

Society as a barrier to love in "at an inn"



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"At an Inn" is a poem written by Thomas Hardy, a composition showcasing Hardy's longing for another woman who is not his wife, Florence. In this work, Hardy focuses on the misinterpretations of the nature of the two's relationship from strangers at an inn. He questions the idea of fate, but also alludes to the idea of morals and societal expectations, and their impact on love.

Hardy asserts that love is very much constricted and controlled by societal norms. The most obvious allusion to this is the quotation 'O laws of men', which refers to the idea of the unwritten rules of mankind, working as a silent reminder of what is deemed right and wrong. Whereas love is so often portrayed as purely feelings and passion, this quotation seems to suggest that there is some form of 'law' or moral code that everyone is expected to follow when it comes to love. This is the law that asserts that Hardy and Florence cannot be together and the use of 'O' creates a sense of desperation from his perspective, in the way he seems woeful that there is nothing he can do. Due to this, we can infer that interpretations of morality play more of a part in romantic love than would have been originally thought.

Hardy also articulates this theme by use of the quotation 'Veiled smiles bespoke their thoughts of what we were,' which alludes to the assumption that the spectators obviously make about the couple; that they are very much in love. The use of 'veiled' brings to mind the idea of sight being obstructed and unclear, suggesting that the people can't see properly, therefore they lack clarity in the things they see, misinterpreting the couple as something that they are not. The people in the inn are perhaps looking at

the world through rose tinted glasses, allowing their good intentions to sway them and see the couple as something that they aren't. They effectively have wool over their eyes and could be extended to the idea of people being in love with the idea of love. These people observe the couple and want to see love between them, so they do. It's interesting to note the obvious dependence on perspective when it comes to love and how appearances seem to translate into false conclusions being made. In the same way, if you see two people holding hands, it doesn't mean they are necessarily in love - the two being together in this inn together causes an assumption to be made that they are lovers. Despite what Hardy perceived them as, 'never the love-light shone/ between us there', the people at the inn can only use what they see to make a judgment.

The word 'veiled' could also link to the idea of a veiled threat, in the way something that would usually be considered a bad thing, is concealed under the pretense of love. In reality, there is a more sinister side to the pair, in the way that he is married to another woman, yet is at an inn with another woman, perhaps with less than innocent intentions, despite Florence's religious commitments. There is also the cruel way Hardy treats his wife; his meaner nature is buried beneath the facade of love with another woman. This deceptive nature almost acts as a metaphor for the human existence, in the way that looks can be deceiving and everything is not always as it appears to be. Lastly, 'veiled' brings to mind the idea of weddings, creating a sort of tragic irony, since in reality the two are unable to marry, considering that Hardy is already married.

As Hardy puts it, ' maybe the spheres above/made them our ministers,' and his use of ' our ministers' shows that he hopes they assume that the two are married. However it could be argued that his idea of marriage does not necessarily tie into the concept of love. Hardy doesn't seem to believe he has any marital obligations to his wife, if she treats her unfairly and resentfully throughout their marriage and attempts to seduce Florence is any indication. Therefore it could perhaps be suggested that in reality he does not care for the idea, or the vows that come along with it, making his hopes that they appear marriage appear empty and meaningless, when his own marriage doesn't mean anything. However, the guilt he feels towards the way he treated her when she was nearing the end of her life, shows that betrothal is actually of great importance, if only in terms of how society asserts he acts. The fact that he hasn't actually done anything with Florence yet, even though her religious beliefs make this an impossibility, shows that he does respect the binding nature of the marriage and that he still acutely aware of how society expects marriages to work, even if he doesn't directly care for his wife. For him, it's more the vows he said that he has to commit to, not the woman he said them to. It was considered shameful to divorce in the time period, meaning that Hardy's marriage to Emma, so he cannot just back out of the promise he made. He is supportive of the spectators becoming ministers because, in the way that he and Emma's marriage isn't, their marriage would symbolise unity and giving yourself completely to another person. So even it isn't real and just for a moment, he and Florence are united in the way that they can never be while his wife is still in the picture. The structure laments this idea in the way it has a regular rhyme scheme and it starts playful, however by the end turns bitter and regretful.

The use of 'the spheres above' making this occur presents a more romantic side of the relationship, not controlled by societal expectations, but by fate. Hardy was a staunch believer in the power of fate and the idea that everything happens for a reason; however, he seems to question it in this instance. The idea of fate relates to the idea that the planets and astrology are in some way dictating the things that occur in everyday life, which is still a prevalent thought today, in the form of horoscopes and zodiacs. Hardy seems to suggest that he and Florence were destined to meet, and to some readers may bring to mind the idea of soulmates, contrasting with the fact that, in reality, they aren't soulmates. If they are, their paths have been laid out in a way that doesn't allow them to be together, despite the way they may appear to people on the outside. He even goes on to resent fate for the way they have met, but in such circumstances, with the phrase "why shaped us for his sport/ in after hours?", suggesting that God has set them up in this way, not allowing them to actually be together, for nothing more than his own enjoyment. The word 'sport' fits with this but also links to how love is often viewed as a chase or a game, as opposed to something serious.

Throughout "At an Inn," Hardy seems to resent the idea of society acting as a hindrance and controller of love, as it prevents him from being with Florence. However, aside from the shackles of society he also questions the extent at which love can be defined from an outer perspective. What you see is not necessarily representative of what is true.