At an Inn

POEM TEXT

When we as strangers sought
Their catering care,
Veiled smiles bespoke their thought
Of what we were.
They warmed as they opined
Us more than friends—-
That we had all resigned
For love's dear ends.

And that swift sympathy
With living love
Which quicks the world--maybe
The spheres above,
Made them our ministers,
Moved them to say,
"Ah, God, that bliss like theirs
Would flush our day!"

And we were left alone
As Love's own pair;
Yet never the love-light shone
Between us there!
But that which chilled the breath
Of afternoon,
And palsied unto death
The pane-fly's tune.

The kiss their zeal foretold,
And now deemed come,
Came not: within his hold
Love lingered numb.
Why cast he on our port
A bloom not ours?
Why shaped us for his sport
In after-hours?

As we seemed we were not
That day afar,
And now we seem not what
We aching are.
O severing sea and land,
O laws of men,
Ere death, once let us stand
As we stood then!

SUMMARY

We were strangers to the inn staff that day we sought out their services. The staff's barely concealed smiles gave away what they thought about us. They treated us warmly, assuming that we were lovers—thinking that we had committed everything to love's precious plans.

The inn staff had that kindness and enthusiasm that comes when people are in the presence of real, live love, the kind that makes the world more exciting and vibrant, and maybe even makes the planet turn! The idea of our love turned them into our guardian angels, and moved them to wish that God would grant them a blissful love like ours.

The people at the inn left us alone, thinking us to be love's favorite couple. But there was never actually any love between us, at least not at the time! Instead, there was that mysterious feeling that made the breath of the afternoon seem colder, and made the buzzing fly shudder and die.

The kiss that the inn staff enthusiastically predicted—and waited for—never came. We were within love's reach, yet felt nothing. Why did love give us the glow of love if it wasn't ours? Why did he toy with us that evening?

On that long-ago day, we seemed like something that we weren't. Now, we don't look like a couple even though we ache with love for each other. Even though we're separated by both the land and sea, and by society's rules, let us stand together like we stood on that day just once before we die.

THEMES

THE PAIN AND CRUELTY OF LOVE

Thomas Hardy's "At an Inn" shows how love, far from being the blissful force people wish for, is often random and cruel. The poem swells with sorrow and regret as the speaker recounts a visit to an inn he made many years ago with a female friend. Though the other patrons believed the pair were in love at the time, they weren't (or, at least, they didn't realize that they were). Now, in the poem's present, they *are* in love, but can't be together. The poem thus presents love—and the workings of the human heart—as unpredictable,

irrational, and, above all, *painful*.

The poem contrasts the idealized love the other patrons of the inn *believed* the speaker and his friend felt with the actual "chill" between them at the time. This contrast suggests that the world has an oversimplified and unrealistic view of love. Everyone at the inn marvels enviously at the "love-light" they see shining between the speaker and his friend. To them, these newcomers don't just look like lovers, but like the perfect embodiment of idealized Love itself: "Love's own pair."

Ironically, though, the light of love "never" really shone between the speaker and his friend while they were at the inn. Looking back through the lens of the years that have gone by, the speaker remembers not love, but a "chill" between them. The other patrons' insistence that this couple is a perfect, shining example of love suggests that the world is eager to idealize romance; everyone wants so much to believe in the pure, simple "bliss" of love that they imagine it even where it isn't.

But as the speaker discovers to his cost, an idealized vision of love isn't just plain wrong: it's painfully and ironically wrong. Beyond merely being complicated, love sometimes feels *actively cruel*. Later in life, the speaker realizes he *does* love his friend—but only after he can no longer be with her, when they're separated by "the severing sea and land" and "the laws of men" (in other words, physical distance and marriages to other people). This realization makes his memories of the inn feel not just bitterly ironic, but like a cruel joke.

Love, like a spiteful court jester, has painted the speaker and his friend with the "bloom" (the look) of love only to deny them the chance to make it a reality, and then cartwheeled away from the scene. The poem personifies love not as a some kind cupid committed to bringing people together, but as a much more mystifying, weird, and fickle character. Love, the poem concludes, is certainly a powerful force—but one as likely to bestow "aching" pain than "bliss."

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-40

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

When we as strangers sought
Their catering care,
Veiled smiles bespoke their thought
Of what we were.

The poem starts with a flashback to the time when the speaker and his companion (most likely Thomas Hardy and his friend Florence Henniker) visited an inn together many years earlier.

The first stanza sets the scene, and focuses on how the couple—who aren't *actually* a couple—were received by the staff and patrons of this inn.

The speaker and his female friend arrive together, though the purpose of the visit is never revealed to the reader. It's worth noting that for a man to be spending this kind of alone time with a woman who *wasn't* his wife would have been quite unusual during the strict moral atmosphere of the Victorian era (though plenty of illicit behavior still went on!). The speaker and his companion are "strangers" to the inn, and this anonymity, on the one hand, frees them from their identities. But this freedom is only in the eyes of others; if the poem is taken as autobiographical, both Hardy and Henniker were married to other people at the time. They are momentarily free to *look* like a couple, but not to actually *be* one.

Though they are "strangers," the staff at the inn feel happy to be in the presence of what they think is pure love. They offer their "catering care" to the newcomers, the prominent hard /c/ alliteration perhaps suggesting that the people at the inn are a little overbearing! Their smiles signal the vicarious happiness the staff feel as witnesses of this love, though they try not to make it too obvious.

