Afterwards

POEM TEXT

When the Present has latched its postern behind my tremulous stay,
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
Upon the wind-warped upland thorn, a gazer may think,
"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,
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,
And a crossing breeze cuts a pause in its outrollings,
Till they rise again, as they were a new bell's boom,
"He hears it not now, but used to notice such things?"

SUMMARY

When the present has shut its door behind my fragile time here, and the month of May flutters its happy green leaves as if they were wings as thin and delicate as freshly-made silk, will the neighbors comment, "He was a man who paid attention to things like this"?

If it's twilight when—like the silent blink of an eye—the nightjar flies across shadows to land on a hawthorn gnarled by wind, someone looking on might think, "He would have seen this happen often."

If I die in the night, as moths flutter through the warm air and a hedgehog darts secretively across the lawn, maybe someone will say, "He took great care to protect such harmless animals, but there wasn't much he could do for them, and now he's dead."

If, upon hearing that I've finally passed away, they stand looking out the door at a starry winter sky, will those who'll never see my face again think, "He was a sensitive observer of mysteries like this"?

And will anyone say, when my funeral bell sounds in the darkness—and a passing breeze interrupts the bell's echoes until they start again, as if a new bell had sounded—"He's no longer here to witness it, but he used to pay attention to things like this"?

THEMES

DEATH AND REMEMBRANCE

In “Afterwards,” the speaker (perhaps Thomas Hardy himself, who was 77 when he wrote the poem) looks ahead to his own death and wonders how people will remember him when he is gone. He knows that his life must end, and that when it does, he'll no longer be able to savor the things that once delighted and intrigued him. Yet he hopes that others will recall him from time to time, as they look out upon the same world he did. Through memory, the poem suggests, the living can carry the dead with them. That idea might be particularly consoling to a person who's about to leave the world behind.

The speaker knows the world won’t stop when he dies, but this doesn’t necessarily mean he’ll be forgotten. He likes to think his neighbors will remember him as someone who “used to notice” the changing of winter into “May”—so much so that they’ll think of him every springtime. Similarly, he hopes that they'll remember his delight in the "full-starred heaven" of winter and the "nocturnal blackness" through which hedgehogs trundle. That is, he hopes his neighbors will associate him with the natural world and the pleasure he took in it. Their memories of that pleasure, perhaps, will color their experience of the seasons, extending the impact of his life. The speaker even imagines people hearing his “bell of quittance” (i.e., the church bells tolling at his funeral) and recalling how he once appreciated such melancholy, atmospheric sounds. Through the power of memory, in other words, even his own death

might in some way bring him back to life!

In short, the speaker hopes that, after he dies, he won't be totally gone from the world. Though he won't be around to experience anything, he hopes that his love of the world will endure in others' memories—and therefore that he might, in some way, live on.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

THE VALUE OF OBSERVING NATURE

The speaker of "Afterwards" has spent his life paying close attention to his natural surroundings. As he faces death, he doesn't anticipate being remembered as a particularly important or good person. Instead, he hopes people will remember him as someone who "notice[d] such things" as quiet "hawk[s]," stealthy "hedgehog[s]," and the "mysteries" of starry night skies. To him, a life spent enjoying the beautiful secrets of nature is a life well lived.

The poem is filled with the speaker's detailed observations of his environment, suggesting that quiet moments of loving, attentive perception have defined his life. He describes, for example, "the dewfall-hawk" that flies across the shadowy twilight "to alight / Upon the wind-warped upland thorn" (i.e., a tree bent out of shape by strong winds). He compares the hawk's swift, silent motion to "an eyelid's soundless blink," subtly linking the hawk with the eyes of the person watching it. This link suggests, perhaps, that the act of "gaz[ing]" or noticing is just as incredible as the natural wonders the eye beholds. That the "sight" of the hawk is "familiar" to the speaker also suggests how much he's prioritized observing nature's splendors. He has devoted his life to simply noticing what's right in front of him.

