

Beeny Cliff

March 1870 – March 1913

I

O the opal* and the sapphire* of that wandering western sea,
And the woman riding high above with bright hair flapping free -
The woman whom I loved so, and who loyally loved me.

II

The pale mews plained below us, and the waves seemed far away
In a nether sky, engrossed in saying their ceaseless babbling say,
As we laughed light-heartedly aloft on that clear-sunned March day.

seagulls called
engrossed - absorbed
aloft – high above

III

A little cloud then cloaked us, and there flew an irised rain,
And the Atlantic dyed its levels with a dull misfeatured stain,
And then the sun burst out again, and purples prinked the main.

irised - rainbow-coloured
levels – surface; misshaped
adorned the sea

IV

- Still in all its chasmal beauty bulks old Beeny to the sky,
And shall she and I not go there once again now March is nigh,
And the sweet things said in that March say anew there by and by?

rises in its huge mass

V

What if still in chasmal beauty looms that wild weird western shore,
The woman now is – elsewhere - whom the ambling pony bore,
And nor knows nor cares for Beeny, and will laugh there nevermore.

looms - appears
ambling – at a slow pace

*opal – a creamy stone with rainbow tints; sapphire – deep blue; Hardy describes the colours of the sea 43 years earlier as jewel-like in their beauty

After Emma's death in late November 1912, Hardy revisited Cornwall in early March 1913, almost exactly the 43rd anniversary of their first meeting there in 1870 (hence the dates in the poem's subtitle). He wrote in volume I of his disguised autobiography: 'March 10 (1870) Went with ELG (Emma Lavinia Gifford) to Beeny Cliff. She on horseback ... On the cliff ... the run down to the edge.' The first three stanzas recreate the colour, energy and joy of their blossoming relationship in March 1870; the last two bring us to the present. In *Some Recollections*, Emma Hardy remembers 'scampering up and down the hills on my beloved mare alone, wanting no protection, the rain going down my back. ... The villagers stopped to gaze when I rushed down the hills ... for no one dared except myself to ride in such wild fearless fashion.' (SR pp 50-1)

Hardy opens the poem by setting the scene in that spring-time in Cornwall over forty years earlier. He paints a magical picture whose backdrop is the sea with its jewel-like colours, shimmering between creamy opal with iridescent lights, to sapphire blue. ‘The woman’ is riding while Hardy bicycles beside her. There is no main clause in this sentence; it sets the scene and we wait until the second verse to find out what is happening.

The rhythm of ‘Beeny Cliff’ is roughly-speaking that of Emma’s trotting pony: light light strong light light light strong light light light:

O the opal and the sapphire of that wandering western sea,
And the woman riding high above with bright hair flapping free –

The opening verses are full of carefree happy words, like free (verse 1) and light-heartedly (verse 2) and the bright jewel-colours of the sea and the brightness of the woman’s hair: ‘opal and ... sapphire ... bright hair’. The exclamation, ‘O’ lends the lines enthusiasm and excitement. The beautiful romantic landscape forms a fitting setting to the love of ‘the woman’ and the writer:

The woman whom I loved so, and who loyally loved me.
The alliterating ls emphasise their love.

The second verse focuses on the sounds of the sea:

The pale mews plained below us, and the waves seemed far away seagulls called
In a nether sky, engrossed in saying their ceaseless babbling say, below us, absorbed
As we laughed light-heartedly aloft on that clear-sunned March day.

The lovers are above the seagulls and the sea, which occupies a ‘nether’ (lower) sky – I think the idea here is that it can often be hard to tell where sky stops and sea begins, so that the sea far below them looks like a lower sky. The fact that they seem to be above the sky adds to the sense of their exhilaration. The mewing of the seagulls and the babbling of the waves is far away from them. The repeated ‘ay’ sounds and the pairs of alliterated words convey the distant noise of the waves and the gulls: pale plained, waves, away, saying, say. The sense of distance is underlined by the contrasting ‘nether’ and ‘aloft’. The waves babble onomatopoeically, with repeated s’s and ls: ‘engrossed in saying their ceaseless babbling say’. They are also ‘engrossed’ absorbed in their babbling say, so that the lovers are not impinged upon by the waves and they ‘laughed light-heartedly aloft’. The alliteration links them and adds to their sense of one-ness, as does the consonance of ‘laughed’ and ‘aloft’. I think that the rhythm breaks a little, with ‘laughed light-heartedly aloft on that clear-sunned March day’ as if the lovers are free of even rhythmic constraints in their new-found happiness. It’s as if the stresses bounce waywardly on the important words, emphasizing the laughter and the spring sun.

The first verse has focused on colours and on ‘the woman’; the second on the sounds of the gulls and the waves and on the laughter of the lovers in the spring. In the third verse there is a little shower of the kind that you can see driven across the sea towards the cliffs where you are walking. The shower seems rainbow-coloured as the sun shines through it:

A little cloud then cloaked us, and there flew an irised rain, irised - rainbow-coloured
And the Atlantic dyed its levels with a dull misfeatured stain,
And then the sun burst out again, and purples prinked the main. prinked the main -
adorned the sea

The verbs associated with the weather are full of energy: ‘flew’ and ‘burst’. However, this brief change in the weather signals a change of direction in the poem. The first three verses have been in

the past tense as Hardy momentarily recaptures the place, the lovers and the feelings of 43 years earlier.

With the fourth verse the poem moves into the present tense. The place is the same: 'Still in all its chasmal beauty bulks old Beeny to the sky'. 'Chasmal' seems to be a coined word, chasm meaning an abyss (presumably referring to the height of Beeny Cliff) and also meaning a separation, a rift. It would thus also suggest the difference between that happy time forty-three years earlier and the grief-stricken present and, perhaps, the estrangement between Hardy and his wife that had latterly saddened the marriage. But if Hardy has so many memories of her and of their happiness together as they rode and walked along the cliff, Emma is now dead and it means nothing to her any more. The 'wandering western sea' of verse 1 has become 'that wild weird western shore'.

The woman riding high above with bright hair flapping free –
The woman whom I loved so, and who loyally loved me
has become

The woman now is – elsewhere – whom the ambling pony bore
And nor knows nor cares for Beeny, and will laugh there nevermore.

It is as if Hardy cannot bear to speak aloud the word 'dead' and seeks comfort in evasion '– elsewhere –'. The last line is filled with negatives: 'nor', 'nor', 'nevermore'. The feelings and laughter have dwindled to desolation: 'nor knows nor cares'. This is the definition of Emma's death. Hardy is alone. The 'we' and 'us' of verses 2 and 3 are gone. As Alan Pound, the writer of *York Notes Advanced*, says, 'The final line, with its heavy rhythm and hollow, echoing sounds, seems drained of hope.' He's right. Look at the stresses in the line and compare them to the opening lines of the poem:

And nor knows nor cares for Beeny, and will laugh there nevermore.

Hardy has done here something similar to what he did in 'The Voice'; the rhythm changes, falters, becomes heavy; the words so full of colour and rhythmic energy become colourless and lifeless. He conveys the desolation and loneliness of death and of his life without Emma.

F B Pinion writes: 'The opening lines give a glorious sense of exhilaration, in contrast to the last two, where the hesitation before 'elsewhere is more expressive than words.'

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 stressed, 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