The word choice that describes their attempts to hide their smiles—"veiled"—ironically gestures towards the wedding veil worn by brides. But as if demonstrating that this love is an illusion, the three alliterating /w/ sounds in line 4's "what we were" are showy and gaudy. Even just in these four lines, then, the poem sets up a tension between what people *think* about love and how, in reality, love can play cruel and deceiving tricks—between how things seem, and how things actually are.

LINES 5-8

They warmed as they opined
Us more than friends—-
That we had all resigned
For love's dear ends.

The people at the inn couldn't really have it more wrong about the speaker and his companion! These people—probably the staff, but maybe other patrons too—feel a kind of warm glow, as though the supposed love between the speaker and his friend has such a strong aura that actually makes others feel a small part of that love too.

The speaker and his companion are judged—"opined"—to be "more than friends." They are falsely seen almost as the embodiment of pure love, as though they are ambassadors from the Love-land sent on a mission to spread joy and hope.

To the people at the inn, it looks as though the speaker and his companion have made loving each other the sole cause for living. They think the speaker and his friend have "resigned"—sacrificed—"all" in the service of their love. In actuality, the two newcomers might even be doing the opposite,

ignoring or resisting the feelings that may or may not exist between them.

In line 8, the poem starts to subtly personify love (this becomes much more obvious later), describing it as something that has needs and desires: "dear ends." Love *wants* something, and most people think that something is to bring lovers together. But love here, even before the reader has more details, already seems like a bit of a prankster, granting the speaker and his friend the glow of love without its reality.

LINES 9-13

And that swift sympathy
With living love
Which quicks the world--maybe
The spheres above,
Made them our ministers,

The staff at the inn feel moved by the loving relationship that they incorrectly perceive between the speaker and his companion. The staff buy into an idealized concept of love, feeling a "swift sympathy" towards the speaker and his friend *because* they think they are in the presence of "living love." To them, the speaker and his friend represent everything that is exciting, joyful, and precious about love.

The speaker doesn't *deny* that this type of love exists, and acknowledges how love seems to "quick[] the world." That is, love is *sometimes* like a kind of rocket booster that makes the world itself seem like a better place, exhilarating and full of possibility.

The alliteration phrases in lines 9 and 10—"swift sympathy" and "living love"—give the poem a giddy sense of enthusiasm, as though the feelings of the staff are finding the way into the poem's language. The two /l/ sounds in "living love" are also quite soft, almost seductive. Enjambment in this stanza then quickens the poem's pace, pushing readers forward through the lines and adding to the wrongly-placed atmosphere of excitement.

As if to match the lofty sentiments of the people at the inn, the poem here launches into the realm of metaphor. "Living love," which metaphorically makes the world go round—and, perhaps, even makes the *planets* follow their orbits (line 12)—turns the staff into the young (non-)couple's "ministers." This refers to the way that the staff dote on the newcomers because of how the latter seem so in love. The staff instinctively "minister"—or attend to—the newcomers' needs *because*, in doing so, they pay tribute to love's needs too.

Alliteration in line 13 between "made" and "Ministers" works like a kind of spell, showing how, to the staff, the air seems to be suffused with a kind of love-magic. This section also plays with the idea of fate. Think about how love is sometimes described as being written in the stars (or the "spheres"!). People are *meant* to be together, says this romantic idea of love; but, says this poem, that's totally wrong.

"Ministers" also possibly alludes to angels, who in the Bible are described as "ministering spirits" sent to serve humankind. The reference to religion plays on the idea that the speaker and his friend are a so-called match made in heaven, when of course they're not. This ties in with the mention of (heavenly) "spheres" and the subsequent mention of God in line 15.

LINES 14-16

Moved them to say,
"Ah, God, that bliss like theirs
Would flush our day!"

In lines 14 to 16, the speaker reports what the staff at the inn said when they looked at the two newcomers. Wrongly seeing the speaker and his companion as an example of perfect and pure love, the people at the inn feel "moved" (meaning both motivated and emotionally compelled).

The inn staffers addresses God, which is in keeping with the description of these people as "ministers" (which relates on a literal level to how they *administer* help to the newcomers, and on a metaphorical level portrays them as angels or even church ministers presiding over a wedding). Through apostrophe, the inn staff ask God to grant them the same "bliss" afforded to the speaker and his companion.

The staffers clearly believe in an idealized—and romanticized—version of love, something like a fairy tale, that the poem implicitly undermines. The staff perceives something that isn't there (or, if it is there, can't be acted upon). Perhaps there *is* an under-the-surface sexual tension between the speaker and his friend, but it's hard to say for sure. It's worth noting, thought, that words like "bliss" and "flush" *are* sexually suggestive, gesturing towards the "bliss" and hot "flush" associated with orgasm.

LINES 17-20

And we were left alone
As Love's own pair;
Yet never the love-light shone
Between us there!

The poem continues its trend of personifying love. The speaker and his friend were treated not just as if they were in love, the speaker reveals, but as if they were "Love's" *favorite* and/or most important lovers: "Love's own pair." The inn staff leave the speaker and his companion out of respect for how in love they think the "couple" is.