In fact, careful attention to the world is so important to the speaker that he hopes it will be his legacy. He wonders whether people will remember him as someone who tried to protect wildlife and "noticed" nature's "mysteries." Implicitly, that's how he'd *like* to be remembered. He doesn't fantasize about being remembered for his wit, fame, or lasting contributions to society. Instead, he wants people to recall what meant most to him: his closeness with nature. Indeed, he fantasizes that people will think of him while looking out "the door, / Watching the full-starred heavens that winter sees." Here, it's not just that he's being remembered for his powers of observation: those who remember him are *also* observing the world, and the world somehow "sees" itself along with them. To the speaker, all this "Watching" is what connects everything on earth—and it's part of life's deepest purpose.

The poem thus argues for the merits of close, careful attention to nature. Even if one can "do little for" one's environment, there's meaning in simply observing and appreciating it.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 5-8
- Lines 9-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

When the Present has latched its postern behind my tremulous stay,
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"?

In "Afterwards," the poem's speaker—a version of the poet—reflects on his own inevitable death, wondering how he'll be remembered once he's gone.

He begins by imagining a time "When the Present has latched its postern" (or back door) "behind [his] tremulous stay." He's personifying time as a figure who has graciously hosted him for his "stay" on earth—his life, which seemed "tremulous" (quivering) due to nerves, emotion, fragility, and/or age—but who will soon enough lock a metaphorical door behind him. Prominent /p/ alliteration ("Present," "postern") pops up here, highlighting the speaker's passage from life to death.

The speaker then imagines that, when he dies, "the May month" will "flap[] its glad green leaves like wings." Here, alliteration ("May month," "glad green," "like leaves") intensifies the lively spring imagery. The speaker will be dead and gone, but the world will go on without him, its beauty as bright and enticing as ever. The simile comparing May's "leaves" to "wings" evokes the lightness and joy of nature's renewal even as the speaker heads into the gloom of death. He adds that these wing-like leaves will be "Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk." Silk is soft and shiny, so this phrasing evokes spring's delicacy and wonder.

In lines 3-4, the speaker wonders whether, after his death, "neighbors" will comment on how he "used to notice such things." He means things like the beauty of springtime and young, green leaves. His question implies that this is how he sees himself—as a "notice[r]" of nature's cycles and the world's beauty—and he hopes that others will remember him this way, too.

Lines 1-4 mark the first of the poem's five quatrains, or four-line stanzas. These quatrains are written in accentual meter—that is, their lines generally contain a set number of stressed syllables (six), but those stresses don't appear in any particular order. Furthermore, lines can contain any number of *unstressed* syllables, so that overall line lengths vary. Here's line 1, for instance:

> When the Present has latched its postern behind my
> tremulous stay,

This loose rhythm gives "Afterwards" a fairly relaxed, conversational feel, though the poem maintains some structure and musicality. It also follows a conventional ABAB rhyme scheme. (Hardy continued to use meter and rhyme—the standard tools of 19th-century poetry—well into the 20th-century modernist era, when free verse came into fashion.)

LINES 5-8

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

In the second stanza, the speaker continues to imagine life after he has died. Using vivid imagery, he paints the kind of scene he has spent his life paying attention to:

> If it be in the dusk when, like an eyelid's soundless
> blink,
> The dewfall-hawk comes crossing the shades to
> alight
> Upon the wind-warped upland thorn, [...]

He's picturing a "dewfall-hawk" (a.k.a. a nightjar, a small bird of prey) swooping across a "shad[owy]" landscape, then landing upon a "[haw]thorn" tree that's been gnarled and twisted by "wind." He compares the hawk's swift, effortless flight to the silent "blink" of an eye. This simile not only evokes how quick and quiet the bird is but also draws attention to the person *watching* the bird. It suggests that something so fleeting can only be witnessed by a keen-eyed, devoted observer.

