A Broken Appointment

POEM TEXT

1 You did not come,
2 And marching Time drew on, and wore me numb,—
3 Yet less for loss of your dear presence there
4 Than that I thus found lacking in your make
5 That high compassion which can overbear
6 Reluctance for pure lovingkindness' sake
7 Grieved I, when, as the hope-hour stroked its sum,
8 You did not come.

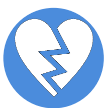
9 You love not me,
10 And love alone can lend you loyalty;
11 —I know and knew it. But, unto the store
12 Of human deeds divine in all but name,
13 Was it not worth a little hour or more
14 To add yet this: Once you, a woman, came
15 To soothe a time-torn man; even though it be
16 You love not me?

SUMMARY

You stood me up, and time kept marching on while I waited for you, wearing me down. But it wasn't the fact that I didn't get the pleasure of your company that upset me. It was more that I realized your character lacked the kind of deep empathy that would have outweighed your hesitation to see me and pushed you to come simply because it was the kind and compassionate thing to do. That's why I was so upset when the hopeful hour of our meeting came and went and you didn't show.

You're not in love with me, and only love can grant the kind of faithful compassion I'm talking about. I know that now and I knew it at the time. But, to the pile of human kindness, wouldn't it have been worth giving up just an hour of your time to contribute this good deed: one occasion on which you, a woman, came to comfort a man made weary by time—even if you don't love me?

THEMES



LOVE, COMPASSION, AND DISAPPOINTMENT

"A Broken Appointment" describes a meeting that never took place: the poem's speaker was supposed to see the woman he loved, but she stood him up. The speaker feels let down not just because his love is apparently unrequited, but because his beloved failed to display what the speaker considers common courtesy. The speaker implies that human beings have a moral duty to treat each other kindly and lovingly (with what the poem calls "lovingkindness"), and he's thus bitterly disappointed that this woman refused to take the time to "soothe" his heartache.

Though clearly experiencing a classic case of unrequited love, the speaker insists that it's not the woman's rejection that's upset him so much. Instead, it's the brutal fact that she didn't bother to come to their "appointment," or meet up—something the speaker basically sees as a *moral* failure on this woman's part.

The speaker complains that the woman lacked the "high compassion" (that is, strong sense of empathy) to get over her "reluctance" to meet him. The kind and loving thing to do, he argues, would have been to spend "a little hour" with him regardless of the fact that she didn't really want to. This would have "soothe[d] a time-worn," or weary older, "man." The speaker insists that meeting him despite not loving him would have added to the total sum of human kindness. It would have made the world a better, even holier, place.

Yet the speaker acknowledges that his position is a little contradictory. By his own admission, people reserve this "high compassion" only for those they love most—and, for this particular woman, he's not one of those people. "Love alone," says the speaker, inspires the kind of "loyalty" he implicitly demands. In a way, then, the speaker understands why the woman didn't come. He just wishes he lived in a world where people turn up when they say they will.

It's ultimately up to the reader to decide if they agree with the speaker or not. Perhaps he's got a point: people *could* be that little bit kinder and more compassionate in general and make more of an effort to "soothe" others' pain. Of course, readers might disagree that this woman had a moral obligation to make the speaker feel better. The speaker's anger over her supposedly poor character might really just be his own wounded pride talking.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

You did not come,
And marching Time drew on, and wore me numb,—

"A Broken Appointment" begins with its speaker clearly feeling let down. He had an "appointment"—that is, a meeting/date—with a woman, but she stood him up: "You did not come," the speaker says bluntly, addressing the woman directly. Given that the woman isn't around to respond, this is an example of apostrophe. The brevity of this opening line captures the speaker's shock and hurt at the woman's decision not to come.

The speaker clearly has strong feelings for this woman, and, in line 2, he describes coming to the crushing realization that she wasn't ever going to show. "Time" cruelly marched on; the hour of their "appointment came and went, and the clock kept ticking, indifferent to the speaker's emotions. The speaker grew "numb" with waiting, his emotions worn thin.

While the opening line contained just four blunt syllables, the second line falls into iambic pentameter: a meter in which each line contains five iambs, poetic feet with an unstressed-**stressed** syllable pattern (i.e., da-**DUM**).