Here is the dramatic reveal of the poem, a twist that has already been implied but is now made explicit: the inn staff think that the speaker and his friend are totally ruled by the force of their love for one another, but they couldn't be more wrong! In line's 19 and 20, the speaker reveals that the "love-light" *didn't* shine between him and his friend. "Love-light" is a

metaphor that fits in with the idealized view of love represented by the staff at the inn, who see it as a kind of exciting, supernatural force for good, and wish they could have some of it for themselves.

Notice how the alliterating /l/ sounds in "**l**eft" and "**L**ove" and "**l**ove-light" ironically highlight the fact that the speaker and his friend are *not* a pair. The poem sounds musical and unified in these moments, but that sound is deceiving—much like the appearance of the speaker and his friend.

LINES 21-24

But that which chilled the breath
Of afternoon,
And palsied unto death
The pane-fly's tune.

The "love-light" that the inn staff incorrectly perceives as shining between the newcomers would, in theory, be bright, bold, pure, warm—all the good things about falling in love. Instead of such loving warmth, however, there's a cold emotional distance between the speaker and his friend once they're left alone.

The speaker describes this feeling as something that chills the personified breath of the afternoon and even makes a fly buzzing near a window shudder and die. Readers can picture the speaker and his companion awkwardly sitting together in a room, the icy silence between them so tense that it seems to kill even a humble fly!

- Note that flies are often symbolic of death. Think about when and where flies usually appear: *decaying matter*.
- The symbolism suggests that there's no romance blossoming between the two—or, maybe, this is the moment when the potential for romance died.

Perhaps the speaker now remembers this bad feeling in part because of how this day now seems like a lost opportunity. It's almost as if a world of romance, togetherness, and joy are just within the speaker's grasp, but he fails to grasp it (perhaps because he doesn't see it). On the surface, it seems like it's the inn staff who have got things wrong, but maybe it's actually the speaker and his friend!

This section also dials into a new type of consonant sound (mostly through alliteration). Whereas the first half of the stanza used long and soft /l/ and /n/ sounds, here the poem switches to the more plosive /b/, /p/, and /d/:

But that which chilled the **b**reath
Of afternoon,
And **p**alsied unto **d**eath
The **p**ane-fly's tune.

These sounds require the reader to expel breath (try it!), thus making their very own "chilled" breeze. So while the sounds during the discussion of love were warm, the *reality* is cold and empty.

LINES 25-28

The kiss their zeal foretold,
And now deemed come,
Came not: within his hold
Love lingered numb.

Everyone at the inn expected the speaker and his friend to kiss—which makes sense, given they think the newcomers are head-over-heels in love. The inn staff (and maybe patrons too) are almost desperate to see a kiss and thereby see true love in action! They have "zeal," or are *zealous*, almost like members of a cult called Love, run by personified Love himself. In other words, they really *believe* in this idealized version of love which they wrongly perceive in the relationship between the newcomers.

But, of course, no kiss comes. The poem uses a type of repetition here known as polyptoton, in which words from the same word-stem are repeated. So "come," turns into "came not." The repetition also has a kind of *sliding doors* effect, as if the speaker and his friend stand at the crossroads of two very different potential futures—one in which they are together, and one in which they are separate. If this kiss comes, they're together, and vice versa.

Love, in its personified form, "hold[s]" the speaker and his friend in a shared moment. But the love "linger[s] numb"—there are no real loving feelings there. The poem uses consonance in this section to capture this numbness, using a muffled /m/ sound in "dee**m**ed co**m**e," "ca**m**e," and "nu**m**b."

The alliteration of "**h**is **h**old," meanwhile, is breathy, as if love, or the speaker and his companion, or the people at the inn, are grasping at thin air. And the alliterating "**l**ove **l**ingered" is another example of the poem's ironic trick of creating alliterative pairs, highlighting the fact that the speaker and his friend are *not* a couple.

LINES 29-32

Why cast he on our port
A bloom not ours?
Why shaped us for his sport
In after-hours?

In lines 29-32, the speaker asks two rhetorical questions, both of which ponder the strange circumstance of his visit to the inn. The speaker wonders why love—in his personified form—would be so cruel as to cast a "bloom" (a glow) of love on him and his friend, when that same "bloom" didn't really belong to them. Love doesn't seem to be a force for good, but more like an evil trickster, having fun with humanity for his own kicks.

Here, the poem possibly alludes to Shakespeare's *King Lear*, in which the Earl of Gloucester says: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport." Sport is such a specific word here, and, combined with the mention of fly in line 24, makes this allusion plausible. Love, as described above, is like an anarchic God, messing with people's love lives just because he can. It's *amusing*—both tragic and comic—to Love to make people look like they're together when they're not.

The mention of after-hours here relates to the closing of the inn—perhaps the speaker and his friend are staying over (Hardy and Florence Henniker did, apparently, stay at the inn together). But after-hours also relates to late-night activities, the kind of stuff lovers get up to in the privacy of the late-night hours. There's irony to the phrase, then, since the speaker and his friend did not get up to any of that!

LINES 33-36

As we seemed we were not
That day afar,
And now we seem not what
We aching are.

In the last stanza, the speaker lays it all on the line. Now, the reader catches a glimpse of the present moment from which the poem is written/spoken. The speaker has been looking back on that day at the inn through the prism of memory, and has come to see it in all-too-painful clarity.

