

The Oxen (published in The Times on Christmas Eve, 1915)

Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
'Now they are all on their knees,'
An elder said as we sat in a flock
By the embers in hearthside ease.

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
They dwelt in their strawy pen;
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
'Come; see the oxen kneel

'In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,'
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

barton – farm building; coomb – little valley

Just to clear up any confusion: oxen are cattle, cows and bulls. And, of course, they do get up and lie down by kneeling on the front legs. In this respect they are unlike other farm animals, such as sheep, goats, pigs or horses.

The poem opens with serene certainty:
Christmas Eve, and twelve of the clock.
'Now they are all on their knees ...'

It is midnight on Christmas Eve: the hushed, expectant moment of excitement as Christmas Eve becomes Christmas Day, the moment of Christ's birth. The first line is end-stopped, underlining the certainty, and the rhythm is more or less trochaic, so that the line opens with a stressed and secure syllable: Christmas Eve. The other stressed words are the important ones: twelve ... clock. The scene is set.

And the second line continues the certainty of the first.
'Now they are all on their knees'
An elder said ...

I imagine the old man to be one of a group of men in a pub sitting round the fire and seeing in Christmas Day in companionship. They are obviously a group of both young and old men, as the young Thomas Hardy is one of them. The old man speaks in simple monosyllables, and in the present tense, which adds to the sense of conviction and gives what he says an immediacy even to the modern doubting sceptical reader. The poem is couched in the first person, involving the reader in the remembering of childhood certainties and adult doubts. It is the elder, the old man with the voice of knowledge and experience, who speaks.

Everyone is sitting ‘By the embers in hearthside ease.’ It’s a quiet, very comfortable scene, both physically and intellectually. The embers are the glowing pieces of wood or coal in a dying fire, giving out a considerable warmth but without the energy of leaping flames. Although Hardy does not describe it directly, there would be a gentle light on the faces of the men sitting round the fire. The physical comfort of the scene - ‘hearthside ease’ - extends to the intellectual certainty that the old legend is true: the oxen in the farm sheds will be kneeling in homage to the infant Christ, just as they knelt to him at his birth so many hundreds of years ago. The rhyme of knees with ease suggests to me that the men are secure in their belief in the old folk-tradition – they are at ease with the idea.

The group round the fire are presumably somewhere deep in the country, for Hardy uses the word ‘flock’ instead of group. (In fact we know he set it in the Dorset hamlet near Dorchester where he was born.) But far from sounding patronising about the intellectual powers of country yokels who would believe this kind of thing, Hardy underlines the ease, the comfort, of these simple beliefs in the next verse:

We pictured the meek mild creatures where
They dwelt in their strawy pen;
Nor did it occur to one of us there
To doubt they were kneeling then.

The sense of certainty is continued here, and not only in the meaning of the words: ‘We pictured’; ‘Nor did it occur to one of us there / To doubt’. Just as the end- stopped line that opened the poem added to the certainty, so do the run-on lines in this second verse. They give the sense of ease in the belief – with no cesuras to jolt the belief. There is a half-rhyme in that line, though, ‘occur’ and ‘there’ which introduces a very slightly disturbing effect, especially in this poem with its very definite monosyllabic masculine rhymes. Although the verse is in the past tense, ‘then’ gives the sense that the oxen are kneeling at that precise moment. But it is in the past tense; ‘then’ is not ‘now’ and now is where Hardy moves for the second half of the poem.

In verse three, Hardy moves to ‘these years.’ The poem was published in *The Times* on 24 December 1915, when the First World War had been raging for over a year. Historically, ‘these years’ of slaughter were much worse even than the years of the Second Boer War that Hardy had depicted in such tragic and despairing poems as *A Christmas Ghost Story*, *At the War Office London* and *Drummer Hodge*. So both from the viewpoint of the World War and from the viewpoint of Hardy’s own doubts and scepticism after living for 75 years, it is true that

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years.