> And **march-** | ing **Time** | drew **on,** | and **wore** | me **numb,—**

The longer length of this line helps to convey the speaker's discomfort. The line stretches on, capturing how time seemed to "draw on" while the speaker waited. The regular iambs also seem to "march" like time: left, **right**, left, **right**; da-**DUM**, da-**DUM**, da-**DUM**.

Finally, these opening lines form a rhyming couplet: "come"/"numb." This perfect rhyme lends the opening a sense of firmness and finality. The woman didn't show, and there's nothing the speaker can do about it.

LINES 3-8

Yet less for loss of your dear presence there
Than that I thus found lacking in your make
That high compassion which can overbear
Reluctance for pure lovingkindness' sake
Grieved I, when, as the hope-hour stroked its sum,
You did not come.

The speaker claims that he's not actually all that mad about the fact that this woman stood him up. He's less upset by the loss of her "dear presence," or pleasant company, than he is by the realization that her "make," or character, is "lacking." Basically, the speaker insists that his disappointment *really* stems from the fact that she's not as good a person as he thought she was.

More specifically, she doesn't possess the kind of "high compassion," or deep kindness and empathy, that would have compelled her to set aside her "reluctance" to see the speaker. "High compassion," in this poem, is a virtue that entails looking *beyond* one's own wants, desires, and preferences: it pushes people to live on behalf of "pure lovingkindness" (a word of Hardy's own invention). Such compassion has the power to "overbear," or overcome, individual hesitation and unwillingness.

Readers might ask themselves, is it really fair to expect others to act for "pure lovingkindness' sake?" Should the speaker really expect this woman to put aside her own desires just so she doesn't hurt his feelings?

The poem never answers these questions, but the sounds of these lines hint at the frustration underlying the speaker's seemingly measured argument. The sharp, biting consonance of "lacking," "make," "compassion," "Reluctance," "kindness," and "sake" subtly reflects the speaker's bitterness. Though he's talking about nice things like "compassion" and "kindness," readers can perhaps sense buried anger. It's possible that these accusations about the woman's poor moral character are part of the speaker's attempts to make himself feel better.

In line 7, the main verb of the sentence that began in line 3 finally arrives: the speaker says that he "grieved" for the woman's lack of compassion and "pure lovingkindness." The speaker then reiterates how terrible it feels to wait around for someone who never shows.

At first, he was excited about their date and thought that her arrival would be the start—or the continuation–of a loving relationship. He calls the first chunk of waiting around the "hope-hour": an hour brimming with all the excitement of what might be to come. But as the clock ticked on and the woman didn't appear, the speaker's hope began to dwindle: that "hope-hour stroked its sum," or reached the end of its tally of seconds and minutes.

The last line of the stanza then repeats the first line verbatim, circling back on itself. The poem doesn't go anywhere—just like the relationship itself.

LINES 9-11

You love not me,
And love alone can lend you loyalty;
—I know and knew it.

The second stanza opens with another plain statement of fact. The speaker concedes: "You love not me." The poem keeps up the use of apostrophe, which just makes the woman—the poem's addressee—seem all the more absent. She's not around to reply and give her take on things.

In line 10, the speaker admits that their take on the broken appointment is a little contradictory. "Love alone can lend you loyalty," he says, meaning that love is the one thing that can make people behave with the "high compassion" that the

speaker talked about in the previous stanza. The speaker argues that people put aside their own "reluctance" and show up for each other if, and only if, they love each other. Note how the diacope of "love"—which appears in lines 9 and 10—underscores its importance:

> You **love** not me,
> And **love** alone can lend you loyalty;

The line also features some prominent alliteration:

> And **l**ove a**l**one can **l**end you **l**oya**l**ty;

The gentle /l/ sounds elevate the poem's language in this line, making this depiction of "love" seem all the more elegant and tender.

The repetition of the following line then hammers home the speaker's awareness of love's importance:

> —I know and knew it. [...]

The speaker is fully aware that only love inspires the kind of devoted morality that he's talking about. He knew this when waiting around for the woman to show, too. According to his own logic, then, it's perfectly understandable that she wouldn't meet up with him on the basis of emotional charity alone.