The poem uses repetitive parallelism in lines 33-36 to set it all out:

As we seemed we were not
That day afar,
And now we seem not what
We aching are.

Back then, in other words, the speaker and his friend seemed like something they weren't—now they don't look like they're in love, but, if the reader is to believe the speaker, they "ach[e]" with love for each other. (It's worth noting that there is no evidence that Florence Henniker felt anything more than friendship towards Hardy!)

The similar grammatical structure between the past and the present suggests how life can utterly change course based on one moment or decision. And the emphasis on "seem[ing]" recalls how the inn staff were projecting a fantasy onto the speaker and his friend. Now, though, the speaker feels that love—and feels the loss of that day. The day itself now seems "afar," as though time has placed it on a distant planet impossibly out of reach.

Notice, too, how the poem uses knotted, almost garbled syntax (word order). The verb "are" is placed right at the end of the sentence, and although Hardy does this quite a lot, it was pretty antiquated even then—like something more befitting the Elizabethan era than the Victorian/Georgian hundreds of years later. This word order grant extra-strong emphasis on "are," making the emotion seem all the more real, present, and, above all, *painful*.

LINES 37-40

O severing sea and land,
O laws of men,
Ere death, once let us stand
As we stood then!

The speaker uses apostrophe here, first calling out, as if in a fit of despair, to the "severing sea and land" that separate the speaker from the friend he now realizes that he loves. This probably relates to geographical distance, contrasting with the close physical proximity between the two on that day at the inn. Note how the sibilance here evokes the spray of that "severing sea," and suggests a sinister, cruel hiss. It's as though the speaker is spitting out these words.

It's not just distance that now keeps them apart, however; it's also the "laws of men." Perhaps the speaker and his friend are married to other people (autobiographically speaking, this was true), divided by a red line that society says they cannot cross. It's worth remembering that divorce was far more taboo in the Victorian/Edwardian era than it is now. Both phrases use anaphora through the repeated "O," making the speaker seem doubly in pain.

Dramatically addressing these two things that keep him apart from his love, the speaker begs that just once before death they can "stand" together again as they "stood" on that day. In other words, he longs to go back to that moment and, essentially, fix it. But, as that past tense "stood" affirms, love has already had his fun with both of them, and that day at the inn is lost forever.

SYMBOLS

THE FLY

Flies usually appear when something is dead and decaying, and as such are common symbols of death. The unfortunate fly that appears in the poem's third stanza reveals the intensity of the chill between the speaker and his friend once they were finally alone, away from the staff's prying eyes.

Instead of emotional warmth and attraction in this moment, there was only distance and coldness; instead of the presence of love, there was its absence. The atmosphere was *so* tense, *so* awkward, that a little fly by the window shuddered and died, its "tune," or buzzing, silenced forever.

The fly's literal death signals the symbolic death of something else: the *opportunity* for the speaker and his friend to be together romantically. The moment for that has passed them

by.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 23-24:** "And palsied unto death / The pane-fly's tune."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration appears throughout "At an Inn," filling the speaker's lines with music and emotion. The speakers feelings are quite intense—as though they've been bubbling away in a pressure cooker—and the poem's frequent alliteration evokes this intensity. Take lines 1-4:

> When we as strangers sought
> Their catering care,
> Veiled smiles bespoke their thought
> Of what we were.

The alliteration starts the poem off on a bold, forceful note in terms of sound, already suggesting the speaker's longing for "what we were" (that is, for closeness with this friend). The hard /c/ "catering care" specifically hints at the eager enthusiasm of the staff at the inn, as does the later /m/ sounds of "Made them our ministers / Moved them" in lines 13-14.

"Swift sympathy" has a quick, slippery sound, while "living love" is warm and luxurious. The inn staff are keen to help the newcomers because of the love they falsely perceive, and these examples of alliteration ring hollow; they grant the poem a gentle, pleasant beauty that evokes the glow of love, but because love isn't actually there, the sonic effects are a kind of fantasy.

By contrast, note the plosive alliteration in lines 21 to 24, with its bold /b/ and /p/ sounds:

> But that which chilled the breath
> Of afternoon,
> And palsied unto death
> The pane-fly's tune.

Notice how these sounds require the reader to push air out of the mouth, creating a mini version of that "chill[]" that blows between the speaker and his friend. It's a totally opposite effect from the pleasant /l/ sounds of "left," "Love," and "love-light," marking the shift from fantasy to reality.

The poem uses alliteration in the end to build to its rhetorical height. The poem ends on a strong, high note of woe-is-me, and alliteration works alongside apostrophe and repetition to make this a dramatic, heartrending moment. The sibilance of "severing sea" also subtly evokes the salty splash of the waves that keep the speaker and his now-beloved apart.