The speaker then wonders if a future "gazer" will assume that, for him, this bird "must have been a familiar sight." He's revealing, here, his own history of paying close attention to nature. He's also hinting at his *hope* that he'll be remembered this way: as someone who noticed things others didn't.

Alliteration helps highlight the striking imagery of this stanza. The /d/ sounds in "dusk" and "dewfall-hawk," the /c/ sounds in "comes crossing," and the /w/ sounds in "wind-warped"—as well as similar /ar/ and /or/ sounds in "warped" and "thorn"—add a vivid intensity to the hushed natural scene.

LINES 9-12

> *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."*

The third stanza starts with anaphora (the repetition of "If," which also kicked off the poem's second sentence/stanza):

> 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,

Once again, the speaker imagines a scene that might follow his death. He's imagining that he'll die on a "warm" night filled with fluttering "moth[s]." (Note how this imagery echoes the opening lines of the poem, in which the speaker imagines dying as spring "leaves" flutter like "wings.") In this "nocturnal" darkness, the speaker's death wouldn't be the only thing happening: "the hedgehog" would be trying to cross the yard unnoticed. The secretive hedgehog corresponds with the swift, silent "dewfall-hawk" in the previous stanza. Both animals would be hard to spot unless someone were carefully watching for them.

The speaker hopes that, after he dies, people will remember his skill at spotting such "furtive[]" creatures—and his passion for protecting them. In fact, line 11 is the longest in the poem, perhaps hinting that this "str[iving]" was of special importance to him. But in the end, he admits, "he could do little for" the wildlife he loved. He doesn't expect to be remembered as a hero, only as someone who paid attention and cared.

LINES 13-16

> *If, when hearing that I have been stilled at last, they stand at the door,*
> *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"?*

The speaker begins the fourth stanza with more anaphora, repeating "If" and continuing to imagine the world after his death:

> If, when hearing that I have been stilled at last, they
> stand at the door,
> Watching the full-starred heavens that winter sees,

This time, the speaker pictures those who once knew him looking up at the night sky, appreciating the "star[s]" twinkling in the blackness. Basically, he's imagining that those who survive him will carry on the thing he loves most: observing nature. He finds a certain comfort in knowing those beautiful, starry nights won't go unappreciated just because he won't be there to witness them. Crisp /st/ alliteration ("stilled," "stand," "full-starred") draws attention to the stillness and silence of this scene. Notice, too, that the speaker subtly personifies "winter," which "sees" the same heavens the people do (as if it's stargazing along with them). Humanity and nature seem in harmony here, at least in the speaker's imagination.

The speaker then wonders if, while gazing at the stars, these people "who will meet [his] face no more" (i.e., who'll never see him again) will recall him as "one who had an eye for such mysteries." He wonders, that is, whether the simple act of contemplating nature will remind them of him. If so, he will have made a lasting impact on others—not by changing the world but by keenly perceiving and appreciating its "mysteries."

LINES 17-20

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

The speaker ends the poem by reiterating his broader question: whether people will remember him when he's gone. He imagines his "bell of quittance" (the church bell that will sound at his funeral) ringing out "in the gloom" of evening. He imagines that "a crossing breeze" will come along to interrupt, or "cut[]" off, the sound of the bell. On a metaphorical level, he may be worrying about the fragility of his legacy (as if it's vulnerable to the slightest puff of wind). The anaphora in lines 17-18 builds momentum as the poem nears its close:

> And will any say when my bell of quittance is heard in the gloom,
> And a crossing breeze cuts a pause in its outrollings,

Throaty /c/ alliteration in "crossing" and "cuts" emphasizes the disruptive breeze, which drowns out or diverts the sound of the bell for a moment. But this sound won't disappear for long; the speaker adds that the "outrolling[]" echoes will "rise again, as [if] they were a new bell's boom." In other words, it will seem as if a new bell has begun to ring, but in fact, the same one will be picking up where it left off. Again, this description seems metaphorically charged. It implies that the speaker himself will only be briefly interrupted by death, and that his spirit will carry on in some other form. Again, the detailed imagery here reflects the close attention he pays to the world.

