

‘Your Last Drive’ December 1912

Here by the moorway you returned,
And saw the borough lights ahead
That lit your face - all undiscerned
To be in a week the face of the dead,
And you told of the charm of that haloed view
That never again would beam on you.

all undiscerned – not perceived

And on your left you passed the spot
Where eight days later you were to lie,
And be spoken of as one who was not;
Beholding it with a cursory eye
As alien from you, though under its tree
You soon would halt everlastingly.

halt – stop, stay

I drove not with you... Yet had I sat
At your side that eve I should not have seen
That the countenance I was glancing at
Had a last-time look in the flickering sheen,
Nor have read the writing upon your face,
'I go hence soon to my resting-place;

sheen – shine (of Dorchester's lights)

'You may miss me then. But I shall not know
How many times you visit me there,
Or what your thoughts are, or if you go
There never at all. And I shall not care.
Should you censure me I shall take no heed
And even your praises I shall not need.'

censure - criticism

True: never you'll know. And you will not mind.
But shall I then slight you because of such?
Dear ghost, in the past did you ever find
Me one whom consequence influenced much?
Yet the fact indeed remains the same,
You are past love, praise, indifference, blame.

Eight days before her death, Emma hired a car and went for a drive to see some friends who lived just outside a village about five miles from Hardy and Emma's house on the outskirts of Dorchester (Dorset's county town). So 'the borough lights' to which Hardy refers in the first verse as Emma returns from her drive are the lights of Dorchester on a dark November evening. The view would

be haloed, or Dorchester would be, by the effect of the lights on (perhaps) a foggy or misty evening. Driving back towards Dorchester, Emma passed the churchyard where she was so soon to lie (verse two). As was so often the case towards the end of her life, Emma made this expedition alone; 'I drove not with you' Hardy writes in verse three. At the end of verse three and in verse four, Hardy writes the words Emma, in his imagination, would have spoken if he had been with her on that drive. And in the last verse, he writes his thoughts, in response to what she might have said to him on that occasion, and in response to her sudden death.

As in the first poem of the sequence, 'The Going', Hardy focuses entirely on Emma in the first two verses. In verse one: 'You returned', 'lit your face', 'you told of the charm', 'never again would beam on you.' In verse two: 'you passed the spot', 'you were to lie', 'alien from you', 'You soon would halt'. It is not until verses three and four that Hardy introduces himself, in the first person, into the poem. And even so, the last line of all focuses entirely upon Emma.

Hardy constantly makes mention of time in this poem, stressing, perhaps, how unforeseen are the changes that time brings. 'A week', 'never again', 'eight days later', 'everlastingly', 'a last-time look', 'soon', 'then', 'how many times', 'never', 'in the past'. And he constantly moves from past to present to future, stressing how sudden and unperceived was such an event, and looking bleakly towards the future.

Hardy opens the poem in the past tense: 'you returned, / And saw'. But within four lines he has moved to the present, 'To be in a week the face of the dead.' Back to the past again, 'And you told of the charm of that haloed view' to be immediately succeeded by the present 'that never again would beam on you.' ('Would beam' is obviously not present tense, but the sense is.) 'Ahead' rhymes with 'dead' – what lay ahead for Emma was death, but it was 'all undiscerned' that is, not perceived. The unpredictability of what time will bring, of how little humans can see, is a characteristic theme of Hardy's poetry. Ironically – Hardy is addicted to irony – Emma passes the spot, the churchyard, where so very soon she will lie 'everlastingly'. Again, as in the first verse, the place and its importance are not seen, not paid attention to: 'Beholding (seeing) it with a heedless eye / As alien from you.' 'heedless' and 'alien' indicate a lack of awareness, similar to 'all undiscerned' earlier. The movement of the drive, 'you returned', 'you passed' is contrasted with 'halt', the stillness of death. We have a strong sense of the strange baffling juxtaposition of being alive and, suddenly, being dead. The number of verbs to do with seeing highlight the fact that neither of them saw that she would so soon be dead.

Continuing the idea in verse three that humans do not see what is going to happen to them, Hardy writes that even had he accompanied Emma on her drive, 'I should not have seen / That the countenance I was glancing at / Had a last-time look.' Again, the verse opens with the movement of the drive, and ends with the stillness of 'resting-place'. In the first two verses it was Emma who did not see what was going to happen to her; in the third it is Hardy who would not have seen even if he had been there.

Emma's voice takes over in the fourth verse. It is strangely detached, distant. 'I shall not know ... And I shall not care ... I shall take no heed.' She has moved beyond human relationships now. In contrast to her indifference, her picture of Hardy is of someone busying themselves with the actions and words of this world: 'you visit me', 'you censure me', 'your praises'. Hardy has written

poems before where the dead speak, as in 'Friends Beyond' and 'The Levelled Churchyard'; and the dead in these poems, too, are detached from human cares.

In the last verse, Hardy accepts what Emma says, and the fact that her death has made such a difference. 'True: never you'll know. And you will not mind.' The opening monosyllable, 'True', with the complete cesura after it has the ring of acceptance about it. It is final, definite. In his imagination, Hardy speaks to Emma now, when it's (ironically) too late. Too late for her, but his feelings are awakened and are changing, as these elegies chart. He looks to the future: 'Shall I then slight (criticise) you...?' He calls her 'Dear ghost'. And he faces the fact that 'You are past love, praise, indifference, blame.' This line seems to trace the path of their deteriorating relationship, from love, to indifference (not caring) to recrimination (blame). The stresses in this line fall on 'You', 'past', 'love', 'praise', 'blame', and the number of stresses in the line means that it moves slowly, as he accepts the meaning of Emma's death. Ironically, now that she has died, he cares about her but she no longer cares about him.

Tim Armstrong, editor of *Thomas Hardy Selected Poems*, writes: 'The second poem of the sequence sustains the direct address of the opening poem ('The Going'), and continues with the theme of the suddenness and unexpectedness of Emma's death, expressing the sense of hurt which necessarily precedes any elegiac recovery.'

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