Hardy has moved into the present, in a conditional sort of way, ‘would weave.’ ‘Weave’ is a wonderful word to have used – originally he wrote ‘believe’ and he modified it later to ‘weave’. For one thing, weaving is a traditional cottage industry, so it is another connection to traditional country folk-tales and homespun ways. For another, weaving is literally making a fabric by crossing the threads in warp (lengthwise) and weft or woof (across); if you interlace the threads in this way, you are including all sorts of different elements into the fabric as you weave to and fro. Figuratively – and the word has been used figuratively for centuries – weaving has associations with something that may not be true, so it is an apt word for a folk tradition.

The certainties of the first two verses have faded into uncertainty ‘would’, ‘I should’, ‘hoping’. The folk tradition it would not have occurred to him to doubt now seems a fair (attractive sounding) fancy (imagining). The alliterating fs link the words that few would now believe in. Even the word ‘the gloom’, meaning the darkness of midnight on Christmas Eve, has another suggestion, that of melancholy and depressing darkness, a state of mind that sits well with Hardy’s disbelief as an adult. It contrasts with the ease and warmth of the hearthside and his childhood certainties. Now he is going outside into the darkness, to a lonely barton, hoping against hope. Then he was one of a group of believers: ‘we sat in a flock’; ‘we pictured the meek mild creatures’; ‘Nor did it occur to one of us there / To doubt’. Now he is alone: ‘I feel’, ‘I should go’. The easy run-on lines of the first two verses have disintegrated into lines with the sudden stops and starts of doubt. Indeed, the start of flickering hope carries the poet right over from the end of the third verse to the beginning of the fourth, the beginning of a faint hope:

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
‘Come; see the oxen kneel

‘In the lonely barton by yonder coomb
Our childhood used to know,’ ...

That faint hope includes a sense of now-lost community, ‘Our childhood’.

The last verse contains not only the hoped-for truth of the childhood belief, but also reverts to the comforting dialect words of the country childhood, ‘barton’ and ‘coomb’. ‘Barton’, in Dorset dialect, means outbuildings at the back of a farmhouse, and a ‘coomb’ is a little valley. ‘Coomb’, the well-known word of childhood, rhymes uncomfortably with ‘gloom’, the adult’s unhappy state of mind. The certain knowledge of childhood ‘our childhood used to know’ rhymes jarringly with the adult’s uncertain hope ‘hoping it might be so.’ It is, perhaps, Hardy’s version of ‘Dover Beach’.

The last verse articulates emotions rather than reason. Hardy rationally knows that ‘So fair a fancy few would weave / In these years!’ The exclamation mark conveys the knowledge that it must all be fantasy. But he clings to the old belief: ‘Yet’. It’s his feelings that drive him to cling, ‘I feel’. He doesn’t know, but ‘If someone said ...’. It’s only an ‘if’. He doesn’t say he would certainly go, but he thinks ‘I should’ (conditional tense), ‘hoping’. The invitation of the someone is couched in very definite terms. Both ‘come’ and ‘see’ are stressed, breaking the iambic rhythm of the verse. Both verbs are commands; both are in the present tense – in Hardy’s hope, it really is happening: ‘Come; see the oxen kneel...’ In the old days, they could all easily ‘picture the meek mild creatures where / They dwelt in their strawy pen’. Now he needs actually to go and ‘see the oxen kneel’ because the old beliefs have been overtaken by doubts.

The rhythm of the ballad-like quatrains varies. There is a mix of trochee (strong/light) and dactyl (strong/light/light) and anapaest (light/light/strong) in the first quatrain, and it flows readily and easily. A similar mix characterises the second verse. But the third and fourth verses are more heavy and plodding, as befits the change of mood, the doubt of the adult. They are written mostly in iambs (light / strong) with the exception of the lines: Come; see the oxen kneel ...’; ‘I should go with him ...’ and ‘Hoping...’. The stress moves forward here to the beginning of the line, underlining its importance to Hardy.

The date of the poem (1915) suggests that it is also a lament for a disappearing way of farming life. Machines had for some time been doing more and more of the work formerly carried out by animals. No-one is going to picture machines kneeling.

But the fact that *The Oxen* was published on Christmas Eve 1915 surely means, too, that it is not only Hardy who has left the embers in hearthside ease of his childhood. The fire by which he and the others sat then had burned down to its embers; it was dying. A whole way of life was dying, as the young men in the trenches of the First World War and their grief-stricken parents were discovering. Life would never be the same.

