



Thomas Hardy's Poetic Reminiscences on His Wife Emma

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Abstract:

Thomas Hardy was a Victorian novelist who had trodden the footsteps of realistic tradition. Though he gained fame for his novels yet he considered himself primarily as a poet. Hardy's most famous poems were written between 1912-13 after the death of his first wife Emma Gifford with whom he had estranged relations for more than 20 years. There is a deep sense of remorse and regret in all the poems written on her. In these poems one finds description of elemental forces, hills, dales, waterfalls, lonely places, birds etc. These poems are perfect examples of his emotional life after Emma's death. He could not bear her quiet departure and wrote many emotional poems on their estranged relationship.

Keywords: Estranged relations, Love, Death, Loss, Memory, Emotional.

Thomas Hardy was born on June 2, 1840 and died on January 11, 1928. Though he gained fame for his novels yet he considered himself primarily as a poet. Being greatly influenced by romanticism, one finds influence of William Wordsworth's poetry in his novels and poetry. From 1898 till his death in 1928 he published eight volumes of poetry. He published his first volume of poetry *Wessex Poems* in 1898 which he had written over a period of 30 years. Variety of his poems includes lyrics, ballads, dramatic monologues, epic drama etc. He wrote many war poems in which the point of view of ordinary soldiers, using colloquial language, is shown. Hardy's most famous poems were written between 1912-13 after the death of his first wife Emma Gifford with whom he had estranged relations for more than 20 years. Elegiac feeling, which is a spur for the poet, is coupled with imaginative words. There is a deep sense of remorse and regret in all the poems written on her and these poems are regarded as the peak of his poetic feat. His poems are "racked with guilt and wonder." (poetry foundation). These poems deal with the themes of disappointment in love life. "They are poems in which he attempts to come to terms with the loss of his wife and his love for her, many years earlier." (poetry foundation) Many famous poets such as Robert

Frost, Ezra Pound, Philip Larkin, W.H. Auden and many more acclaimed his poetry which had a profound influence on them.

Hardy's literary work can be divided into three aspects: as an interpreter of Nature, as an interpreter of Character and as an interpreter of Life. His understanding and description of Nature gives an insight into his outlook of human nature too. Throughout his poetry these two are inextricably interwoven. In the poems, written in memory of Emma, one finds description of elemental forces, hills, dales, waterfalls, lonely places, birds etc. These poems are perfect examples of his emotional life after Emma's death. He could not bear her quiet departure and wrote many emotional poems on their estranged relationship which is now beyond repair. Men and women, taken in his poems, are vividly actualized because they are simple characters.

The poems written after Emma's death express his regret and remorse. "In a 2007 biography on Hardy, Claire Tomalin argues that Hardy became a truly great English poet after the death of his first wife Emma, beginning with these elegies, which she describes as among 'the finest and strangest celebrations of the dead in English poetry'." (wikipedia) Poems like *The Voice*, *Neutral Tones*, *After a Journey*, *The Going*, *We Sat at the Window*, *The Walk*, *Under the Waterfall* and *A Broken Appointment* are representatives of his poems written on Emma. All these poems deal with elegiac feeling and disappointment in his married life. Most common theme in these poems is his futile struggle against fate. He has to endure his fate that is why he shows a tragic vision in these poems. In all these poems he is an autobiographical speaker. "Hardy's vision is said to be stoical as it involves an acceptance of faith". (vinhanley)

He felt a strong sense of belongingness after Emma's departure from this earth. In the poem *The Going* Hardy addresses his dead wife and asks her why she has left him without any indication. He says:

Why did you give no hint that night...
You would close your term here, up and be gone
Where I could not follow
With wings of swallow
To gain one glimpse of you ever anon!

This poem presents a range of emotions he feels after Emma has gone forever. He registers his displeasure because she has left this world without any indication. He yearns for one more

glimpse before her death. He feels emptiness which sickens him. He remembers the rocks, 'Beeny Crest' where she used to ride but these places are no more occupied by her. Through reflection of memories Hardy internalizes the experience of life. He rethinks his love relationship with Emma in a sweet harmonious way. He finds himself helpless in recalling the time back.

The mood of the poem *Neutral Tones* too is that of despair like other poems. As the title suggests this poem is about neutrality of feeling. The use of imagery and colours shows the negative and gloomy tone of the poem. The winter weather itself is associated with cold and thus has negative emotions. Even the sun is described as white. It is not bright and warmth giving. The sun looks as if "chidden of God". Everything described in the poem presents a picture of gloominess. There is a frozen pond, dead leaves and starving earth. In reminiscence mode the poet depicts his past moments with great feeling. He laments over his love which has vanished forever. He starts this poem with words of desolation of a winter day. They spoke very little on that day and those words seemed meaningless rather they were bitter. At psychological level it is difficult to understand what is there in the mind of the lady. The poet describes her eyes, "Your eyes on me were as eyes that rove / Over tedious riddles of years ago;" In the last stanza he warns the future lovers that love deceives "And wrings with wrong". The poet here presents a gloomy theme by writing, "And a few leaves lay on the starving sod; / They had fallen from an ash, and were grey." His relationship with his wife is like a tedious riddle which is dying just like the falling leaves. Smile on her face was "the deadest thing" that day. Her smile was the only thing that could revive their relations but that too was coming to an end. The poem doesn't romanticize love rather it indicates that there is no remedy for the wounds that love gives. Both were suffering loss because of their dying relationship.