Finally, note that much of the poem's alliteration comes in pairs, almost mocking the human pair that never was (the speaker and his friend). "Strangers sought," "catering care," "swift sympathy," "living love," "love-light," "come [...] Came," "his hold," "love lingered," "severing sea," "land [...] law," :"stand [...] stood"—these are *all* alliterative couplings! It's like the speaker sees couples wherever he goes, and speaks them whenever he opens his mouth. Love—or the lack of it—is on his mind, expressing itself in everything he does.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When we," "strangers sought"
- **Line 2:** "catering care"
- **Line 4:** "what we were"
- **Line 9:** "swift sympathy"
- **Line 10:** "living love"
- **Line 13:** "Made," "ministers"
- **Line 14:** "Moved"
- **Line 17:** "left"
- **Line 18:** "Love's"
- **Line 19:** "love-light"
- **Line 21:** "But," "breath"
- **Line 23:** "palsied"
- **Line 24:** "pane-fly's"
- **Line 26:** "come"
- **Line 27:** "Came," "his hold"
- **Line 28:** "Love lingered"
- **Line 33:** "we were"
- **Line 37:** "severing sea," "land"
- **Line 38:** "laws"
- **Line 39:** "stand"
- **Line 40:** "stood"

ALLUSION

The poem possibly makes a subtle allusion in lines 31 and 32. In these lines, the speaker asks why love—transformed through personification into a god-like figure—would mess around with people's lives just for his own amusement:

> Why [had Love] shaped us for his sport
> In after-hours?

In other words, the speaker wonders why he and his friend were made to look like they were in love when they weren't—and why, to be doubly cruel, the speaker now aches with love for this same friend when they can't be together. The key word here is "sport," which is so specific as to suggest an allusion to Shakespeare's *King Lear*. In the play, the Earl of Gloucester says:

> As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;
> They kill us for their sport.

In other words, gods—like Love here, perhaps—play with human beings, even killing them, just for fun, just because they can.

This possible allusion suggests that people *think* love is some great, beautiful force, but it's really more like an anarchic prankster, granted the keys to humanity's hearts in order to play cruel tricks on them. It's worth noting, too, that the poem's earlier mention of a fly in line 24 ("The plane-fly's tune") supports this being an allusion to Shakespeare. Perhaps the thought of a fly leads the speaker's mind subconsciously to *King Lear*.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 31-32:** "Why shaped us for his sport / In after-hours?"

APOSTROPHE

"At an Inn" uses apostrophe in its last four lines. At this point, the speaker has told his painful story about the inn, and revealed that, though he and his friend weren't in love back then, now they are (or, at the very least, he loves her).

In terms of rhetorical highs and lows, the ending of the poem is its most dramatic moment. Apostrophe plays a big part in that drama, the speaker calling out to the earth itself as he laments the lost opportunity of that day at the inn. That repeated "O" sounds like the speaker wailing with anguish at the "severing sea and land" (the physical distance between himself and his friend) and the "laws of men" (the societal/moral distance between them).

Apostrophe here works like a cry of pain, and makes the ending particular tortured and tragic. The fact that the "O" gets repeated as anaphora adds to the drama as well.

Of course, all three things that are apostrophized here (the sea, land, and societal conventions) are totally *incapable* of answering the speaker. Put bluntly, then, the speaker is screaming into the void, and it seems there's no hope for a reunion with his beloved.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 37-40:** "O severing sea and land, / O laws of men, / Ere death, once let us stand / As we stood then!"

CONSONANCE

Consonance in the poem works just like alliteration, bringing the speaker's imagery to life and making his emotions seem all the more intense to the reader.

Take the third stanza, for example, where the speaker contrasts what the staff at the inn see between the two newcomers with the reality of their friendship. Where others see pure, joyous love, there's really just a "numb" feeling, a kind of emotional distance. Check out how the soft, muffled /m/ sounds evoke this chilly, numb atmosphere and how thudding /d/ sounds add a sense of heaviness to these lines:

> The kiss their zeal foretold,
> And now deemed come,
> Came not: within his hold
> Love lingered numb.

This stanza *sounds* weighty, lacking the light spark that the inn staff wrongly think exists between the speaker and his friend.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "strangers sought"
- **Line 2:** "catering care"
- **Line 3:** "Veiled smiles"
- **Line 4:** "what we were"
- **Line 7:** "resigned"
- **Line 8:** "love's dear ends"
- **Line 9:** "swift sympathy"
- **Line 10:** "living love"
- **Line 13:** "Made," "ministers"
- **Line 14:** "Moved"
- **Line 17:** "we were," "left alone"
- **Line 18:** "Love's"
- **Line 19:** "never," "love-light," "shone"
- **Line 20:** "Between"
- **Line 21:** "But," "breath"
- **Line 23:** "palsied"
- **Line 24:** "pane-fly's," " tune"
- **Line 26:** "deemed come"
- **Line 27:** "Came," "his hold"
- **Line 28:** "Love lingere," "d," "numb"
- **Line 29:** "cast," "port"
- **Line 30:** "not"
- **Line 31:** "sport"
- **Line 32:** "after-hours"
- **Line 37:** "severing sea," "land"
- **Line 38:** "laws"
- **Line 39:** "stand"
- **Line 40:** "stood"

ENJAMBMENT

Most of "At an Inn" is enjambed, lending the poem a sense of forward momentum. Readers are frequently pulled from one line to the next without any break or pause, perhaps evoking the way that the inn staff jump to conclusions regarding the relationship between the speaker and his friend. The poem's

quick pace suggests that there's no time for the speaker to correct anyone before assumptions have become taken as fact!

In the second stanza, the poem's quick enjambments also mirror the inn staff's enthusiasm. Staffers seem to move more quickly because they think they're in the presence of true love, flitting about to help the "couple."