Hardy had learned the folk-tradition of the oxen kneeling at the moment of Christ's birth from his mother, when he was a child. He refers, in a letter to Edmund Gosse written in April 1898, to "the belief still held in remote parts hereabout, that the cattle kneel at a particular moment in the early hours of every Christmas morning just at, or after 12". Again, this time hilariously, he refers to the belief in Chapter 17 of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, published in 1891.

Songs were often resorted to in dairies hereabout as an enticement to the cows when they showed signs of withholding their usual yield; and the band of milkers at this request burst into melody--in purely business-like tones, it is true, and with no great spontaneity; the result, according to their own belief, being a decided improvement during the song's continuance. When they had gone through fourteen or fifteen verses of a cheerful ballad about a murderer who was afraid to go to bed in the dark because he saw certain brimstone flames around him, one of the male milkers said--

"I wish singing on the stoop didn't use up so much of a man's wind!"...

"Oh yes; there's nothing like a fiddle," said the dairyman. "Though I do think that bulls are more moved by a tune than cows--at least that's my experience. Once there was an old aged man over at Mellstock--William Dewy by name--one of the family that used to do a good deal of business as tranters over there--Jonathan, do ye mind?--I knowed the man by sight as well as I know my own brother, in a manner of speaking. Well, this man was a coming home along from a wedding, where he had been playing his fiddle, one fine moonlight night, and for shortness' sake he took a cut across Forty-acres, a field lying that way, where a bull was out to grass. The bull seed William, and took after him, horns aground, begad; and though William runned his best, and hadn't MUCH drink in him (considering 'twas a wedding, and the folks well off), he found he'd never reach the fence and get over in time to save himself. Well, as a last thought, he pulled out his fiddle as he runned, and struck up a jig, turning to the bull, and backing towards the corner. The bull softened down, and stood still, looking hard at William Dewy, who fiddled on and on; till a sort of a smile stole over the bull's face. But no sooner did William stop his playing and turn to get over hedge than the

bull would stop his smiling and lower his horns towards the seat of William's breeches. Well, William had to turn about and play on, willy-nilly; and 'twas only three o'clock in the world, and 'a knowed that nobody would come that way for hours, and he so leery and tired that 'a didn't know what to do. When he had scraped till about four o'clock he felt that he verily would have to give over soon, and he said to himself, 'There's only this last tune between me and eternal welfare! Heaven save me, or I'm a done man.' Well, then he called to mind how he'd seen the cattle kneel o' Christmas Eves in the dead o' night. It was not Christmas Eve then, but it came into his head to play a trick upon the bull. So he broke into the 'Tivity Hymm, just as at Christmas carol-singing; when, lo and behold, down went the bull on his bended knees, in his ignorance, just as if 'twere the true 'Tivity night and hour. As soon as his horned friend were down, William turned, clinked off like a long-dog, and jumped safe over hedge, before the praying bull had got on his feet again to take after him. William used to say that he'd seen a man look a fool a good many times, but never such a fool as that bull looked when he found his pious feelings had been played upon, and 'twas not Christmas Eve. ... Yes, William Dewy, that was the man's name; and I can tell you to a foot where's he a-lying in Mellstock Churchyard at this very moment--just between the second yew-tree and the north aisle."

"It's a curious story; it carries us back to medieval times, when faith was a living thing!"

The remark, singular for a dairy-yard, was murmured by the voice behind the dun cow; but as nobody understood the reference, no notice was taken, except that the narrator seemed to think it might imply scepticism as to his tale.

"Well, 'tis quite true, sir, whether or no. I knowed the man well."

The idea of the oxen being present at Christ's birth is not to be found in the gospel accounts (specifically St Matthew's and St Luke's which give the fullest version of events). It probably stems from the first chapter of the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament. Isaiah Chapter 1, verse 3 says: The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. The word crib came to be associated with the manger in which Jesus was laid in St Luke's account. In Isaiah's chapter, the disobedience of God's people was being contrasted with the obedience of animals. Bit by bit, the idea of the ox and the ass being present at the humble scene of the Saviour's birth took hold. There is a delightful fourth century depiction of the Birth of Jesus on an Ancient Roman Christian sarcophagus. You can find it if you click on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nativity_scene

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