

# Analyse the poetry of thomas hardy essay sample

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Thomas Hardy is an intriguing and enigmatic poet whose poetic themes deviate from war, nature and heroism to love, the transience of life and the death of the soul. Though penned some eighty years ago, the poetry of Thomas Hardy remains remarkably accessible and identifiable to a modern reader. While some critic's claim that his poetic writing is archaïse. His language elegant but awkward and his work difficult to comprehend, I enjoyed the poetry of Hardy for its diversity of themes, its earthly realism and his descriptive and metaphorical language. I identified and empathised with his poetry of love and loss, change and decay. Whether he is describing the transience of life and the onslaught of time " Down their carved names the raindrop ploughs" or the mystery, enchantment and wonder of first love " with magic in my eyes", the world that Hardy creates is always vivid and real for his reader.

" When I set out for Lyonesse" is a beautiful, sad, magical and poignant lyric that captures the magic, mystery and wonder of first love. Despite the fact that the poem describes the wonder and joy that the poet feels for his new love, the poem is devoid of any specific details about the narrators beloved, their initial meeting or the nature of their relationship. And it is because of this, because of the poet's description of an emotion rather than an event that " When I set out for Lyonesse" becomes a universal love poem to all and for all that have ever loved or have hoped to love. While much of Hardy's work focus upon the irrationality of war, the transience of life and the destructive progress of time, " When I set out for Lyonesse" is different in many respects, depicting great personal happiness, fulfilment and love, a transforming and memorable moment in the poets life, a time

where everything has changed. Despite the joy and happiness that the poet describes, it is impossible to ignore the poignancy of this simple lyric. After all, Hardy composed this poem after his wife's death, forty-four years after their initial encounter. Biographical details indicate the marriage was an unhappy and unfulfilling one. Hardy might thus be suggesting that despite the fervour, romance and enchantment of first love, such feelings will never last, that love itself is little more than an elaborate illusion, that love is transience, as subject to the ravages of time as we are.

On the 7th March 1870, at the second bidding, Hardy travelled to St Juliot in Cornwall to draw an architect's plan of the church. It was during this visit that Hardy was to meet, fall in love with and eventually to marry Emma Gifford. Their marriage was thirty-eight years long and an unhappy one. After Emma passed away Hardy found a series of manuscripts among his wife's possessions. One of them described their first meeting and it appears that it was this manuscript that provided the motivation for this poem. Hardy noted " I have a faculty for burying emotion in heart or brain for forty years and exhuming it at the end of that time as fresh as when interred".

While Hardy is frequently condemned for his archaise language and awkward expression, " When I set out for Lyonesse" is remarkable for its great simplicity of language. Despite the unusual alliterated expressions " durst declare" and " Should sojourn", the poem is easily comprehensible and is laced with the mythical, magical, even childlike terms such as " wisest wizard" or " prophet". Structurally, each stanza describes a different stage in Hardy's journey. Stanza one depicts the departures, stanza two the journey

itself and stanza three the transformation. “ When I set out for Lyonesse” is based the Wordsworthian principal of emotion recollected in tranquillity.

There is a sense of reluctance rather than anticipation at the beginning of the poem as the poet emphasises the loneliness and isolation of the speaker “ starlight lonesomeness” yet there is a sense of enchantment evident from the poet’s first utterances. The still night sky creates a l’ambiance of romance and mystery. Lyonesse, a mythical kingdom normally associated with King Arthur is more of a fairytale world than a real one. It is “ hundred miles away”, and thus the land described assumes magical, mythical significance Repetition, particularly of the word “ Lyonesse”, and rhyme contribute to the musical quality of the poem.

There is a contrast between the narrator’s demeanour at the outset and the demeanour of the poet upon return from his journey. Hardy captures the sense of transformation as a result of falling in love. While initially feeling only “ lonesomeness”, the poet returned with “ magic in my eyes”. This line is significant as it is another reference to a childlike, dream like world, perhaps depicting that the feeling is ‘ make believe’ or artificial, much like a child’s fantasy world. The transforming nature of love and happiness is reinforced in the final lines. The transformation is so immense that “ All marked with mute surmise”.