Alas, it seems he let his "hope" get the better of him for a moment. It sounds as though he let himself think that maybe, just maybe, his love would be returned.

LINES 11-14

But, unto the store
Of human deeds divine in all but name,
Was it not worth a little hour or more
To add yet this:

After the caesura in line 11, the speaker poses a rhetorical question to the woman who stood him up. First, the speaker introduces the idea that there is a "store" of human acts of kindness (or "pure lovingkindness"). Imagine all the empathetic deeds going on around the world at any given time. Together, they form a kind of stockpile of goodness—and the woman could have added to that pile, the argues the speaker, if only she'd shown up to keep him company.

The speaker calls such acts of kindness "human deeds divine in all but name." In other words, they are holy, godlike, worthy of worship. What stops them from actually being *called* divine? The speaker probably means that such actions don't get the attention they deserve and/or people don't value them as much as they should (people such as the woman herself, in the speaker's view).

The speaker then asks:

> Was it not worth a little hour or more
> To add yet this: [...]

In other words, the woman *could* have contributed to that stockpile of goodness if she'd only given up one measly hour of her time. This rhetorical question paints her in an increasingly selfish, mean-spirited light.

LINES 14-16

Once you, a woman, came
To soothe a time-torn man; even though it be
You love not me?

Had the woman simply shown up and made the old, weary speaker feel better, the speaker argues, this action would have been one more good deed to add to the "store" of human kindness. In fact, the speaker suggests that coming to see him would have been all the *more* kind, all the *more* compassionate, precisely *because* the woman doesn't love him back. She would have been doing something particularly selfless in coming "To soothe a time-torn man."

The last line of the poem then repeats line 9 (the first line of the second stanza). This repetition works like a bell ringing out once more to commemorate the speaker's loneliness. As with the repetition at the end of the first stanza, it also means the poem ends where it began. The speaker is still alone, and he still hasn't overcome his sorrow and disappointment.

Of course, readers might detect more than a whiff of self-pity in these words. The speaker's revelations about the "store" of human kindness, and human beings' duty to add to it, could simply be a smokescreen for the fact he's resentful that the woman didn't show. That is, all this talk about human beings' moral obligation to "soothe" each other might *really* just be sour grapes. Readers can decide for themselves if the speaker genuinely believes that the woman displayed a moral failing in refusing to respect their "appointment."

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

"A Broken Appointment" uses apostrophe from start to finish, as the speaker directly addresses the woman who failed to show up to their planned "appointment." The woman, of course, isn't around to reply.

Somewhat paradoxically, this apostrophe makes the woman's absence all the more unavoidable (or present). She's very noticeably *not there*. Repeatedly calling out to her makes the speaker come across as all the more lonely and dejected. Her absence rings out in every line.

The speaker's words resound in a kind of echo chamber. These are *his* thoughts, and *his* thoughts alone (and they keep circling

back to the plain facts: "You did not come," "You love not me"). For all the speaker's passionate reasoning, his words don't find their intended target; the woman's not around to hear his pleas, which makes them more poignant (or, perhaps, pathetic). In fact, all these "you"s start to sound a little obsessive, even accusatory, as the poem goes on. The speaker remains intensely fixated on this woman, even though she clearly doesn't return his affections.

By the poem's end, readers might be considering whether the speaker's criticism is really fair. There are two sides to every romance story—and this poem can only present one.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

CONSONANCE

"A Broken Appointment" uses consonance, as well as the related sonic devices alliteration and assonance, to create its melancholy tone and to convey the speaker's bitter, downtrodden mood.

Take the poem's second line, where muted, mournful /n/ and /m/ sounds make it seem as though the speaker can barely get the words out:

> And marching Time drew on, and wore me numb,—

Contrast those sounds with the spiky consonance and hissing sibilance found throughout lines 4 to 7:

> Than that I thus found lacking in your make
> That high compassion which can overbear
> Reluctance for pure lovingkindness' sake
> Grieved I, when, as the hope-hour stroked its sum,

The mixture of sharp /k/ sounds and spitting sibilance evoke the speaker's bitter disappointment as he laments this woman's supposed lack of empathy. Yet as the speaker reflects on the power of "love" to make people compassionate and kind, the poem's sounds become gentle and tender:

> And love alone can lend you loyalty;

The speaker's language feels softer, sweeter, and perhaps a little sadder when lamenting that love, and only love, can make people behave with "high compassion."