Enjambment also lends the poem a sense of inevitability, as readers barrel towards its tragic end. Note in particular how the enjambment at the start of stanza 4 builds to a crescendo that comes to an abrupt halt in line 28 with the full stop "Love lingered numb." The opportunity the speaker and his friend once had to become lovers passes them by too quickly; they're "within [love's] hold" for only a moment, not even granted a brief pause at the end of line 27 to savor what might be before reality sets in.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "sought / Their"
- **Lines 3-4:** "thought / Of"
- **Lines 5-6:** "opined / Us"
- **Lines 7-8:** "resigned / For"
- **Lines 9-10:** "sympathy / With"
- **Lines 10-11:** "love / Which"
- **Lines 11-12:** "maybe / The"
- **Lines 12-13:** "above, / Made"
- **Lines 14-15:** "say, / "Ah"
- **Lines 15-16:** "theirs / Would"
- **Lines 17-18:** "alone / As"
- **Lines 19-20:** "shone / Between"
- **Lines 21-22:** "breath / Of"
- **Lines 23-24:** "death / The"
- **Lines 25-26:** "foretold, / And"
- **Lines 26-27:** "come, / Came"
- **Lines 27-28:** "hold / Love"
- **Lines 29-30:** "port / A"
- **Lines 31-32:** "sport / In"
- **Lines 33-34:** "not / That"
- **Lines 35-36:** "what / We"
- **Lines 39-40:** "stand / As"

METAPHOR

The poem uses metaphor throughout to bring its story to life. The poem's first metaphor is short and sweet and comes in line 3, when the staff display "Veiled smiles" at the speaker and his friend. The inn staff's smiles, of course, aren't *literally* veiled. The speaker is saying that the staff make a pretty poor to attempt to *hide* their smiles; their enthusiasm for love shines right through that metaphorical "veil," and is right there on their faces for the speaker and his companion to read. The choice of veil also gestures towards the wedding veil, which brides wear on their wedding days.

The second stanza draws on something more ethereal for its metaphor. The inn staff are so enthused by the love between the speaker and his friend (which isn't really there, remember!) that they become like angels—"ministers"—sent from "the spheres above" (that is, the heavens) to look after the two newcomers. This portrays how the staff see love as something heavenly and precious, and act like guardian angels looking down on the "couple."

In the third stanza, when the speaker and his friend are finally left alone, the poem again turns to metaphor to describe the chilly atmosphere between them. Though the staff might expect the room to be filled with the warm light of love, there's a vague something that metaphorically "chill[s] the breath of afternoon." In other words, the vibe between the speaker and his friend is decidedly *not* romantic! The idea of the afternoon having "breath" is also a subtle form of personification, discussed separately in this guide.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "Veiled smiles"
- **Lines 9-16:** "And that swift sympathy / With living love / Which quicks the world--maybe / The spheres above, / Made them our ministers, / Moved them to say, / "Ah, God, that bliss like theirs / Would flush our day!""
- **Line 18:** "Love's own pair"
- **Lines 19-20:** "Yet never the love-light shone / Between us there!"
- **Lines 21-24:** "But that which chilled the breath / Of afternoon, / And palsied unto death / The pane-fly's tune."
- **Lines 27-28:** "within his hold / Love lingered numb."
- **Lines 29-32:** "Why cast he on our port / A bloom not ours? / Why shaped us for his sport / In after-hours?"

PERSONIFICATION

There's another main character in the poem in addition to the speaker and his companion: love itself! Personified love has his own "dear ends," or precious plans, and a favorite couple. The inn staff think that the speaker and his friend have sacrificed everything for love because they are "Love's own pair" (line 18), two people selected by love, perhaps, to represent love in its purest, most joyful form. The inn staff think love is a kind matchmaker, using his skill to bring lovers together.

Of course, the speaker thinks something entirely different. Capital-L "Love" is more like a god than a person in the poem's second half, and this love plays cruel tricks on humanity, toying with their hearts for his own amusement. To the speaker, love is more like an anarchic prankster than an arrow-toting Cupid. He has the speaker and his friend in a "hold," yet leaves them feeling "numb." The speaker can't figure out why love made him and his friend look like they were in love, but refused them to *grant* them that love in actuality. The speaker thinks it was all

for "sport," Love messing with them just to see what happens.

One other moment personification appears in line 21. When the speaker says that the afternoon at the inn had a "chilled [...] breath," he's referring metaphorically to the emotional distance between the speaker and his friend.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "love's dear ends"
- **Lines 17-18:** "And we were left alone / As Love's own pair"
- **Lines 21-22:** "But that which chilled the breath / Of afternoon"
- **Lines 27-28:** "within his hold / Love lingered numb"
- **Lines 29-32:** "Why cast he on our port / A bloom not ours? / Why shaped us for his sport / In after-hours?"

REPETITION

Repetition is an important part of the poem's last two stanzas, which act like a cold, hard dose of reality, deflating the fantasy of love explored in the poem's first half.

First, there's the polyptoton in lines 26 and 27:

> The kiss their zeal foretold,
> And now deemed **come**,
> **Came** not: [...]

These two words are almost the same, but they represent the dividing line between two opposite worlds: fantasy and reality. In the realm of fantasy, the speaker and his friend were about to kiss—but in reality, they didn't. One moment severs (to use the speaker's own word) life in two directions, and also severs the speaker and his friend from one another. Had that kiss come, that is, perhaps they *would* have been together.

