

## At Castle Boterel

As I drive to the junction of lane and highway,  
And the drizzle bedrenches the waggonette,  
I look behind at the fading byway,  
And see on its slope, now glistening wet,  
Distinctly yet

waggonette – open carriage

Myself and a girlish form benighted  
In dry March weather. We climb the road  
Beside a chaise. We had just alighted  
To ease the sturdy pony's load  
When he sighed and slowed.

chaise – light cart

What we did as we climbed, and what we talked of  
Matters not much, nor to what it led, -  
Something that life will not be balked of  
Without rude reason till hope is dead,  
And feeling fled.

balked of - denied  
rude reason – robust, good  
feeling fled – feeling has gone

It filled but a minute. But was there ever  
A time of such quality, since or before,  
In that hill's story? To one mind never,  
Though it has been climbed, foot-swift, foot-sore,  
By thousands more.

Primaeval rocks form the road's steep border,  
And much have they faced there, first and last,  
Of the transitory in Earth's long order;  
But what they record in colour and cast  
Is - that we two passed.

from the earliest ages in the world's history  
transitory – not permanent, passing; order - history  
cast – construction

And to me, though Time's unflinching rigour,  
In mindless rote, has ruled from sight  
The substance now, one phantom figure  
Remains on the slope, as when that night  
Saw us alight.

though Time has taken  
though Time in its mechanical way, has taken my beloved away

alight – get out of the cart

I look and see it there, shrinking, shrinking,  
I look back at it amid the rain  
For the very last time; for my sand\* is sinking,  
And I shall traverse old love's domain  
Never again.

travel across the land that belongs to love

\*sand refers to the sand running through an hour glass; in other words, Hardy is an old man.

In the sequence of 1912-13 poems, this follows 'After a Journey' (when Hardy has arrived in Cornwall in early March 1913 to revisit the places where he and Emma first met and were happy), and 'Beeny Cliff' when he walks along the clifftop where Emma rode her pony and he walked in March 1870.

The poem opens in the present tense on a drizzly March day. Hardy is driving in a waggonette, an open carriage. As he approaches the main road (the highway) he looks behind him at the little lane, or byway, he has been travelling along. It is fading in the mist and drizzle. It seems to him that he can see himself and a girlish form (Emma) on a dry March evening 43 years earlier. They had just got out of the chaise (light cart) because it would make the pony's job easier; the pony had 'sighed and slowed' as he tried to pull them up the hill. Just so, in Greek legend, Orpheus tried to recover his dead wife from the underworld and just so he looked behind, with disastrous consequences – she was lost to him for ever. Is that the case in this poem?

The lonely 'I' of the first verse gives way to the happier 'we' of the second and third verses, as Hardy vividly describes the earlier memory. In the lonely present, the weather is gloomy and everything is drenched. Repeated 'dr' alliteration effectively 'bedrenches' everything with 'drizzle' 'As I drive'. The sound of the drizzle is conveyed through the lightly hissing s's in 'drizzle', 'see', 'slope', 'glistening' and 'distinctly'.

There is also a conspicuous repeating of the 'i' sound in 'I', 'drive', 'highway', 'behind' and 'byway'. It continues into the second verse with 'myself', 'benighted' (which means overtaken by darkness; Hardy refers in verse 6 to 'that night'), 'dry', 'climb', 'alighted', 'sighed' and is still present in the third verse with 'climbed' and 'life', and in the fourth verse, 'a time of such quality', and in the fifth, 'primaeval'. One must be guessing, but does this sound form a linking function? Does it link the past with the present perhaps? Help to convey the vivid picture of that March day so long ago? Do the 'i' sounds in the first two verses lead to the key words containing this vowel sound: the key moments and claims in the poem: 'something that life will not be balked of (denied)' (verse 3), 'But was there ever / A time of such quality, since or before' (verse 4), and the final claim that the 'primaeval rocks' 'record ... that we two passed' (verse 5). ('Primaeval' means, from the earliest ages of the world's existence.)

The 'I look behind' of the first verse signals Hardy's retrospective describing of his past experiences – he looks back to 'myself and a girlish form benighted / In dry March weather.' The verse break, which is an enjambement, between verse 1 'I look behind .. And see ... / Distinctly yet' takes us over 43 years back into the past of verse 2, 'Myself and a girlish form ...'. Perhaps in an attempt fully to recapture the past, Hardy describes the past scene in the present 'We climb the road / Beside a chaise.' Then he moves (more truthfully) into the past, 'We had just alighted'. The considerable cesuras in the second and third line convey the lovers' slow pace as they climbed the hill.

At first verse 3 continues in the past tense: 'What we did as we climbed, and what we talked of...'. But then it moves into the present, and even the future, because what it articulates are constants and essentials in human life:

Something that life will not be balked of	denied
Without rude reason till hope is dead,	good
And feeling fled.	

I assume that ‘something’ is words of love? A kiss? But ‘life’ with its lively, impulsive run-on line slows at the end of the next line, with ‘dead’, plus the cesura provided by the comma, and stutters to a halt in the short, heavy line, ‘And feeling fled.’ The plosive bs and ds in these three lines make the statement sound a very emphatic claim.

‘It (the ‘something’) filled but a minute.’ To illustrate its brevity, this sentence takes only half a line. And Hardy insists on its importance, with questions and superlatives which he places in the context of the whole of time:

But was there ever

A time of such quality, since or before,

In that hill’s story? To one mind never, ...

Further to stress the importance of the ‘something’, he distinguishes it from the experiences of all the other people, ‘thousands’ who have climbed the hill. In the next verse he claims that the primaeval rocks at the side of the road have witnessed much that is transitory, but – and he brings this into the present, because it is still to be found there in these rocks –

What they record in colour and cast (appearance)

Is – that we two passed.

Hardy claims permanence written in the roadside rocks for that important ‘something’.

Although Time mechanically passing (‘Time’s unflinching rigour, / In mindless rote’) means that Hardy can no longer see Emma physically (‘the substance’), he believes that her ‘phantom figure’ remains there. But as he looks back and sees it there in the last verse, it is ‘shrinking, shrinking’. He is looking at it for the very last time, for he is getting older ‘my sand is sinking’ and he will never again travel across the country of his old love. (Does this mean he will not come back to Cornwall again, or that he will not try to recapture Emma as she was?) The two words on a single line, ‘Never again’, end the poem sadly and emphatically, with the stresses on the first and last syllables underlining the finality of the statement: ‘never again.’

The impressions the poem leaves on me are twofold: the contrast between lonely present and happy past. But there is also the insistence that ‘the transitory’, ‘it filled but a minute’, can be ‘of such quality’ that it in some way matches the permanence of ‘primaeval rocks’ which represent millions of years. Human experience and life is ‘transitory’ and yet some moments in it cannot be extinguished by time. At the most convincing moments in the poem this is what Hardy claims, and yet his conviction seems to fade towards the end of the poem with his realization that he is old, that he, like everything, is subject to ‘Time’s unflinching rigour, / In mindless rote...’. The quality of brief human experience is set against the mechanical operations of time. But how successfully?

## 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