Written ten days after the sinking of the Titanic on her maiden voyage with the loss of 1513 lives, the “ Convergence of the Twain” was initially written for a gala in aid of the Titanic Disaster Fund. Essentially, “ The Convergence of the Twain” is a social commentary and social critique of human vanity and

“ pride of life” which were expressed in the opulent style of the ship’s construction. While the loss of the titanic was a very human tragedy and despite the fact that two of Hardy’s friends were among the dead, Hardy appears less concerned with lamenting or remembering the dead as he is with rebuking the pride and hubris that created the “ unsinkable ship”. This poem is a commentary on human folly and arrogance, a response to the belief that “ God himself could not sink the ship”. In many ways, the sinking of the ship vindicated the poet’s pessimistic view of the world and Hardy seems to suggest that the sinking was testament to man’s pride and egotism.

The poem is written in a formal manner. The rigid rhyming schemes reinforce the rigidity or formality of the poem. It also reinforces Hardy’s separation of himself from the poem. The poem is impersonal and written as a commentary. He does not use personal language or colloquialisms.

The opening tone is a sombre and solemn one, an idea reinforced through the low vowel sounds and alliteration employs. Like many of Hardy’s poems “ The Convergence of the Twain is based on a contrast between what the ship once was and what she is now. The notion of pride and vanity that are to dominate the poem are emphasised from the opening moments of the text. “ Deep from human vanity, And the pride of life that planned her”. Believing the ship to be unsinkable, Captain Smith did not order the ship to slow down, despite the numerous ice warnings thus vanity refers not only to the makers of the ship but also to the captain’s own sense of personal vanity. Smith often boasted of his safe record at sea, perhaps, as thus was

his last voyage, he insisted on maintaining speed so as to create a final headline.

Hardy juxtaposes cold and hot, and on a symbolic level, life and death. Hardy remembers the intense heat of the engine rooms, perhaps to reinforce the magnitude and power of the ship, the condition of the ship when in her glorious, unsinkable past, “ Steel chambers, late the pyres Of her salamandrine fires”. Now her fires are quenched and the ship lies in a disintegrating decrepit condition. The cold steel chambers filled with arctic currents, are compared to the warm fires that used to burn brightly on the ship. Hardy uses the word “ pyres” to connote funeral pyres, and to add to the tone of loss. Hardy says that the chambers are now filled with the rhythmic music of the sea, which contrasts with the chaos of the Titanic last few hours.

Hardy uses anthropomorphism as he refers to the fish which do not inhabit the Titanic. He gives the fish an inquisitive attitude. They ask “ What does this vaingloriousness down here?” They wonder why this marvel rests on the ocean floor where it is obviously out of place.

Originally entitled “ The Lost Glass”, “ Under the Waterfall” is a memory poem, articulated from the perspective of Hardy’s wife Emma that reflects upon a happy, harmonious time in the protagonist’s lives, a picnic shared by the lovers in 1870. Like “ When I set out for Lyonesse”, “ Under the Waterfall” is based on Emma’s manuscripts and the incident described is mentioned briefly by her in a memoir entitled ‘ Some Recollections’ discovered by the poet after her death in 1912. While “ When I set out for

Lyonnesee” is articulated from Hardy’s viewpoint, the voice that dominates much of this poem is that of Hardy’s wife.

On a denotative level, “ Under the Waterfall” is a simple narrative account of a wineglass lost by two lovers as they picnicked together. On a connotative level, however, the wineglass assumes a deeper symbolic significance becoming a symbol of lost love. Like “ When I set out for Lyonesse”, “ Under the Waterfall” celebrates the power of memory to recover moments of emotional intensity and to preserve them forever.

