Again, Hardy sets the memory in the past, this time by illuminating the remembered face with an old-fashioned source of flame and light, a tinderbox.

As you look at the movement of the poem, Hardy moves his reader steadily towards details. He opens with a generalisation about his capacity for musing as he sits surrounded by family furniture. Then he pictures the hands that 'owned each shiny familiar thing', hands that recede through the years. At this point he focuses our attention on details: a finger that sets the minutes right on a clock's dial; fingers that dance on the strings as they play the violin; a face lit briefly by the spark from a tinderbox. In the last verse, he withdraws from his reminiscences. 'Well, well. It is best to be up and doing...' Hardy renders the hands, fingers and faces ghostly – 'hands behind hands, growing paler and paler ... each frailer / As it recedes.' And 'a foggy finger... in the wont (habit) of a moth' and 'I see a face .. fading again'. Although he sets the memories so firmly in the past, however, he writes about them in the present. 'I see the hands'; 'fingers are dancing'; 'I see a face'. This has the effect of making the brief memories curiously vital; we share his glimpses.

Hardy ends the poem in a conversational tone, addressing the reader: 'Well, well...' He seems to find himself out of kilter with modern doings, with the modern attitudes. 'The world has no use for one to-day / Who eyes things thus.' Perhaps he should join those he has so fondly remembered:

He should not continue in this stay,
But sink away.

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