Wessex Heights, December 1896

There are some heights in Wessex, shaped as if by a kindly hand — heights - hills
For thinking, dreaming, dying on, and at crises when I stand,
Say, on Ingpen Beacon* eastward, or on Wylls-Neck* westwardly,
I seem where I was before my birth, and after death may be.

In the lowlands I have no comrade, not even the lone man's friend -
Her who suffereth long and is kind; accepts what he is too weak to mend:
Down there they are dubious and askance; there nobody thinks as I,
But mind-chains do not clank where one's next neighbour is the sky.

In the towns I am tracked by phantoms having weird detective ways -
Shadows of beings who fellowed with myself of earlier days:
They hang about at places, and they say harsh heavy things -
Men with a wintry sneer, and women with tart disparagings.**

Down there I seem to be false to myself, my simple self that was,
And is not now, and I see him watching, wondering what crass cause — crass - stupid
Can have merged him into such a strange continuator*** as this,
Who yet has something in common with himself, my chrysalis. ****

I cannot go to the great grey Plain; there's a figure against the moon,
Nobody sees it but I, and it makes my breast beat out of tune; — breast - heart
I cannot go to the tall-spired town, being barred by the forms now passed — Salisbury / Oxford
For everybody but me, in whose long vision they stand there fast. — fast – fixedly, firmly

There's a ghost at Yell'ham Bottom chiding loud at the fall of the night, — chiding – scolding
There's a ghost in Froom-side Vale, thin lipped and vague, in a shroud of white,
There is one in the railway-train whenever I do not want it near,
I see its profile against the pane, saying what I would not hear.

As for one rare fair woman, I am now but a thought of hers,
I enter her mind and another thought succeeds me that she prefers;
Yet my love for her in its fulness she herself even did not know;
Well, time cures hearts of tenderness, and now I can let her go.

So I am found on Ingpen Beacon, or on Wylls-Neck to the west,
Or else on homely Bulbarrow,* or little Pilsdon Crest,*
Where men have never cared to haunt, nor women have walked with me, — haunt – visit often
And ghosts then keep their distance; and I know some liberty.

December 1896

* Ingpen Beacon is Inkpen Beacon, a hill in Berkshire; Wylls-Neck in in the Quantock Hills, Somerset
** tart disparagings – sharp criticisms
*** continuator – the middle-aged man who grew from the young man he used to be

**** chrysalis – earlier stage of an insect before it becomes a butterfly or moth, so Hardy's youthful self
***** Pilsdon Crest is Pilsdon Pen, a high hill on the western edge of Dorset and Bulbarrow a hill in mid-Dorset

Hardy wrote this poem at the end of 1896; his last two novels, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, had been slated by the critics and it seems that in this poem he is trying to understand who he now is and how he can escape from his depression. He feels as if he is a misfit: 'nobody thinks as I'. When he is 'down there' in the lowlands and the towns he is sneered at and criticised and he feels as if he is tracked by shadows of beings who were his companions when he was younger. There seems nowhere that he is safe from ghosts from the past: the 'great grey Plain', 'the tall-spired town', even places near where he was born, like 'Yell'ham Bottom' and 'Froom-side Vale', even travelling by train, he feels followed and haunted. He feels that he is 'false to myself', except for the times when he can escape to the hills, Ingpen Beacon, Bulbarrow, Pilsdon Crest, where he can 'know some liberty.'

The poem opens with 'some heights in Wessex', for 'thinking, dreaming, dying on'. On these heights, Hardy feels that he can escape the clutches of this world, with its time and its criticism: 'I seem where I was before my birth, and after death may be.' The first line moves smoothly into the second with its easy enjambement, as it makes its fluent way towards 'thinking, dreaming, dying on … where I was before my birth.' The gentle iambs of 'For thinking, dreaming, dying' mirror the freedom of Hardy's imagination, unconstrained by mind-chains or any other clankings. The only kindly thing in the poem, 'kindly hand' that shaped these heights, is perhaps recalled in the repeated vowel sounds in 'heights', 'kindly', 'dying' and 'I', which presumably help in 'crises'. The rhythm is mostly what Tom Paulin called 'enormous iambic couplets' but not entirely. Each line contains a little scamper of syllables amongst the iambs: 'shaped as if by a kindly hand'; 'and at crises when I stand'; 'I seem where I was before my birth'. I think these little scampering clusters of syllables lend the poem a natural rhythm of speech. In this autobiographical poem, written in the first person, you get the feeling of Hardy speaking aloud.

The second stanza explicitly contrasts with the first: instead of the opening 'heights', the second stanza is placed 'In the lowlands'. Indeed, much more of the poem is devoted to the negative aspects Hardy associates with the lowlands than to the freedom he experiences on the heights. In the lowlands he is lonely, a fact accentuated by the assonance of the repeated 'o' sound and the negatives:

In the lowlands I have no comrade, not even the lone man's friend.

(The lone man's friend turns out in the next line to be Charity, or Love, in its quotation from St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 13: 'her who suffereth long and is kind'.) The alliteration of 'down' and 'dubious', the sibilance of 'dubious' and 'askance' which suggest malicious gossiping whispers, perhaps of the 'tart disparagings' in the next verse, and more negatives, 'nobody thinks as I', characterise everything that he hates about the lowlands:

Down there they are dubious and askance; there nobody thinks as I

'Nobody thinks as I' gives another reason for the loneliness that Hardy instances in the first line of this verse. The last line of the second verse forms a direct contrast and describes the freedom he feels on the heights, away from the fettering, imprisoning, heavily weighted 'mind-chains' of the lowlands.

