

## Under the Waterfall

'Whenever I plunge my arm, like this,  
In a basin of water, I never miss  
The sweet sharp sense of a fugitive day  
Fetched back from its thickening shroud of gray.

fugitive - fleeting  
shroud – burial cloth  
prime – strong, important

Hence the only prime  
And real love-rhyme  
That I know by heart,  
And that leaves no smart,

smart - sting

Is the purl of a little valley fall  
About three spans wide and two spans tall  
Over a table of solid rock,  
And into a scoop of the self-same block;  
The purl of a runlet that never ceases  
In stir of kingdoms, in wars, in peaces;  
With a hollow boiling voice it speaks  
And has spoken since hills were turfless peaks.'

purl - swirling flow and ripple; fall - waterfall  
span – a hand span, thumb tip to little finger tip

runlet – small stream

turfless – no grass, just rock

'And why gives this the only prime  
Idea to you of a real love-rhyme?  
And why does plunging your arm in a bowl  
Full of spring water, bring throbs to your soul?'

throbs – regular pulsing, also pain

'Well, under the fall, in a crease of the stone,  
Though precisely where none ever has known,  
Jammed darkly, nothing to show how prized,  
And by now with its smoothness opalized,

opalized – the colour of an opal, clouded

Is a drinking glass:  
For, down that pass  
My lover and I  
Walked under a sky

Of blue with a leaf-wove awning of green,  
In the burn of August, to paint the scene,  
And we placed our basket of fruit and wine  
By the runlet's rim, where we sat to dine;  
And when we had drunk from the glass together,  
Arched by the oak-copse from the weather,  
I held the vessel to rinse in the fall,  
Where it slipped, and it sank, and was past recall,  
Though we stooped and plumbed the little abyss  
With long bared arms. There the glass still is.  
And, as said, if I thrust my arm below  
Cold water in basin or bowl, a throe  
From the past awakens a sense of that time,  
And the glass we used, and the cascade's rhyme.

leaf-wove awning – covering woven from leaves  
burn – burning heat

past recall – couldn't be recaptured, found

throe – violent spasm of feeling

The basin seems the pool, and its edge  
The hard smooth face of the brook-side ledge,  
And the leafy pattern of china-ware  
The hanging plants that were bathing there.

'By night, by day, when it shines or lours,  
There lies intact that chalice of ours,  
And its presence adds to the rhyme of love  
Persistently sung by the fall above.  
No lip has touched it since his and mine  
In turns therefrom sipped lovers' wine.'

lours – looks dark  
intact – whole, not broken

'In her memoir, *Some Recollections*, Emma Hardy writes, "often we walked down the beautiful Vallency Valley to Boscastle harbour where we had to jump over stones and climb over a low wall by rough steps, to come out on great wide spaces suddenly, with a sparkling little brook into which we once lost a tiny picnic tumbler." Hardy sketched Emma searching for the glass.' (York Notes)

The poem is in speech marks, and is written as if it is being spoken. It is obviously spoken by a woman, presumably Emma. Just for four brief lines another speaker enters. The woman says that whenever she plunges her arm into a basin of water, it always reminds her of the hot August day when she and her lover had a picnic by a little river. She dropped the picnic glass into the water, and she plunged her arm into the river to try to retrieve it. But she was unable to find it.

From the beginning, her memory of this happy picnic is bittersweet. Plunging her arm into a basin of water always reminds her of

The sweet sharp sense of a fugitive day  
Fetched back from its thickening shroud of gray.

fugitive - fleeting  
cloth wrapping a body prepared for burial

The memory is 'sweet sharp'; the day of happiness was 'fugitive' (fleeting); she fetches the reminiscence from a past that is mistily gray and is in a 'shroud' with all its deathly associations. This mix of happy past memory that is only fleeting, that has a sense of sharpness in it, for all its sweetness, and is fetched from a past with associations of death, is already poignant with a sense of not lasting long. This impression is intensified by the word 'smart' (sting, pain) a few lines later. The only memory that leaves no sting, she says, is the purl (rippling flow) of a little waterfall that has flowed thus all through the ages. The description of the little waterfall is full of liquid 'I' sounds in the words, 'purl', 'little', 'valley', 'fall', 'runlet', 'hollow'.

The next four lines come from a different voice, a colder voice that questions the first speaker's feelings. 'Why gives this ... why does plunging your arm ...?'

The woman answers, and her answer takes up the rest of the poem. She explains that the drinking-glass they had used at their August picnic lies just under the waterfall. It is now the colour of an opal, after many years' movement of water over it. On the day of the picnic, 'my lover and I / Walked' in a landscape of bright colours, blue and green. These colours suggest the colour and life of this happy day, which years later can only be revisited through a 'shroud of gray'. The language is consciously feminine, pretty and poetic: 'a leaf-wove awning of green; (an awning is a roof-like

covering). This happy picnic was shared: 'we placed our basket of fruit and wine / By the runlet's rim, where we sat to dine.' '...We had drunk from the glass together'. It's almost as if the glass was a chalice of love (she later refers to it as 'that chalice of ours'), and the wine gives a sense of their being intoxicated by their love, 'lovers' wine'. Then

I held the vessel to rinse in the fall,

waterfall

Where it slipped, and sank, and was past recall.

couldn't be recaptured, found

Neither could their happy love. The 'cascade's rhyme' seems an image of the harmony of their love; she later refers to it as 'the rhyme of love.' And the tiny picnic tumbler of Emma's diary entry has become a 'chalice', a symbol of their love:

No lip has touched it since his and mine

In turns therefrom sipped lovers' wine.

The tone of the poem is poignant: she keeps repeating the incident, re-telling this moment of happiness.

'Under The Waterfall' is the last poem in the collection 'Satires of Circumstance, Lyrics and Reveries' which was published in November 1914. Although the poem isn't included in Poems of 1912-13 *Veteris Vestigia Flammae*, it seems a fitting prologue to them, rather than being the epilogue of *Satires of Circumstance*. Most reviewers, writes Tim Armstrong, 'found the volume melancholy in tone.' Lytton Strachey, a famous critic of the time, wrote 'what gives Mr Hardy's poem their unique flavour is their utter lack of romanticism, their common, undecorated presentiments of things.' The poet Laurence Binyon wanted to ask 'why he seems so insistently, as with a morbid absorption in the theme, to harp on that familiar note of the implanted crookedness of things and the inbred malignity of chance.'

## 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