

The Photograph

The flame crept up the portrait line by line
As it lay on the coals in the silence of night's profound,
 And over the arm's incline,
And along the marge of the silkwork superfine,
And gnawed at the delicate bosom's defenceless round.

profound – deep, unbroken
incline - slope
marge - edge

Then I vented a cry of hurt, and averted my eyes;
The spectacle was one that I could not bear,
 To my deep and sad surprise;
But, compelled to heed, I again looked furtivewise
Till the flame had eaten her breasts, and mouth, and hair.

vented – let out; averted – turned away

heed – take notice; furtivewise – stealthily, secretly

"Thank God, she is out of it now!" I said at last,
In a great relief of heart when the thing was done
 That had set my soul aghast,
And nothing was left of the picture unsheathed from the past
But the ashen ghost of the card it had figured on.

aghast - appalled
unsheathed – pulled out
figured on – been pictured on

She was a woman long hid amid packs of years,
She might have been living or dead; she was lost to my sight,
 And the deed that had nigh drawn tears
Was done in a casual clearance of life's arrears;
But I felt as if I had put her to death that night! . . .

arrears – in time past

* * *

- Well; she knew nothing thereof did she survive,
And suffered nothing if numbered among the dead;
 Yet--yet--if on earth alive
Did she feel a smart, and with vague strange anguish strive?
If in heaven, did she smile at me sadly and shake her head?

thereof – about it; did she – if she

smart – pain; anguish strive – struggle with pain

In this poem Hardy has been having a clear out, 'a casual clearance of life's arrears'. He has found an old photograph of a woman he once knew, and he is burning it on the coal fire one night and watching it as 'The flame crept up the portrait line by line'.

The flame, writes Hardy, 'gnawed at the delicate bosom's defenceless round' and, in the second verse, 'the flame had eaten her breasts, and mouth, and hair.' He has chosen words of devouring to describe the action of the flames, and what they devour are the particularly feminine, adorable, kissable parts of her body. She is wearing something made of superfine silk, and this adds to the impression both of her femininity and of her fragility and vulnerability. To me, the repeated 'i' 'n' and 'l' sounds reinforce this impression, in words like 'line', 'silence', 'night', 'incline',

'superfine'. They are quite light, slow, elegant sounds. The flame moves slowly; it 'crept up', 'And over', 'And along', 'And gnawed'.

Hardy experiences intense pain as the photograph burns:

'I vented a cry of hurt, and averted my eyes;
The spectacle was one that I could not bear...'

He conveys his sense of pain through the assonance of 'hurt' and 'averted'. In fact, in the third stanza, he calls it 'the thing ... That had set my soul aghast' (appalled). And although he briefly turns away from the sight, the sound of 'eyes' and presently of 'surprise' and 'furtivewise' echoes those 'eye' sounds in the first stanza, as he is pained and yet drawn to watch the destruction of the beautiful woman by the flame. This sense of pain is continued in the third stanza, where he writes, 'nothing was left of the picture unsheathed from the past'. 'Unsheathed' suggests a sword; the sight of the photograph has wounded him – or else it has destructive potential. But after the flame has eaten it, 'nothing was left ... But the ashen ghost of the card it had figured on.' In those days photographs were often printed on quite stiff card, and the ashes of the card left in the grate are all that is left of this lovely woman. The soft sounds of 'ashen ghost' convey the crumbling ash, the ghostliness that remains.

The sense of pain lingers in the fourth stanza: 'the deed (burning the photograph) that had nigh (nearly) drawn tears'. Hardy feels as if 'I had put her to death that night' though rationally all that he has done is to burn an old photograph while he was tidying up and clearing things out. Rationally, if she is still alive, she 'knew nothing thereof' and if she is dead she 'suffered nothing'. But reason alone is not enough. If she is still alive, did she, too, feel some pain 'smart' or 'vague strange anguish'?

Looking again at the past is painful, as we know from the Emma elegies of 1912-13. Hardy is evidently surprised by the depth of feeling he has both for the girl he hasn't thought of for years, and by the capacity of the past still to hurt. And he has initiated such total destruction, in putting the photograph on the fire. Perhaps this links with 'I look into my glass' in its expression of the intense emotional pain he experiences in old age. Hardy visibly pulls himself together in the last stanza - 'Well' – and then his thoughts depart in a different direction, imagining the woman's reaction to what he has just done.

I wonder whether Hardy intends the slow inexorable movement of the flame as it destroys the woman's beauty to be comparable to the slow inexorable movement of time about which he writes so often. Time, too, devours.

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