The Voice

POEM TEXT

Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me,
Saying that now you are not as you were
When you had changed from the one who was all to me,
But as at first, when our day was fair.

Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you, then,
Standing as when I drew near to the town
Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then,
Even to the original air-blue gown!

Or is it only the breeze, in its listlessness
Travelling across the wet mead to me here,
You being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness,
Heard no more again far or near?

Thus I; faltering forward,
Leaves around me falling,
Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,
And the woman calling.

SUMMARY

Woman, whom I miss deeply, I hear you call to me. You say you're not the different person you were at the end of your life (as opposed to the woman who once was my everything), but that you're like you were at the beginning of our relationship, when things were good between us.

Is it really you that I'm hearing? Then let me see you standing like you used to, back when I'd be getting closer to town and you'd be there waiting for me. Yes, just like you were then, even down to the original sky-blue dress you wore!

Or am I actually just hearing the wind as it aimlessly blows across the damp meadow towards me? Have you disappeared forever into a state of pale non-existence, never to be heard from again?

And so, I'm stumbling ahead as the leaves fall around me. The northern wind slowly seeps through the shrubbery, and I hear the woman's voice.

THEMES

GRIEF, NOSTALGIA, AND REGRET

Inspired by the death of Thomas Hardy's first wife, "The Voice" explores the way that grief raises feelings of regret, nostalgia, and longing. The speaker grieves not just for a dead woman he once loved, but also for the good times they once shared. When he hears her voice calling out to him (or imagines he does), however, it's her voice from the joyful days at the beginning of their relationship—not her voice as it was when she died. That voice makes the speaker long to reach out to his lost loved one, recovering an earlier version of her from happier times. Of course, that's sadly impossible. Grief, the poem suggests, leaves survivors mourning not just the person who's gone, but the *times* that are gone: death reminds the bereaved that the past can be neither changed nor recovered, no matter how much they want to turn back the clock.

Deep in mourning for a woman he once loved, the speaker hears her voice calling to him. Yet that voice doesn't sound exactly like the dead woman the speaker knew at the end of her life; instead, it sounds like some earlier version of her—the woman she was "at first," back when her relationship with the speaker was loving and happy.

In fact, the voice *itself* makes this claim: it tells the speaker that "now you [the speaker's lover] are not as you were / When you had changed from the one who was all to me." In other words, the voice says that death has restored the woman to an earlier, happier state—and also lets readers know that she had "changed" dramatically between then and her death, and not for the better. She and the speaker must have grown apart before she died.

The voice's call transports the speaker down memory lane, making him remember his lover as she looked when they first got together. Grief, here, acts as a kind of floodgate, opening to let memories—and regrets—flow through from the past. Listening to the voice, the speaker imagines the woman "Standing as when I drew near to the town / Where you would wait for me," excitedly watching for him. In his imagination, she even wears the same "air-blue gown" that she did back then. Through this voice, the speaker lets himself hope that death has released the woman from whatever heaviness passed between her and the speaker in later years. She is restored to an earlier, more joyful version of herself—a version of herself the speaker is still in love with.

However, as the speaker himself admits, the beloved's voice might all be a trick of his mind: what he hears, he says, could

easily just be "the breeze," and his former lover might really be "heard no more again far or near," or lost forever. In other words, in wanting to hear his beloved's voice as it once was, the speaker might just be lost in hopeless regrets, wishing in vain that what went wrong for the couple might somehow be put right. Alas, all the things that might have been unresolved between the speaker and the woman will forever remain unresolved. He might still hear "the woman calling" for the rest of his life, but he'll never be able to return to their happy times together or heal the rift between them.

The poem thus shows how death can conjure up a longing not just for the lost loved one, but for happier times—not to mention painful regret over everything one can't change about the past.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

THE STRANGENESS OF DEATH

"The Voice" captures how hard it can be to accept that a person who has died is never coming back. The speaker feels that, on the one hand, his ex-partner has gone forever. At the same time, he seems to hear her voice calling to him everywhere, and he feels as if she might appear in front of him again at any moment. Death, the poem suggests, leaves the living stuck in a paradox: the dead seem both inaccessibly distant *and* ever-present.

On the one hand, the speaker *knows* that his ex-partner has died and won't come back. Calling her "Woman much missed," he reflects that she's likely to be "forever dissolved," never to be "heard again."

However, she still *feels* very present to him. He hears "the woman calling" on the wind throughout the poem, as though she's insistently reaching out to him in a loving, familiar voice. He sees her in his mind's eye, too, still in "the original air-blue gown" that she used to wear at the happy beginning of their relationship. This voice feels so real that the speaker replies to it, begging the woman to let him "see" her in earnest.

But though the speaker feels as if he can hear—and almost see—his former lover, he also knows deep down that he'll never meet her again on this earth. Her death leaves him in a strange limbo, feeling as if this woman is both always with him *and* lost forever.

The poem thus captures not just the pure sadness of someone's passing, but also the sheer bewilderment of grief. Losing someone you know very well, the poem suggests, can leave you feeling as if the dead person is ever-present and inaccessible at the same time—a terribly painful and confusing predicament.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-16

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINE 1

Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me,

The speaker begins the poem by addressing the owner of the "voice" of the title directly, an example of apostrophe: "Woman," he says, calling out to *her* just as she seems to repeatedly "call to" *him*.