The Voice too expresses Hardy's feeling of loss after his wife's death. It is difficult for a person to accept death. In the very first line "Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me" there is a feeling of grief and lamentation. The repetition of the words shows his longing for his wife. He remembers the time when their "day was fair". He hears some voice calling him and wonders why he can't see her. He wishes her to appear in front of him. He remembers those gone days when Emma used to wait for him. There is a feeling of nostalgia throughout the poem. In the deep recesses of his mind, he hears Emma's voice clearly calling to him. It was the voice that takes the poet to a memory lane of those sweet days when there was no rift in their relationship but the fact is that past cannot be recovered. He laments and says, "You being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness, / Heard no

more again far or near?" in the entire poem there is a feeling of grief, a sense of emptiness and dismay over permanent loss.

After a Journey is based on an incident which Hardy felt after his wife's death. He wants to forget his lonesomeness and wishes a word with his dead wife. He revisited the places where he first met Emma and had expectations that he could find her ghost there. He says,

Yes: I have re-entered our 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__

This imaginative meeting reminds him of his past with Emma. Their youthful summer which gave them joyous days has turned into chilling winter i.e. disappointment. He remorsefully utters, "Things were not lastly as firstly well / With us twain, you tell? / But all's closed now, despite Time's Derision." In most of his poems he favours question answer form. Here too this form is used. There is no reversal of time. He illustrates cruel irony of life that time and youth cannot be recalled but in human mind he can remember his youthful happy time. At least he can experience a happy vision though time is there to annihilate everything. Again there is a tone of despair as he is aware that this imaginative vision will vanish soon. He requests Emma's spirit to "...bringing of me here; nay, bring me here again! / I am just the same as when / Our days were a joy, and our paths through flowers." In the presence of Nature, he finds a mysterious power and is hopeful to rejoin her again.

We Sat at the Window opens with the speaker's remembering a past joyful memory when he and Emma sat at a window looking out at the incessant rain. Past happiness and present sorrow is juxtaposed in this poem too. Complexity of relationship is beautifully shown. His memories of past love present a poignant reflection of love that is lost now. It is clear that he is obsessed with his past life. Image in the poem reflects a moment of togetherness. He says, "Nothing to read, nothing to see / Seemed in that room for her and me / On Swithin's day." He describes his precious moments spent with Emma.

Most of Hardy's poems written in memory of Emma are full of melancholic thoughts and *A Broken Appointment* is no exception. The speaker of the poem is talking about the woman that he loved. He complains that she has broken her promise by not coming to meet him. She has broken the ethical code. She should have treated him with "Lovingkindness". But the meeting never took place between them. He feels let down because his beloved failed to show common courtesy of requiting the love. It is moral duty to treat each other lovingly. The thing that bothers the speaker much is her moral failure to fulfil

the appointment. He says, “Than that I thus found lacking in your make / That high compassion which can overbear / Reluctance for pure lovingkindness’ sake”. He is not disappointed at his unrequited love but his disappointment is that his beloved did not show the basic courtesy of fulfilling the promise of meeting. His tone is that of acceptance. Theme of this poem is disappointment in love which is the cause of pessimism. The poet says, “And marching Time drew on, and wore me numb”. Here the poet is feeling a sense of rejection .

Like the other poems Hardy is recollecting the time spent with Emma. Poem *The Walk* is replete with the words full of negation e.g. not, never are used many times. The poet is contrasting his earlier days spent with Emma when she used to accompany him in younger days. Now she has become “weak and lame” so Hardy has to walk all alone. He says, “So you never came, / And I went alone, and I did not mind, / Not thinking of you as left behind.” After Emma’s death things have changed a lot. Now he clearly sees what their life together was and what change has now come. He says, “I walked up there to-day / Just in former way; / Surveyed around / The familiar ground....” These lines show how melancholic a walk can be. It connects the poet’s past with his present. Grief and joy co-mingle here. There are several layers of memory (joyous and sad) which are realized in later years. This walking provides him a room for thoughts which deals with subtle feeling of loss, regret, pain and emptiness. Now there will be no sharing of thoughts as the room is empty forever. Hardy feels himself isolated and a feeling of loneliness engulfs him in the end.

Thus we find that there is a tragic vision of life in all these poems, so all these poems demand a respectful attention. By the use of extraordinary imaginative word power, he makes his poetry different from others. From his early days he had a wish to devote his life to poetry, and this desire was fulfilled in his later years. Poems written when he was grappling with Emma Lavinia Gifford loss are considered his best. His poems showcase his talent as a poet. There is a sense of nostalgia which resonates throughout these poems. These poems deal with themes of love, transience of life, loss and despair. Hardy had a wreath inscribed on Emma’s tombstone “From her lonely husband, with the Old Affection.”

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