Later, the thudding /d/ alliteration of "deeds divine" makes this phrase stand out to the reader's ear, emphasizing the importance of those acts of human kindness. Finally, the crisp alliteration of "time-torn man" again hints at the speaker's bitterness; his description of himself sounds rough and ragged, reflecting the idea that life has been cruel to him.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "marching Time," "on," "me," "numb"
- **Line 3:** "less," "loss"
- **Line 4:** "Than that," "thus," "lacking," "make"
- **Line 5:** "compassion," "can"
- **Line 6:** "Reluctance"
- **Lines 6-6:** "lovingkindness / ' sake"
- **Line 7:** "stroked," "sum"
- **Line 10:** "love alone," "lend," "loyalty"
- **Line 11:** "know," "knew"
- **Line 12:** "deeds divine"
- **Line 15:** "time-torn"

ENJAMBMENT

"A Broken Appointment" is filled with enjambment, as the speaker's long, twisting sentences sprawl across line after line. This enjambment pulls readers into the poem while also creating tension and anticipation, as readers must read on and on to fully understand the speaker's point.

Both stanzas have a similar structure: they start with a relatively simple sentence before launching into a long, thorny sentence. Here's the sentence that begins in line 3:

> Yet less for loss of your dear presence there
> Than that I thus found lacking in your make
> That high compassion which can overbear
> Reluctance for pure lovingkindness' sake
> Grieved I, [...]

On the first read, this might seem hard to unpack. There is no caesura to offer any pause, and each line enjambs into the next, piling words upon words. It's not until line 7, with "Grieved I," that the sentence actually reaches its main verb (and the sentence itself still isn't finished!).

Thanks to all this enjambment, there's quite a bit of build-up as readers plow forward until reaching the verb "Grieved" and the caesura that follows. That grief thus feels especially momentous; the enjambment suspends the sentence in the air, while "Grieved I" brings it crashing back down to earth.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "there / Than"
- **Lines 4-5:** "make / That"
- **Lines 5-6:** "overbear / Reluctance"
- **Lines 6-7:** "sake / Grieved"
- **Lines 11-12:** "store / Of"
- **Lines 13-14:** "more / To"
- **Lines 14-15:** "came / To"
- **Lines 15-16:** "be / You"

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REPETITION

Both stanzas in "A Broken Appointment" follow the same pattern: the final line of each stanza repeats the first line of that stanza word for word. These lines themselves are both short, blunt, and brutally to the point: "You did not come" and "You love not me." For all the speaker's complex reasoning about moral duty elsewhere in the poem, these lines bring it all back to the painful facts. The speaker can't escape reality: his beloved didn't show up and she doesn't love him.

The parallelism of these lines makes the repetition ring out even more emphatically: both lines have four syllables and use the phrasing "You [blank] not [blank]." As a result, the poem feels circular, as though it loops itself to essentially end where it began. Nothing has changed; the woman still hasn't shown, their relationship never got off the ground, and the speaker is still miserable.

There are two other important examples of repetition in the poem. The diacope of "love" in line 9 emphasizes the importance of "love" in treating people with empathy (in the speaker's mind):

> You love not me,
> And love alone can lend you loyalty;

That repetition creates a cause-and-effect scenario: the speaker doesn't have this woman's love, and love is the one thing that can make people display the "high compassion" the speaker desires. As such, the speaker shouldn't expect to receive such "high compassion" from this woman.

In the next line, the polyptoton of "know" and "knew" makes the speaker sound more emphatic: he already *knew* that the kind of "high compassion" he's talking about is reserved for people in love, and he certainly still knows it now. The repetition makes him sound a bit sheepish, as though embarrassed about getting his hopes up and seeking to reassure himself that he's still a logical, rational person.

