

An August Midnight by Thomas Hardy

A shaded lamp and a waving blind,
And the beat of a clock from a distant floor:
On this scene enter—winged, horned, and spined—
A longlegs, a moth, and a dumbledore;
While 'mid my page there idly stands
A sleepy fly, that rubs its hands...

Thus meet we five, in this still place,
At this point of time, at this point in space.
—My guests besmear my new-penned line,
Or bang at the lamp and fall supine.
“God’s humblest, they!” I muse.
They know earth secrets that know not I.

Thomas Hardy

Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 and died in 1928. He was an English novelist and poet. Thomas Hardy’s works are considered to be part of the Victorian Realism and greatly influenced by Romanticism. He was critical of Victorian society, especially on the declining status of rural Britain. Although he thought of himself as a poet, Hardy was mainly seen as a novelist. Thomas Hardy’s most recognized works include *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Jude the Obscure*, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, among many others. During his lifetime, he was acclaimed by young poets who saw him as a mentor. Even after his death, Thomas Hardy continued to inspire generations of writers and his poems were greatly praised by important poets such as Ezra Pound, W.H. Auden and Philip Larkin. Hardy sometimes wrote ironic poems, like "Ah, Are You Digging On My Grave," in which he employed twist endings in the last few lines or in the last stanza to convey that irony. Some, like "The Darkling Thrush" and "An August Midnight", appear as poems about writing poetry, because the nature mentioned in them gives Hardy the inspiration to write. "An August Midnight" was written in 1899 and it was published in 1901. The poem was featured in Hardy’s second poetry collection called *Poems of the Past and the Present*. *Poems of the Past and the Present* is an extensive collection, which includes a wide variety of topics and is divided into five headings. This collection includes some of Hardy’s most powerful poems.

Thomas Hardy was interested in 'natural history' and the reconsideration of the relationship established between men and nature. Hence, this can be read in "An August Midnight". The poem presents the meeting of a man with five insects. However, the man and the insects are described as equals, generating empathy with these small creatures.

An August Midnight has two stanzas with six lines each. The poem presents two dissimilar rhyme schemes: the first stanza has an ABABC rhyme scheme and the second stanza has a AABBCC rhyme scheme. Something similar occurs within the stanzas with the metre. For example, the first line of the first stanza has iambic pentameter, whereas the second line has anapaests. With this mixture of rhyme and metre, Hardy creates a particular and interesting rhythm that consists of alteration rather than stability. This sporadic rhythm can be read as the movement of insects.

The main theme in An August Midnight is the meaning and purpose in life. A sense of the past is created, by using detailed descriptions, in order to portray a vivid memory with a message. The lyrical voice is aware of his/her surroundings and conveys an observational view over the narrated events.

An August Midnight Analysis

First Stanza

A shaded lamp and a waving blind,

And the beat of a clock from a distant floor:

On this scene enter—winged, horned, and spined—

A longlegs, a moth, and a dumbledore;

While 'mid my page there idly stands

A sleepy fly, that rubs its hands...

The first stanza describes the initial scene. The lyrical voice mentions three objects ("shaded lamp", "waving blind" and the "beat of a clock") and this is enough to create a particular image in the reader's mind. However, this scene is interrupted: "On this scene enter — winged, horned, and spined—/A longlegs, a moth, and a dumbledore". The lyrical voice mentions three characteristics ("winged, horned, and spined") of the three insects ("A longlegs, a moth, and a dumbledore"). Notice how the bumblebee is referred as

“dumbledore”, a specific word which places him in time and place. The insects are presented as guests and are personified by their descriptions. And, moreover, the lyrical voice describes one more insect, a fly (“While ‘mid my page there idly stands/ A sleepy fly, that rubs its hands”). This insect has more human characteristics than those previously described because it is presented in more detail and performs human actions (“idly stands”, “rubs its hands”). This first stanza is mainly narrative and descriptive. The pace is calm and slow due to the particular use of syntax and the change in rhythm goes along with the sudden appearance of the insects. The final couplet closes the stanza with a pace that has more rhythm and movement, which contrasts with the beginning of the stanza.

Second Stanza

Thus meet we five, in this still place,

At this point of time, at this point in space.

—My guests besmear my new-penned line,

Or bang at the lamp and fall supine.

“God’s humblest, they!” I muse. Yet why?

They know Earth-secrets that know not I.

The second stanza reflects on this encounter with the insects. The lyrical voice refers directly to the meeting with the four insects (“Thus meet we five”) and concentrates on time and space to magnify the encounter (“[...] in this still place/At this point of time, at this point in space”). He/She sees him/herself as an equal to the insects and describes how they act: they move around the table and they bump into the lamp that is placed on it. (“My guests besmear my new-penned line,/ Or bang at the lamp and fall supine”). The final couplet emphasizes what he/she feels towards the insects by describing them as “God’s humblest, they!” and by acknowledging their wisdom (“They know Earth-secrets that know not I”); a wisdom that is dissimilar to that of the lyrical voice. This final stanza focuses on meditating on the meeting with the insects, which are personified. The stanza consists of 3 rhymed couplets that enable a more stable and constant pace. Moreover, the last two lines establish a more thoughtful and reflective tone that gives closure to the narration of the gathering with the insects.