Lamenting this lost opportunity, the speaker asks searching questions that can never be answered. Both of these start with "why" (an example of anaphora), and show the speaker's sense of irresolution and even injustice. Unfortunately for him, no answer is forthcoming.

The speaker then clearly lays out the tragic irony of his life in lines 33 to 36:

> As we seemed we were not
> That day afar,
> And now we seem not what
> We aching are.

This is an example of parallelism, with similar syntax on either side of the comma once again showing those two opposite, incompatible worlds. Both clauses use very similar language, but express completely different things: *we seemed to be together but weren't, and now we aren't together but should be.*

This love was so close, yet so far, the repetition also showing the speaker's fixation on that one day in the past.

Finally, anaphora and polyptoton appear together in the last four lines. The two "O"s, which are also an example of apostrophe, make the speaker seem desperate and pained, while the polypton of "stand" and "stood" marks the impossibility of going back in time, ending the poem on a shift from present-tense to past-tense to highlight the speaker's longing for what might have been.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 26:** "come"
- **Line 27:** "Came"
- **Line 29:** "Why"
- **Line 31:** "Why"
- **Lines 33-36:** "As we seemed we were not / That day afar, / And now we seem not what / We aching are."
- **Line 37:** "O"
- **Line 38:** "O"
- **Line 39:** "stand"
- **Line 40:** "stood"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

In lines 29 to 32, the speaker asks two searching rhetorical questions. He wonders why love, personified (or deified) as a kind of God, would treat people the way he has been treated. He can't see the logic in what happened that day at the inn—why did he and his friend look like they were in love if they weren't? Why was love toying with them in such a cruel way?

Above all, the rhetorical questions foreground the speaker's inability to understand love. Love is a mysterious but all-powerful prankster, who appears to care little for the hearts of human beings. Both questions are, of course, unanswerable—that's the point. They represent the speaker's screaming into the void, hearing only the echo of his own scream coming back at him. The second question is also a possible allusion to Shakespeare's *King Lear*, in which the Earl of Gloucester says that the gods kill humans for "sport" (for fun).

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 29-32:** "Why cast he on our port / A bloom not ours? / Why shaped us for his sport / In after-hours?"

IRONY

The poem' is ironic in two ways:

1. When the speaker and his friend looked like they were in love, they weren't, yet now that they are in love, no one else sees it. This suggests that people don't actually understand love all that much—that genuine love isn't so easily spotted. It also adds to

the pathos and comedy of the poem's first half, as the inn staff bend over backwards to "minister" to the seemingly happy couple, unaware that their efforts are totally misplaced.

2. The more tragic irony lies in the fact that when the speaker and his friend were physically together—right next to each other, alone in the same room—they weren't in love, and now that are in love, they can't be physically together. When love was within their reach they didn't want it, and now that they want love they can't have it, separated as they are by geography and the "laws of men."

Both ironies present love itself as something mysterious, painful, and even cruel. Love and the circumstances to actually act on that love don't ever line up in the poem, leaving both parties "aching" and alone.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-40

VOCABULARY

Catering (Line 2) - Providing service, like food, drinks, or accommodation.

Bespoke (Line 3) - Revealed/showed.

Dear Ends (Line 8) - Precious plans.

Quicks (Line 11) - Speeds up.

Spheres (Line 12) - The planets.

Ministers (Line 13) - Attendants, angels.

Flush (Line 16) - Fill, with connotations of being made to go red (like the flushed faces of people in love).

Palsied (Line 23) - Shuddered or paralyzed.

Unto (Line 23) - Archaic form of "to" or "until."

Pane-fly (Line 24) - A fly in the window ("pane" as in window-pane).

Zeal (Line 25) - Enthusiasm/obsession.

Foretold (Line 25) - Predicted/prophesied.

Cast (Line 29) - Made/lit up.

Port (Line 29) - Appearance.

Bloom (Line 30) - Glow.

Sport (Line 31) - Fun/amusement.

Severing (Line 37) - Separating, through a cut.

Ere (Line 39) - Archaic form of "before."

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"At an Inn" is broken up into five eight-line stanzas, each featuring a steady meter and rhyme scheme (based on this rhyme scheme, the stanzas can further be broken down into pairs of quatrains). This form is relatively simple and straightforward, and thus keeps the reader's focus on the story at hand.

The poem also divides pretty neatly into two parts: the first two stanzas focus on the inn staff's response to the speaker and his friend, while the final three reveal their actual relationship to each other both during their stay at the inn and in the present. In a way, then, the first chunk of the poem deals in a *fantasy* and the second in *reality*.

When the speaker and his friend first arrive at the inn, they are received enthusiastically as an example of true love. This illusion makes up lines 1 to 18, only to get punctured by lines 19 and 20 when the speaker reveals that this "love-light" wasn't real. By the time the speaker admits his love for his companion in the poem's end, the chance for love is long gone—a fact mirrored by the poem's structure, which literally places the distant illusion of their courtship many lines above this present reality.

METER

The poem alternates between lines of iambic trimeter (meaning there are three iambs, feet with an unstressed-stressed syllable pattern, per line) and iambic dimeter (two iambs per line). Lines 17 and 18 show this pattern at work:

> And we | were left | alone
> As Love's | own pair;

Iambs are a very common foot in English poetry because they sound a lot like natural speech. That said, the meter here features a fair amount of substitutions (with the speaker swapping extra syllables or feet other than iambs into lines), and this keeps things from feeling *too* strict or rigid.