Hardy uses a simple, mundane and common place gesture to introduce the world described as a domestic, comfortable and intimate one. As the narrator “ plunge(s) (her) arm, like this, in a basin of water” she is reminded of a faithful and memorable moment from the past. Through this simple action, the poet can excavate and recall her memory of that day frequently and vividly. While the memory fades and corrodes over time, the narrator never “ miss(es) the sweet sharp sense of fugitive day.

Much of the poem is dedicated to the description of the idyllic picnic. The scene is depicted as one akin to Eden, a perfect and happy time in the lives of the lovers. “ August, to paint the scene, and we placed our basket of fruit by the runlet’s rim, where we sat to dine”. The wine glass, so central to our understanding of the poem as a whole is introduced in the main body of the text and with it, the tone of the poem alters, becoming darker and bleaker. While the function of the wine glass is ambiguous with some critics suggesting that the glass, while lost, functions as a symbol of the all enduring love of the narrator for her beloved. Equally it may be argues that

the forever lost and unfound glass becomes a powerful and extended symbol of the lost and unattained love of the protagonists. Just as their love faded over time, “ There the glass still is”. In the intricate detail, the loss of the glass is conveyed, “ Where it slipped, and it sank, and was past recall, Through we stooped and plumbed the little abyss With long bared arms”. It is for this reason that plunging her arm in a basin reminds her of the wine glass.

Written in 1917 during the First World War and during what the poet presumed to be the final years of his life. “ Afterwards” is an elegy, lyric and self portrait that reflects the manner in which the poet wishes to be remembered after his passing, once he has “ stilled at last”. “ Afterwards” contains obvious philosophical musings surrounding life, death and reputation, and while Hardy maintains the perspective of a detached outsider and observer, the poem reveals much about Hardy as a person. “ Afterwards” suggests that Hardy cared little for reverence brought about by his literature, preferring that he would be remembered as a keen environmentalist, who dedicated his life to the “ dew-fall hawk”, the “ green leaves” and the “ innocent creatures”. While death is mentioned in each stanza, it is not depicted as something fearful or apprehensive, rather it is familiar and gentle.

“ Afterward” illustrates Hardy’s craft and skill as a poet. With its control of diction and image to create the effect required, and its equal control of syntax and rhythm. Each stanza is written in a single sentence with the main verb coming late to introduce the imagined comment at the end. The

repetition of this sentence structure, with the slow rhythm of the lines h= gives an appropriately solemn, funeral quality to the poem.

The poem opens with an image of Hardy's death, an unusual personification of the present fastening its back gate " postern" after Hardy had departed. " Postern" suggests a small a gate used by unimportant guests. The adjective " tremulous" suggests fragility, uncertainty and brevity, emphasises the transitory nature of life itself, or Hardy's " stay" on earth.

In a simple and beautiful simile, Hardy personifies the month of May seeing it as a creature. This is my favourite line on the English course. " And the May month flaps its glad green leaves like wings" The verb flaps compares its " glad green leaves" with the wings " Delicate filmed as new spun silk", of a newly emerged butterfly. The simile is unexpected and embellished by alliteration. The cycle of nature, of birth and rejuvenation will continue long after the poets passing. The may be associating the new leaves with a fledgling's wings, suggesting the innocence, youth and naivety that the poet lost a lifetime ago. The " new-spun silk" can be further associated with the silk of a cocoon, within which the process of metamorphosis occurs.

Thomas Hardy's gloomy poem about the turn of the twentieth century " The Darkling Thrush", remains one of his most popular and anthologised lyrics. " The Darkling Thrush" is a transitional poem, illustrating the trepidation and doubt many people felt about the future as the Victorian Era came to an end and the modern Era was about to begin.

“ During Wind and Rain” is a haunting, poignant, beautiful and pessimistic reflection on the transience of life, the passage of time and fragility of life. Though inspired by the memories of his late wife, “ During Wind and Rain” is an intensely personal poem, a lament for inexorable march of time and the destruction and oblivion, which time precipitates. In many ways, the poem is an elegy for life itself. A conclusion needs to be added