

The Last Signal

Silently I footed by an uphill road
That led from my abode to a spot yew-boughed;
Yellowly the sun sloped low down to westward,
And dark was the east with cloud.

footed by an uphill road - walked uphill
my abode – my home

Then, amid the shadow of that livid sad east,
Where the light was least, and a gate stood wide,
Something flashed the fire of the sun that was facing it,
Like a brief blaze on that side.

livid – blue-black colour

Looking hard and harder I knew what it meant -
The sudden shine sent from the livid east scene;
It meant the west mirrored by the coffin of my friend there,
Turning to the road from his green,

To take his last journey forth--he who in his prime
Trudged so many a time from that gate athwart the land!
Thus a farewell to me he signalled on his grave-way,
As with a wave of his hand.

in his prime – in the best part of life
athwart - across

WINTERBORNE-CAME PATH.

William Barnes (1801-1886) was buried in the churchyard of the little church where he had been vicar. It was near Hardy's home on the eastern edge of Dorchester. Barnes had been a friend of Hardy's for thirty years (they met in 1856 and Barnes died in October 1886). Barnes wrote poems in Dorset dialect, and Hardy admired the wide variety of verse forms and language effects in his poetry. Hardy subsequently edited the *Selected Poems of William Barnes* published in 1908.

Hardy writes of walking to Winterborne Came churchyard, 'a spot yew-boughed' to attend the funeral of his old friend, Barnes. It is an autumn afternoon, and 'the sun sloped low down to westward' while the eastern part of the sky is 'dark ... with cloud.' Suddenly something 'flashed the fire of the sun that was facing it, / Like a brief blaze.' Hardy realises that the sudden shine from the grey east comes from something bright on the coffin lid (perhaps the plaque with Barnes' name and dates?) which has caught the rays of the sinking sun. It seems to Hardy like 'a wave of his (Barnes') hand' in farewell. The effect of the 'sudden shine' from the dark part of the scene is like a friendly wave from the darkness of death, or perhaps an image of Barnes' uniqueness, his 'shine'.

The extent to which this poem is written as a tribute to Barnes becomes apparent through the techniques that Barnes employed and which Hardy uses here. Barnes was interested in the metrical patterns of old Celtic poetry; for example, rhyming words at the end of a line with those in the middle of the next line ('road' line 1 and 'abode' line 2; 'east' line 5 with 'least' line 6; 'meant' line 9 with 'sent' line 10; 'prime' line 13 and 'time' line 14). Barnes was also enthusiastic about Anglo-Saxon verse; for example, alliteration (this poem is full of alliteration) and compound

epithets, such as ‘yew-boughed’, ‘grave-way’. Hardy himself used alliteration and compound epithets frequently in his poetry.

Of course the style that Hardy is deliberately adopting in tribute to his friend adds considerably to the mood of the poem. The poem opens with Hardy walking almost due South from his home (‘my abode’) to the nearby churchyard at Winterborne Came. It is not far to walk, but the feeling of going on a little journey is conveyed by the run-on first line, ‘... an uphill road / That led from my abode to a spot ...’ And the heavy heart of the poet as he goes to his old friend’s funeral is suggested by the fact that the road is ‘uphill’ (an effort). This effect is reinforced by the number of long, slow vowels: road, abode, then with a slight change in vowel though not in consonants, boughed; sloped low, and then back to the bough sound again with down and cloud. There are lots of l’s, a gentle sound, and lots of rather heavy ds and some heavy bs, too. The mood is sombre.

The gate to the churchyard is wide; the gate to death is wide; all must go through it. And the gate here is in the darkest part of the churchyard, ‘where the light was least’, ‘amid the shadow’. But Hardy emphasises the sudden unexpected gleam he catches sight of: ‘flashed the fire of the sun’; ‘a brief blaze’; ‘sudden shine’. The effect of the brief blaze is made all the brighter by its contrast with the dark skies in the east, by the alliterated fs, bs and s sounds, and by the repetition.

Hardy says twice in the third verse that he knows what ‘it meant’, this brief blaze. The light comes from the west, where the sun ‘sloped low down to westward’. It is the end of the day, and the end of his friend’s life. Hardy’s old friend is ‘Turning to the road from his green. / To take his last journey forth ...’ The significance and size of this last journey is indicated by the fact that the sentence straddles two verses.

Taking ‘his last journey forth’ ‘on his grave-way’, he sends Hardy ‘a farewell ... As with a wave of his hand.’ Or that’s how Hardy feels it.

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