Finally, he imagines the people who will outlive him remarking that "He hears it not now, but used to notice such things." Both the first and last stanzas end with this assertion: that the speaker "used to notice such things." Clearly, he's proud of his sensitivity and powers of observation; he hopes only that other people will appreciate and remember them, too. Implicitly, then, the poem argues for the value of observing the natural world. It suggests that simply paying attention to, and caring for, one's environment is a meaningful way to live.

SYMBOLS

THE LEAVES

In line 2, the speaker imagines the "glad green leaves" that will flutter in the wake of his death. These leaves are symbols of the world's renewal—of life moving on without the speaker. Their vibrancy, and the vibrancy of spring ("May") or nature in general, will outlast the hard winter of his old age and death. He'll die as an individual, but life as a whole will continue in all its glory.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "When the Present has latched its postern behind my tremulous stay, / And the May month flaps its glad green leaves like wings,"

POETIC DEVICES

PERSONIFICATION

The speaker personifies time in the first line of the poem, imagining "the Present" (the period of time in which he's alive) shutting its "postern" (or back door) "behind [his] tremulous stay." In other words, as he thinks of his time on earth coming to an end, he imagines the present as a figure closing a door behind him. This metaphor implies that he's like a guest leaving his host's house—and, in turn, that he was never meant to stay. Indeed, his description of his stay as "tremulous" (marked by trembling or nervousness) indicates his old age; he is contemplating his mortality because his body has grown more frail with age. But the word also hints at a more general, human fragility: all lives must end.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker subtly personifies the season of "winter." He imagines a future scene in which the people who have outlived him "stand at the door," gazing out at "the full-starred heavens that winter sees." In this image, both human beings and elemental nature participate in the act of observation. It's not just that humans are paying attention to the natural world, it's that they're part of nature's "mysteries" themselves.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When the Present has latched its postern behind my tremulous stay"
- **Line 14:** "Watching the full-starred heavens that winter sees"

SIMILE

Similes complement the poem's imagery, bringing the speaker's

observations to vibrant life. The two similes in lines 2-3, for example, create an evocative image of spring:

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

The speaker compares the rustling of May "leaves" to the "flap[ping]" of "wings": a light, airy image that conveys how joyful spring feels after winter's bleakness and heaviness.

These wings, the speaker adds, are "Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk." Silk is a soft, delicate fabric, so this comparison implies that spring is beautiful, yet fragile and temporary. (It also subtly links the spring leaves to the "mothy" darkness in line 9, since silk comes from the cocoon of the silk moth. In line 9, the speaker imagines "pass[ing]" away, so these two moth-related images pair the vivacity of spring with the inevitability of death.)

In the second stanza, the speaker compares a hawk's flight across the "dusk[y]" landscape to "an eyelid's soundless blink." In other words, this stealthy bird of prey is swift, silent, and nearly invisible as it darts through the sky. The "eye[]" image might also evoke the speaker's own gaze as he quietly observes nature.

The last simile appears in the poem's next-to-last line:

> And will any say when my bell of quittance is heard in the gloom,
> And a crossing breeze cuts a pause in its outrollings,
> Till they rise again, as they were a new bell's boom,

Here, the speaker imagines his funeral "bell" ringing out, then getting interrupted by a passing "breeze." After the breeze dies down, the bell (or its echo) picks back up and sounds like a whole new bell ringing. Of course, it's the same bell. This image hints at the way lives continue to resonate after they're over—after all, this is the poem's main theme.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "And the May month flaps its glad green leaves like wings"
- **Line 3:** "Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk"
- **Lines 5-7:** "like an eyelid's soundless blink, / The dewfall-hawk comes crossing the shades to alight / Upon the wind-warped upland thorn"
- **Lines 17-19:** "And will any say when my bell of quittance is heard in the gloom, / And a crossing breeze cuts a pause in its outrollings, / Till they rise again, as they were a new bell's boom"