It's also worth noting how this metrical pattern is, in essence, broken iambic pentameter (a meter with five iambs per line). Iambic pentameter is the typical meter of the sonnet, and thus probably the metrical sound most associated with love poetry. The fact it is echoed here in broken form—lines of three and then two iambs, rather than a single line of five—might subtly evoke the brokenness of the speaker's romantic life.

RHYME SCHEME

Each stanza of "At an Inn" uses the following rhyme scheme:

ABABCDCD

As with the poem's steady meter and form, this lends the

speaker's story a sense of momentum and perhaps even predictability. That predictability, in turn, might suggest how the past can't be changed; the speaker and his friend have missed the chance to be together romantically.

Also notice that the alternating rhymes here come in *pairs*—or, in other words, in *couples*. Back at the inn, the speaker and his friend had the outward *appearance* of a couple, but love, like some evil prankster, was just messing with them. The poem's rhyme pairs are separated (ABAB rather than AABB), and thus subtly acts out this tension between togetherness and separateness: each end-word has another word it's meant to be with, but these words are kept at a distance.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "At an Inn" is generally interpreted as being the poet, Thomas Hardy, himself. The poem is thought to be based in a real-life visit to an inn with Hardy's friend Florence Henniker. That said, knowing the biographical details behind the poem aren't really necessary to getting a sense of what's going on. It's clear enough from the poem alone that the speaker is someone who feels jaded and perplexed by love, having had and lost the chance to be with the object of his affection.

It's worth noting, too, that the reader doesn't really know what the speaker's friend actually thinks about all this! The reader only knows what the speaker tells them to go on, and it's impossible to say for sure if speaker's friend really returns his feelings.

SETTING

The story told within the poem takes place on one particular day in the past when the speaker visited an inn with a female friend. The poem's first half describes how the inn staff received the "couple" as though they were on some kind of romantic tryst despite the fact that, in reality, they weren't together.

The poem's setting towards its middle reflects that reality: instead of a warm atmosphere suffused with love, the speaker and his friend actually felt a chill pass between them—representing an emotional distance, or perhaps the death of an opportunity.

The poem then ends with the speaker reflecting on this experience in the present, turning it over again and again in his mind. This jump in time underscores that the chance for the speaker and his friend—who have since fallen in love—to be together has definitively passed them by.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"At an Inn" was first published in 1898 in Thomas Hardy's debut poetry collection, *Wessex Poems and Other Verses*. By this time, Hardy was 58 years old and well-known as a novelist. These poems were collected over the decades and set against the same semi-fictional backdrop as his novels: Wessex.

Hardy described Wessex as a "merely realistic dream country" situated in southern England. Inns and pubs are quintessential feature of Wessex, places for local social gathering or rest-stops for weary travelers.

The poem is presumed to be autobiographical, and one of at least two Hardy poems that refer to his relationship with Florence Henniker, a poet and novelist with aristocratic lineage. As the story goes, Hardy made sexual advances Henniker and was swiftly rejected, not least because he was married at the time! They did, however, strike up a friendship, and wrote letters to each other for many years. On one particular occasion, they met at an inn in Winchester—and, as in the poem, were mistaken for man and wife. Hardy's poem "Broken Appointment" similarly laments a kind of missed romantic opportunity.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wessex Poems, in which this poem first appeared, was published in 1898, at the tail-end of the Victorian era in Britain. This period was a time of great scientific and technological advancement, combined with a re-evaluation of society's relationship with religion. Through its empire, Britain ruled much of the globe.

While the wider context of Victorian society doesn't appear prominently in "At an Inn," its moral strictures do lurk in the background. The inn staff make an assumption guided by the social mores of the day: if a man and a woman are together, then they are probably husband and wife.

The British exceptionalism of the Victorian period—in which Britons believed their country to be special and advanced—found expression at a more local level through stringent moral codes and social etiquette. When the speaker screams in frustration against the "laws of men" in line 38, he's probably thinking about how society prevents him from being with the woman whom the inn staff mistook for his partner. Indeed, both Hardy and Henniker were married to others.

Of course, many people had affairs, and there was plenty of supposedly immoral behavior going on behind close doors. But for the Victorians, particularly the middle and upper classes, keeping up appearances was a key part of daily life.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Wessex Poems and Other Verses — Check out the full text of the collection in which "At an Inn" first appeared. (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3167/3167-h/3167-h.htm)
- Hardy and Henniker — Read letters between the poet and Florence Henniker, thought to have been his companion on that day at the inn. (http://hardycorrespondents.exeter.ac.uk/person.html?person=FlorenceHenniker)
- Heart of Thomas Hardy Documentary — Watch a BBC documentary about Hardy's life and works. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Jgx6ez9LYM)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to a recording of "At an Inn." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxMipnnyJk4&ab_channel=freeaudiobooks84)
- "The Old Inns of England" — Browse an illustrated history of England's inns, some over 500 years old, in this book from the early 20th century. (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/43865/43865-h/43865-h.htm)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER THOMAS HARDY POEMS

- A Wife In London
- Channel Firing
- Neutral Tones
- The Convergence of the Twain
- The Darkling Thrush
- The Man He Killed
- The Ruined Maid

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