In the lowland towns of the third and fourth stanzas, Hardy seems to feel almost like a criminal, with phantoms tracking him like detectives. He is dogged by memories of himself when he was younger and friends he had then, who now 'hang about .. and … say harsh heavy things.' The juxtaposed stresses and the alliteration of 'harsh heavy' convey Hardy's depression. He is uncomfortably aware of the 'chrysalis' of the young Hardy who has matured, not into a butterfly, but into a 'strange continuator', the middle-aged man that the young Hardy did not expect to become. All through the fourth stanza, Hardy links key words through alliteration: 'crass cause / Can … continuator .. common … my chrysalis.' These words trace the passage of the young Hardy into the middle-aged Hardy, impelled by some 'crass cause'.

Critics have spent some time pursuing the identities of the various figures and ghosts in the next verses. The more important aspect of the poetry is surely Hardy's depression: 'my breast beat out of tune' (that is, not in the harmony of happiness – remember Hardy and his father were musical). He feels 'barred' or debarred (prison images again) from 'the tall-spired town' – Oxford or perhaps Salisbury. Dorset lowlands are full of ghosts 'chiding loud' and 'thin-lipped'; even in the train he hears a ghost 'saying what I would not hear.

The feeling that Hardy is haunted by ghosts from the past intensifies. 'There's a figure', 'forms now passed'. The figure and forms are linked by alliteration and meaning. Only Hardy can see them: 'Nobody sees it but I', 'in whose long vision they stand there fast' (fixedly, he can't rid himself of them). The distress to his feelings is palpable in the erratic rhythms; you get stressed monosyllables together and then wandering lighter syllables in lines like ' the great grey Plain; there's a figure against the moon. This happens again in 'it makes my breast beat out of tune.' 'Breast' (heart, feelings) half rhymes with 'passed' and 'fast; and is alliterated with 'barred', all heavy and unhappy words. 'Great grey Plain' and 'makes' are all linked by assonance as well as heaviness.

The haunting continues in the next verse. Hardy repeats 'There's a ghost' at the beginning of the first two lines. The rhyming becomes more insistent as he is followed against his will; 'I do not want it near', 'I would not hear'. But still he is shadowed by 'one in the railway train' rhyming disconcertingly with 'against the pane.' This internal rhyme is backed up by alliteration 'its profile against the pane'. In every way Hardy evokes a suffocating sense of inescapable pursuit or loss.

Hardy's sense of loss continues in the penultimate verse. He feels that he has lost even the 'rare fair woman' that he loved in London (not his wife) no longer remembers him (this was not actually the case; they remained friends throughout the woman's life). The loss, the haunting and the despair impel him to escape to the freedom of the last verse: 'So …'

And so Hardy's poem ends geographically, emotionally and poetically where it began, on Wessex heights. These heights are the places where he 'know(s) some liberty.' He brings us back to the freedom where 'mind-chains do not clank', where he is not barred. He relishes the solitude he finds on the heights: 'where men have never cared to haunt (go often), nor women have walked with me'. This solitude is quite different from the loneliness he experiences in the lowlands, where he has 'no comrade'. It is a solitude that is synonymous with 'liberty'; his 'next neighbour is the sky'. The heights are places 'for thinking, dreaming' as a writer and poet, where he is free of the oppressive awareness that 'nobody thinks as I'.

Florence Hardy, Hardy's second wife, wrote in a letter to a friend: 'Wessex Heights will always wring my heart, for I know when it was written a little while after the publication of *Jude*, when he was so cruelly treated.' No wonder she wrote these words, for if you look at the poem again, you see that it is his whole life thus far that Hardy is rejecting – from 'before my birth' to 'after death'. The attacks of the critics have nullified everything, destroyed his will to have a life at all. The most he can hope for is 'some liberty'.

Tim Armstrong's introduction to the poem in *Thomas Hardy: Selected Poems* (Pearson, 2009) contains valuable insights: 'Critics have remarked that 'Wessex Heights' seems to mark Hardy's 'escape' from novels to poetry after *Jude the Obscure* had been slated. The four 'heights' or hills in the poem form a rectangle taking in most of Wessex; the contrast between crowded lowlands and solitary highlands is a common gesture of Romantic poetry' (for example Byron). Tom Paulin comments that 'the enormous iambic couplets create a terrifying monotony… the poem sounds what it is – a speech delivered by someone in a state of such acute depression that he has almost totally lost his own will.' The 'monotony' is qualified by a cesura in most lines which tend to break the metre into 3 and 4-beat sections, an effect which is reinforced by internal rhymes. J H Miller argues that the poem uses a sound-structure which attaches 'low vowels' (o and a) to lowland places and high vowels (i) to heights. It has been suggested that the reason Hardy did not include the poem in earlier collections was that it was too 'nakedly autobiographical.'

F B Pinion in *A Commentary on the Poems of Thomas Hardy* (Macmillan, 1976) writes: 'The poem expresses Hardy's depression… Each stanza marks a distinct progression in the theme, the last returning to the first. … Hardy sees his youthful self watching him, wondering how he could have become what he is, at odds with the world. The metaphor my chrysalis implies that a startling change has taken place in the man emerging from youth; he is a strange 'continuator' of his former, simple self. …In this verse (the one opening with the 'great grey plain') Hardy could be thinking of both *Tess* and *Jude*, the two novels which did more to cast a blight on his popularity … than anything else'.

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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