ANAPHORA

Anaphora lends order and emphasis to stanzas 2-4, all of which begin with the word "If":

- "If it be in the dusk when [...]" (stanza two)
- "If I pass during some nocturnal blackness [...]" (stanza three)
- "If, when hearing that I have been stilled at last [...]" (stanza four)

This pattern ties each new stanza to the same core conceit, in which the speaker tries to predict how people will remember him after he's gone. At the same time, the repetition of "If" highlights the impossibility of knowing how and when he'll die, what his legacy will be, and so on. The three "If"s emphasize that the speaker is *imagining* these scenarios—expressing how he *hopes* people will think of him.

In lines 17-18, as the poem nears its conclusion, anaphora accentuates the poem's rhythm and builds its momentum:

> And will any say when my bell of quittance is heard in the gloom,
> And a crossing breeze cuts a pause in its outrollings,

The repetition adds a hint of emotion and urgency as the speaker contemplates his own funeral. The verbal echo also subtly evokes the echo of the "bell."

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "If"
- **Line 9:** "If"
- **Line 13:** "If"
- **Line 17:** "And"
- **Line 18:** "And"

ALLITERATION

Alliteration—along with occasional sibilance, assonance, and consonance—makes the poem more musical. At various points, these sound effects also reinforce the poem's imagery.

The first stanza crackles and pops with various kinds of alliteration. In line 1, the /p/ sounds in "Present" and "postern" highlight the contrast between the speaker's life (which takes place in the "Present") and his death (represented by the closing "postern," or back door). Line 2 is full of /m/, /g/, and /l/ alliteration, a medley of repeating sounds that practically sings of May's beauty and vivacity:

> And the May month flaps its glad green leaves like wings,

Next, lines 3-4 contain /s/ alliteration ("new-spun silk," "say,"

"such") and other sibilance ("used to notice"). These smooth /s/ sounds evoke the soft "silk" of the "leaves" the speaker is describing.

Lines 5-7 also contain several alliterative phrases. The /d/ sounds in "dusk" and "dewfall-hawk" link the hawk to its preferred time for hunting. /C/ alliteration ("comes crossing") emphasizes the bird's quick, powerful movement, while open /w/ alliteration ("wind-warped") evokes the howling winds that have gnarled the hawthorn tree. (Along with this effect, the assonance and consonance in "warped" and "thorn" make "wind-warped upland thorn" a tongue-twister—appropriate to the twisted figure of the tree.)

In lines 13-14, prominent /st/ alliteration ("stilled," "stand," "full-starred") sharply underscores the "still[ness]" of death—and of a sky full of stars.

Line 18 contains more /c/ alliteration ("crossing," "cuts"), which here draws attention to the quick "crossing breeze" that interrupts the speaker's funeral "bell." Finally, line 19 uses /b/ alliteration ("bell's boom") to evoke the resounding echoes of that bell.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Present," "postern"
- **Line 2:** "May," "month," "glad," "green," "leaves," "like"
- **Line 3:** "spun," "silk," "say"
- **Line 4:** "such"
- **Line 5:** "dusk"
- **Line 6:** "dewfall," "comes," "crossing"
- **Line 7:** "wind," "warped"
- **Line 13:** "stilled," "stand"
- **Line 14:** "starred"
- **Line 18:** "crossing," "cuts"
- **Line 19:** "bell's," "boom"

VOCABULARY

Postern (Line 1) - A back door.

Tremulous (Line 1) - Quivering with fright, nervousness, or weakness.

Delicate-filmed (Line 3) - Made of thin, almost translucent material.

New-spun silk (Line 3) - Freshly made silk. (Silk is a fabric made from the cocoon of the silk-moth, which is "spun" or twisted together on a spinning device.)

Dewfall-hawk (Line 6) - A Cornish name for the nightjar hawk, a small bird of prey.

Alight (Line 6) - Land; come to rest.