At the same time, the repetition suggests that there's something a bit different between logically knowing something and knowing it through experience. That is, he always knew, deep down, that this woman didn't love him, but now that knowledge feels painfully fresh and present.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "You did not come,"
- **Line 8:** "You did not come."
- **Line 9:** "You love not me,"
- **Line 10:** "love"
- **Line 11:** "know," "knew"
- **Line 16:** "You love not me?"

VOCABULARY

Make (Line 4) - Character, innate personality.

High compassion (Line 5) - Extreme kindness or empathy.

Overbear (Line 5) - Overcome.

Lovingkindness (Line 6) - The pure kindness that stems from love.

Hope-hour (Line 7) - The period of time in which the speaker optimistically anticipated the woman's arrival.

Stroked its sum (Line 7) - Reached its end/total, by accumulating the appropriate amount of minutes. The "stroke[s]" here are the chimes of the clock that marks the hour.

Lend you loyalty (Line 10) - That is, "make you faithful and compassionate."

Unto (Line 11) - To/into.

Store (Line 11) - The overall amount/stock.

Human deeds (Line 12) - People's actions.

Time-torn (Line 15) - Worn out by the passing years.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"A Broken Appointment" consists of two eight-line stanzas (a.k.a. octets). The shape of the poem on the page subtly mirrors the situation it describes: there are two stanzas, just like there are two people involved in this story.

Both stanzas also begin and end with the same lines. Each of these lines contains four monosyllabic words that provide a brutal statement of the facts: "You did not come" and "You love not me." Through these repetitive lines, the poem circles back on itself, evoking the speaker's persistent frustration and despair. It's as if the poem can't make any forward progress—it's stuck, just like the speaker himself.

METER

"A Broken Appointment" mostly uses iambic pentameter: a meter in which each line contains five poetic feet called iambs, which follow an unstressed-stressed beat pattern (da-DUM).

Here's line 2 as an example. Notice how the steady march of those iambic feet conjures the sense of time marching relentlessly forward:

> And march- | ing Time | drew on, | and wore | me numb,—

These iambs make it easy to picture the speaker waiting, constantly checking the time and feeling the pain of each passing second.

The meter isn't particularly strict, however. There are plenty of variations throughout the poem, which help to convey the sense of a speaker at the mercy of his emotions. That is, the steady iambic march suggests that the speaker is keeping a tight lid on his feelings and simply making a rational argument, while the moments when the meter breaks hint at the frustration and despair bubbling beneath the poem's surface.

Take line 7, which opens with a spondee (two **stressed** beats in a row): "**Grieved I**." This forceful foot conveys the intensity of the speaker's grief.

And, of course, the first and final lines of both stanzas are much shorter than the rest. Lines 1, 8, 9, and 16 all contain just four syllables. As a result, these lines feel particularly blunt and to the point.

RHYME SCHEME

Both stanzas follow the same regular rhyme scheme: AABCBCAA.

Each stanza thus begins and ends with a rhyming couplet. The final lines of each stanza also repeat the stanzas' first lines exactly. Here are the opening lines as an example:

> You did not **come**,
> And marching Time drew on, and wore me **numb**,—
> [...]
> Grieved I, when, as the hope-hour stroked its **sum**,
> You did not **come**.

The poem thus opens and closes with paired rhymes, perhaps reflecting the speaker's own desire to be part of a couple. The intervening sections use an alternating rhyme pattern, and as a result, the rhyme sounds in lines 3-6 and lines 11-14 are more distanced from each other. This break with the couplet pattern might reflect the speaker's heartbreak and separation from the woman he loves.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "A Broken Appointment" is a man who has been stood up by the woman he loves. He talks directly to this woman throughout the poem, and this insistent apostrophe both emphasizes the woman's absence (she's not there to reply) and makes the speaker sound more accusatory and frustrated.

Though clearly heartbroken, the speaker insists that it's not the heartbreak itself that's made him so upset. It's more the fact that this woman didn't turn out to be who the speaker thought she was. He thought she was the kind of person who would visit the speaker despite not loving him back—that she'd overcome her "reluctance" to see him for the simple sake of being loving and kind.

