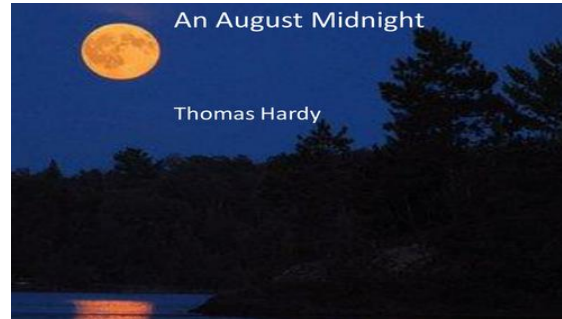


An August Midnight

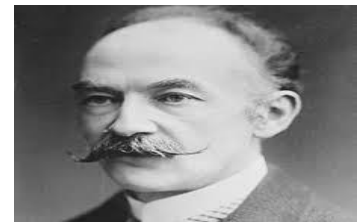
By: Thomas Hardy



*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 parade my new-penned ink,
Or bang at the lamp-glass, whirl, and sink.
"God's humblest, they!" I muse. Yet why?
They know Earth-secrets that know not I.*

Author's Biography: Thomas Hardy, the son of a stonemason, was born in Dorset, England, on June 2, 1840. He trained as an architect and worked in London and Dorset for ten years. Hardy began his writing career as a novelist, publishing *Desperate Remedies* (Tinsley Brothers) in 1871, and was soon successful enough to leave the field of architecture for writing. His novels *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, which are considered literary classics today, received negative reviews upon publication and Hardy was criticized for being too pessimistic and preoccupied with sex. He left fiction writing for poetry, and published eight collections, including *Poems of the Past and the Present*.



Hardy's poetry explores a fatalist outlook against the dark, rugged landscape of his native Dorset. He rejected the Victorian belief in a benevolent God, and much of his poetry reads as a sardonic lament on the bleakness of the human condition. A traditionalist in technique, he nevertheless forged a highly original style, combining rough-hewn rhythms and colloquial diction with an extraordinary variety of meters and stanzaic forms. A significant influence on later poets (including Frost, Auden, Dylan Thomas, and Philip Larkin), his influence has increased during the course of the century, offering an alternative—more down-to-earth, less rhetorical—to the more mystical and aristocratic precedent of Yeats. Thomas Hardy died on January 11, 1928.

Form (Structure): The poem comprises two stanzas, each of six lines.

Rhyme Scheme: The rhyme scheme of the first stanza is ABABCC and that of the second is AABGCC.

Rhythm: The poem is interesting rhythmically in that Hardy does not stick with a consistent beat but mixes the metre such that, for example, the opening line is iambic (two-syllable feet with the stress on the second syllable) but the second consists of anapaests (three syllables with the third carrying the stress). The overall effect is that the words drive the rhythm rather than being driven by it. **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.**

Summary: Hardy was known to like to write at night when there were few distractions, either human or otherwise, and the situation described in the poem is of him sitting at his desk on a warm summer night. His window is open, a breeze disturbs the blind, and, as he works, several insects are attracted in by the “shaded lamp”.

Analysis (detailed meaning):

*A shaded lamp and a waving blind,
And the beat of a clock from a distant floor:*

The first stanza sets the scene. The opening two lines only need to mention three objects, namely the lamp, the blind, “and the beat of a clock from a distant floor” for

the reader to fill in the rest. It is an excellent example of word economy, helped by the rhythm of the second line to give the impression of a long-case clock with its pendulum swinging in time to the beat of the words.

*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 order of this scene is disturbed by four insects: “A longlegs, a moth, and a dumbledore” and a fly that “rubs its hands”. Daddy-long-legs is a familiar name for the crane fly, but, with “dumbledore”, Hardy uses an older and now little known name for the bumble bee. The insects are presented as guests and are **personified** by their descriptions. The last insect has more human characteristics than those previously described because it is presented in more detail and performs human actions.

*Thus meet we five, in this still place,
At this point of time, at this point in space.*

Hardy treats the insects as “guests” and is in no way hostile to them. He has left his window ajar and the lamp has served as an invitation for them to enter. He regards himself merely as one of the five life forms that chance has brought together: “in this still place, / At this point of time, at this point in space”. There is no suggestion that this meeting has been in any way predestined; it has happened because the ways of man (in his case the desire to work at night with the window open) have coincided with the natural urges of four insects to wander into a room in which a lamp is burning.

*- My guests parade my new-penned ink,
Or bang at the lamp-glass, whirl, and sink.*

What the insects do, once on his desk, is neither to his advantage nor theirs. They either walk across the page he has written, before the ink is dry, or burn themselves on the hot lamp. Their actions are simply recorded by Hardy without comment; they are doing what their instincts dictate, just as he is doing as a writer. He says nothing about whether he is annoyed at having his words smudged or if he regrets the fate of those that “fall supine”.

*"God's humblest, they!" I muse. Yet why?
They know Earth-secrets that know not I.*

In the final couplet Hardy confirms his respect for his fellow-creatures by ascribing knowledge to them that he does not possess. They “know Earth-secrets that know not I”. In the penultimate line he had described them as “God’s humblest”, but he ends the poem by expressing his own humility and recognizing that, although the insects do not know more than he does, they do know things that are hidden from him. Again, there is no expression of regret here, simply the statement that this is the way things are.

Conclusion: “An August Midnight” therefore demonstrates Hardy’s thorough assimilation of Darwin’s theory of evolution in which all living beings are akin to each other and have their place in the scheme of things, with no species being morally superior to any other. The poem threatens to take this attitude into a patronizing sort of anthropomorphism when it talks about “guests” and says “Thus meet we five” (and the fly rubbing its hands), but this is done in a humorous way and he stops short of ascribing too many human attributes to the various insects. One can think of plenty of poets who would have taken this theme to a level of sententiousness that Hardy, and most readers, would have despised. His restraint in this respect is part of the respect noted above, and demonstrates his reverence for all life within an encompassing moral framework that includes all sentient beings.

Personification: is a poetic technique in which human emotions, feelings and characteristics are attributed to something non-human or inanimate objects.