Wind-warped (Line 7) - Twisted and gnarled by the force of the wind.

Upland thorn (Line 7) - A hawthorn tree growing in an elevated region.

Mothy (Line 9) - Filled with moths.

Furtively (Line 10) - Secretively; quietly.

Strove (Line 11) - Made a great effort.

Stilled (Line 13) - Put to rest.

Full-starred heavens (Line 14) - Sky full of stars.

Bell of quittance (Line 17) - Funeral bell.

Outrollings (Line 18) - The bell's echoes traveling outward.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Afterwards" contains 20 lines, which are divided into five quatrains (four-line stanzas). The stanza structure reflects the orderly progression of the speaker's thoughts: each new stanza initiates a new thought and sentence. The speaker's slow, steady line of logic suggests that he's calmly ruminating on his life and mortality rather than approaching death with fear and regret.

The poem's lines are long and sprawling, evoking the slow, thoughtful way in which the speaker has lived his life. At the end of each stanza, the speaker wonders whether others will recall his penchant for "notic[ing]" nature's "mysteries," such as a "hedgehog" on "the lawn" and a night sky sprinkled with stars. In this way, the poem's form emphasizes how he hopes he'll be remembered: as someone who appreciated nature's marvels.

METER

The poem uses accentual meter, meaning that lines contain a set number of stressed syllables (in this case, six), but the order in which those stresses appear (as well as the overall number of syllables in each line) varies. Here's how this pattern looks in the first four lines:

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

Note that it's possible to read the stresses in other ways; for example, the fourth line might have five stresses rather than six. In general, accentual verse is looser and more conversational than *accentual-syllabic meter* (which involves strict syllable counts), but not as loose as free verse. Here, the relative looseness might reflect the speaker's tenuous grip on his

legacy. He can hope others will remember him for his quiet, careful, attentive ways, but he can't dictate that outcome. He may be giving up his illusions of, or appetite for, strict control.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows a simple, alternating ABAB rhyme scheme. This straightforward scheme aligns with the speaker's serene, candid tone. Unlike poems that seem tormented by the thought of death, this one has a calm directness to it. The rhymes also add to the melodious quality of the language, which, in turn, helps set a mood of gentle acceptance.

Almost all the rhymes here are exact, with the exception of the slant rhyme between "warm" and "harm" in lines 9 and 11. There's also a light rhyme between "outrollings" and "things" in lines 18 and 20; in other words, the rhyme pairs an unstressed syllable with a stressed one. These small imperfections might hint at a bit of uncertainty lingering beneath the speaker's calm. (After all, he couldn't do much to protect the "innocent creatures" he loved, and he's not *sure* he'll be remembered in the way he hopes.)

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem could be anyone contemplating their own mortality and legacy. They don't identify themselves in terms of gender, race, age, nationality, etc. Instead, they define themselves mainly as someone who "notice[d]" the wonders of nature: from seasonal changes to small, "furtive[]" creatures like "hedgehog[s]" and "dewfall-hawk[s]." In other words, the speaker is someone deeply "familiar" with their natural environment.

At the same time, the speaker can easily be read as Hardy himself. The poet was 77 when he published this poem, in what he thought would be his final collection (as it turned out, he lived to age 87 and published several more books). The poem's quiet, death-haunted mood reflects Hardy's belief that he might not live much longer.

SETTING

The poem is set in an imagined future in which the speaker has died. The speaker pictures himself slipping away on a "warm," moth-filled night, but he doesn't flatter himself that the world will end with him. Instead, all the things he loved about nature will carry on without him: "May" will still arrive and flutter "its glad green leaves like wings," the "dewfall-hawk" will still fly across the evening sky to "alight" on the "upland thorn" (a high-elevation hawthorn tree), and "the hedgehog" will still move quietly through the grass.

The speaker pictures those who knew him, those "who will meet [his] face no more," looking up at a starry sky in winter. Because he loved the night's "mysteries," he wonders whether they'll think of him in that moment. He also wonders whether, when funeral "bell[s]" ring for him, anyone will recall that he "used to notice such" sounds (i.e., was invested in humanity and in the world's small details).