The speaker is deeply disappointed to realize that the woman isn't as empathetic and selfless as he'd hoped, however, and he calls out this supposed flaw in her moral character. At the same time, the speaker admits that this kind of "loyalty" only really comes from being in love. Given that he knows quite well that the woman doesn't reciprocate his feelings, he should, in theory, never have expected her to turn up in the first place.

The speaker also comes across as self pitying. He sees himself as "a time-torn man," someone worn down by the years and in need of some tenderness. Yet while he constructs a compelling argument about the importance of compassion, readers might suspect that he also just feels intensely bitter about the fact she never showed. The reader can decide whether he really does believe that the woman should have added to the "store" of good deeds by coming to see him, or if he's just trying to "soothe" his own bruised ego.

SETTING

The poem takes place shortly after the "broken appointment" of the title. The speaker had been waiting around for his beloved to show up to their arranged meeting, but she stood him up. Now, the "hope-hour" over, the speaker bitterly reflects on what this woman's failure to arrive says about her character.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was an English poet and a novelist known for his passionate opposition to the cruelty and hypocrisy of the buttoned-up Victorian world he was born into. Though Hardy is most famous now for novels like *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, those books weren't especially well-received during his lifetime: frank and shocking, they were just too much for many Victorians. Instead, Hardy made his reputation as a poet.

"A Broken Appointment" was published in Hardy's second poetry collection, *Poems of the Past and the Present* (1901). The book was successful, largely because of the war poems included in the first section; the British public admired its treatment of the Second Boer War (a conflict that Britain was fighting in South Africa at the time). "A Broken Appointment" appears later in the collection, taking its place among poems like "The Inconsistent," and "Between Us Now," which focus on lost romantic opportunities and what might have been.

"A Broken Appointment," like the rest of Hardy's poetry, features conventional meter and rhyme, the tools that dominated pre-20th-century verse. The poem also conveys much the same philosophical pessimism that marks Hardy's writing more broadly. His skeptical outlook influenced a

number of 20th-century poets, including Robert Frost and Philip Larkin.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Hardy grew up in 1840s and 1850s England, making him a man of the Victorian era (which lasted from 1837 to 1901). This period can be simultaneously described as a time of great advancement and great loss. England was at the height of its power and prosperity, but also split by deep divisions between the rich and the poor, the upper classes and the lower classes, and men and women.

In "A Broken Appointment," the speaker's complaints to the woman who stood him up are framed, consciously or not, by their respective genders ("you, a woman," didn't "soothe" me, a "man"). This reflects the patriarchal power structures of Victorian society. While readers never hear from the woman in this poem, the rigid social mores of Victorian England make it pretty understandable why she wouldn't want to meet up with a man she had no romantic interest in.

The Victorian era was a difficult time to be a woman. Sexuality was off-limits outside the confines of marriage—but only for women; men could essentially do what they liked and get away with it. This double standard left a lot of women in desperate circumstances. If a woman was known to have had sex outside wedlock (or to have had a child), she was likely to be cast out of respectable society altogether, and perhaps forced into prostitution.

Some critics believe that Hardy wrote this poem about Florence Henniker, a poet and novelist with aristocratic lineage. As the story goes, Hardy made sexual advances on Henniker and was swiftly rejected, not least because both were 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 called "At an Inn," were mistaken for man and wife. This poem similarly laments a kind of missed romantic opportunity

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Poems of the Past and Present — Read the full collection in which "A Broken Appointment" appeared. (https://archive.org/details/poemsofpastandpr00harduoft/page/128/mode/2up)
- Hardy and Henniker — Read letters between the poet and Florence Henniker, the woman who might have inspired "A Broken Appointment." (https://hardycorrespondents.exeter.ac.uk/person.html?person=FlorenceHenniker)
- The Hardy Society — Explore a treasure trove of resources about the poet provided by the Hardy Society. (https://www.hardysociety.org/resources/)
- The Poem Out Loud — Listen to "A Broken Appointment" read aloud by the famed Welsh poet Dylan Thomas. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5_cUbbl3c0)
- The Heart of Thomas Hardy — Watch a BBC documentary about Hardy's life and work. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Jgx6ez9LYM)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER THOMAS HARDY POEMS

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