

After a Journey, by Thomas Hardy



“After a Journey” is a poem by Thomas Hardy. The journey in question is one in both space and time, and it is also a journey into the poet’s psyche. Here is a description of the poem and the story of how it came to be written.

A troubled marriage

On 27th November 1912 Emma Hardy (née Gifford), the wife of the novelist and poet Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) died at their home, Max Gate, in Dorchester, Dorset, at the age of 72. She had been ill for some time and had suffered bouts of severe pain from impacted gallstones, which were declared to be the cause of her death.

However, for some years before this event the Hardy marriage had been under considerable strain and, although they never separated, they had been living what

were virtually parallel lives in the same house, with Emma having her own rooms in the attic. The faults lay mainly with Thomas, as he had allowed himself to be swayed by the trappings of fame and he was embarrassed by the down-to-earth homely woman who did not fit into the world he now occupied. He preferred to attend functions and receptions on his own, and he was also flattered by the attentions of other women, with some of whom he flirted to a greater or lesser degree.

There were also ideological differences between the free-thinking novelist and his much more traditionally-minded wife, who had, for example, been shocked by the apparent attacks on marriage and religion in Hardy's final novel "Jude the Obscure" (1895).

Hardy's behaviour towards her during her final illness had been at best indifferent and at worst downright callous, even to the extent that he did not go to see her when told that she was desperately ill on the day that she died.

However, her death was profoundly shocking to Hardy when it occurred, as he was brought face to face with just how bad a husband he had been to her for a number of years. This was confirmed after he found her diaries in which she had written her far from complimentary opinions about him.

A journey back in time

Thomas realised that he had missed his chance to be reconciled with Emma, and the poems that he wrote in the

months after her death were his attempt to come to terms with his complex emotions that included large measures of guilt and remorse. The poems were published in 1914 under the title “Poems 1912-13” and were among the finest he ever wrote.

In March 1913 he made a journey back to the places where he had met and courted Emma Gifford back in 1870. As a young man he had been apprenticed to an architect who was involved in the restoration of country churches (a favourite activity of Victorian architects). One of these was at St Juliot, near Boscastle in north Cornwall, to which Hardy was sent. Emma Gifford was living at the rectory as the guest of her brother-in-law, and it was around the cliffs, coves and valleys of the surrounding countryside that Thomas and Emma enjoyed each other’s company, as the poem makes clear.

The poem

“After a Journey” comprises four 8-line stanzas with the rhyme scheme ABABCDDC.

*Hereto I come to view a voiceless ghost;
Whither, O whither will its whim now draw me?
Up the cliff, down, till I'm lonely, lost,
And the unseen waters' ejaculations awe me.
Where you will next be there's no knowing,
Facing round about me everywhere,
With your nut-coloured hair,
And gray eyes, and rose-flush coming and going.*

*yes: I have re-entered your olden haunts at last;
Through the years, through the dead scenes I have tracked you;
What have you now found to say of our past -
Scanned across the dark space wherein I have lacked you?
Summer gave us sweets, but autumn wrought division?
Things were not lastly as firstly well*

*With us twain, you tell?
But all's closed now, despite Time's derision.*

*I see what you are doing: you are leading me on
To the spots we knew when we haunted here together,
The waterfall, above which the mist-bow shone
At the then fair hour in the then fair weather,
And the cave just under, with a voice still so hollow
That it seems to call out to me from forty years ago,
When you were all aglow,
And not the thin ghost that I now frailly follow!*

*Ignorant of what there is flitting here to see,
The waked birds preen and the seals flop lazily,
Soon you will have, Dear, to vanish from me,
For the stars close their shutters and the dawn whitens hazily.
Trust me, I mind not, though Life lours,
The bringing me here; nay, bring me here again!
I am just the same as when
Our days were a joy, and our paths through flowers.*

First stanza

This sets the scene.

The “voiceless ghost” is clearly that of Emma, but this is not the same ghost of “The Haunter” (another poem in “Poems 1912-13”), this being the young Emma with her “nut-coloured hair” who is behaving in the way that a young woman in love would do, enticing her lover to chase and catch her, playing hide and seek around the rocks and cliffs. The stanza is lively and sensual, even down to the highly suggestive use of the word “ejaculations” to link the scenery to sexual union.

Second stanza

The emphasis is now placed on time rather than place:

There is a clever play on words with “haunts”, as this is a standard word usage to describe places with which one is familiar while at the same time reminding the reader of the “voiceless ghost”. It is also to be noted that the poet believes himself to be a guest in a place that belongs to Emma (“your olden haunts”) but is recalling a time that belonged to both of them (“our past”).

Hardy is very conscious in this stanza of the damage done by the years to the marriage that had its roots in the places he now visits, as conveyed by the question in the very expressive fifth line. He places the questions in Emma’s mouth, inviting her to give her verdict on the marriage, but these are rhetorical questions, because “all’s closed now”.

Third stanza

The stress is now on the sharing of place and time

The “haunting” theme continues, in both senses, with references to two actual “haunts” that can, in fact, still be seen today at Pentargon Bay. There is a suggestion that the current visit is taking place in poor weather and before daybreak (there are hints in the first two stanzas with “unseen waters” and “dark space”). The cave is presumably calling with “a voice still so hollow” from the waves that are breaking inside it at high tide. There are therefore several hints that the scene is not being reproduced exactly as it was when Emma and Thomas were there “forty years ago”.

Fourth stanza

The reader now has his or her earlier suspicions confirmed, with the statement that “dawn whitens hazily”, that the conditions under which Hardy is viewing the scene are different from those that he recalls from the distant past. However, there is also the sense that this is what had to be, because the pre-dawn time was when Hardy most felt Emma’s presence, which would vanish when the sun came up.

Summary

What Hardy seems to be saying in this poem is that one can be reminded of the past but it can never be restored. For him, knowing that the old places are still there, as “haunts”, is what matters. The ghosts of both Emma and himself are just that, ghosts that will disappear with the morning light.

However, Hardy’s hope is that, by resurrecting the ghosts, albeit temporarily, some of the hurt of the intervening years will also vanish along with them. He therefore asks to be brought here again, and to repeat his journey to the past. For this brief time he is “just the same”, “despite Time’s derision”.

<http://greatpoetryexplained.blogspot.com/2019/01/after-journey-by-thomas-hardy.html>