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was an English poet and novelist, known for his passionate opposition to the cruelty and hypocrisy of the Victorian world he was born into. Though he's now best known for novels like *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, these frank and shocking books weren't especially well-received during Hardy's lifetime. After effectively quitting fiction in his later years, he made his reputation as a poet. "Afterwards" is one of his later poems; it appears in his 1917 collection *Moments of Vision and Miscellaneous Verses*, published the year he turned 77.

Many Victorian poets, such as Robert Browning and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, built on the poetry of the British Romantics, including William Wordsworth, John Keats, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Their poetry focused on lyrical beauty and psychological intensity, often retelling older narratives, such as the legends of King Arthur. Hardy's poetry, on the other hand, typically offers a bleak, clear-eyed assessment of modern life. And where Romantic writers created passionate heroes who resisted fate, and whose inner lives always colored their experience of the world, Hardy's speakers usually seem quietly baffled by fate. Like characters in a realist novel, they muddle on as the affairs of the world rage around them.

"Afterwards" doesn't have as harsh an outlook as many of Hardy's other poems (such as "The Darkling Thrush"). In fact, it bears some resemblance to Romantic poetry. The Romantics thought that if only people looked with enough sensitivity, nature would have all the answers—and this poem certainly stresses the value of paying attention to nature. Yet the speaker doesn't find any *answers* in nature, only a subtle comfort in knowing others will continue to ponder its "mysteries" after he dies.

Ultimately, Hardy isn't idealistic in his portrayal of himself or nature; he admits that while he "strove" to keep "innocent creatures" safe, "he could do little" to save them in the end. In other words, he's no hero; he's just someone who appreciated the natural world and tried to do right by it. In this way, the poem also conveys the philosophical pessimism that marks Hardy's writing more broadly. His skeptical outlook influenced a number of 20th-century poets, including Robert Frost and Philip Larkin.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Hardy grew up in 1840s and 1850s England, making him a man of the Victorian era, which lasted from 1837 to 1901.

The Victorian era was one of technological innovation and colonial expansion, during which the British Empire spread and tightened its hold on the globe. England reached the height of its power and prosperity, but this was also a time of deep divisions between rich and poor, men and women, and colonists and colonized.

Hardy published "Afterwards" as the last poem in *Moments of Vision and Miscellaneous Verses* (1917), which he believed would be his final collection. He was then in his late seventies, and World War I was raging around him. But while many of Hardy's poems deal explicitly with war and social conflict, "Afterwards" makes no mention of politics or topical events. Instead, it stays rooted in quiet moments of natural beauty and wonder. At this stage in his life, Hardy was contemplating his legacy, and he hoped to be remembered as a keen, caring observer of the world.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Biography of Thomas Hardy — Read more about the poet and novelist's life and career in this Poetry Foundation article. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/thomas-hardy)
- The Poem Aloud — Listen to a reading of "Afterwards." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvA5HsjEWPw)
- An Introduction to the Victorian Era — Learn more about the Victorian era, in which Hardy lived most of his life, and which continued to influence his poetry into old age. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/153447/an-introduction-to-the-victorian-era)
- An Introduction to Modernism — Learn more about the Modernist movement, which encompassed Hardy's later years and shaped his poetry as well. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/152025/an-introduction-to-modernism)
- The Thomas Hardy Society — An organization devoted to the appreciation and understanding of Hardy's work. (https://www.hardysociety.org)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER THOMAS HARDY POEMS

- A Broken Appointment
- At an Inn
- At Castle Boterel
- A Wife in London
- Channel Firing
- Drummer Hodge
- Hap
- He Never Expected Much
- Neutral Tones
- The Convergence of the Twain
- The Darkling Thrush
- The Man He Killed
- The Ruined Maid
- The Voice
- Where the Picnic Was

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