The speaker specifically calls this person "Woman much missed," a phrase filled with humming /m/ consonance and alliteration. The very sounds of the poem call attention to themselves, subtly conveying the power of this mysterious voice.

The speaker then says to this voice: "how you call to me, call to me." Notice that he *doesn't* just say "you call to me" but "how you call to me." Apparently, there's something about the *way* that this voice calls to the speaker that, as the reader will see, moves him profoundly.

The repetition of "call to me" (an example of the device epizeuxis) creates an echo, which has a ghostly, unsettling effect (perhaps calling to mind the way a sound bounces in a dark, empty cave). It also suggests that the voice calls again and again, as though desperate to say something to the speaker.

The next line is also quite repetitive. The contrast between those two "you"s—"now you are" and "as you were"—emphasizes the fact that the woman this voice belongs to changed quite a bit over the course of her relationship with the speaker.

Finally, these lines also establish the poem's general meter: dactylic tetrameter. A dactyl is a poetic foot with one stressed followed by two unstressed syllables: DUM-da-da. It thus *sounds* a bit like an echo too, a strong syllable fading away into two weaker ones:

> Woman much | missed, how you | call to me, | call to me,

The second and fourth lines of the first three stanzas are shortened, missing their two weak syllables at the end:

> Saying that | now you are | not as you | were

Still, all these dactyls have a kind of lingering, stretched quality. The meter seems to capture the way that the speaker's feelings of longing and regret have no real place to go, simply petering

out on the page.

LINES 2-4

Saying that now you are not as you were
When you had changed from the one who was all to me,
But as at first, when our day was fair.

Lines 2-4 complete the poem's first quatrain and provide the reader with some much-needed context around the relationship between the speaker and the woman he identifies with the voice. According to the speaker (who may not be the *most* reliable narrator), the voice tells him that she has changed.

More accurately, she has *reversed* the change she underwent during the course of their relationship, returning to how she was "as at first, when our day was fair." In other words, she sounds like she did during the early, happier days of their relationship—when the couple was younger, more in love, less jaded by the world, etc.

Apparently, the woman "changed" over time, becoming less like this early version of herself. (Of course, don't forget that this is all filtered through the speaker's perspective; he's only telling one side of the story here!) Over time, it seems, the spark faded, and the lovers grew apart. (Hardy's first wife, Emma Gifford, famously lived in the attic of her and Hardy's home in the later years of their marriage). The woman was no longer the one "who was all to me"—perhaps the speaker had found someone else (also true in Hardy's case) and felt estranged.

Now, in the poem's present, the dead woman's voice appears to call to the speaker from beyond the grave. She says she has reverted back to the earlier version of herself—the one the speaker greatly preferred!

Notice how line 4 alliterates "first" with "fair," linking a specific *time*—early love—with fairness, or loveliness, beauty, peace, etc. These lines also set up the poem's simple, alternating rhyme scheme: lines 1 and 2 rhyme with each other, as do lines 3 and 4, creating the pattern ABAB / CDCD and so on. This steady rhyme scheme fills the poem with sonic echoes, which perhaps evoke the ghostly echoes of the woman's voice.

LINES 5-8

Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you, then,
Standing as when I drew near to the town
Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then,
Even to the original air-blue gown!

At the start of line 5, the speaker asks: "Can it be you that I hear?" It's unclear if this question is entirely rhetorical or not. That is, the speaker might be simply expressing surprise at hearing his lover's voice. Alternatively, he might legitimately be questioning this voice and/or his own senses, wondering if he's just imagining things.

The speaker then makes a demand to the voice: to "view" the woman as she was when they first started dating. Back then, she would stand around and wait for him whenever he "drew near to the town." Again, the poem is based on Hardy's real life: Hardy met Emma Gifford near a town called Boscastle in the southwest of England, and he returned every few months to see her.

This vision speaks to the excitement and longing of early love: the woman, back then, was so eager to see the speaker that she'd stand around waiting for him; the speaker, meanwhile, seemed to await the reunion just as eagerly.

As this vision comes into view, the speaker grows more confident in his memory. "Let me view you, then" becomes the affirmative "yes, as I knew you then," as though the voice starts to take form as the woman herself. The speaker can see her distinctive "air-blue gown."

This dress symbolizes the woman's beauty and purity. It's the color of a clear, unpolluted sky, and might also make readers think of heaven and the afterlife. In the Christian tradition, Mary is also typically depicted wearing blue.

LINES 9-12

Or is it only the breeze, in its listlessness
Travelling across the wet mead to me here,
You being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness,
Heard no more again far or near?

The speaker starts to doubt his senses, wondering whether the voice he hears is real or just a trick of the mind (and the breeze).

Lines 9 and 10 implicitly juxtapose these two options. Either the voice is real, and the speaker really is communicating with his ex-partner across the great divide, or he's imagining the whole experience. It might just be the sound of the wind as it aimlessly, lazily wanders "across the wet mead" (that is, the meadow).

Calling attention to the wind's "listlessness" adds insult to injury, suggesting that the speaker's vision is really the result of something random and meaningless. And listen to all those sibilant sounds in line 9:

Or is it only the breeze, in its listlessness

Thanks to all these /s/ and /z/ sounds, a chill wind seems to blow through the poem itself. The environment seems to mirror the speaker's state of mind (an example of pathetic fallacy).

The sentence then *travels*, through enjambment, into the following line 10, mirroring the way the voice seems to cross "the wet mead" to reach the speaker. The alliteration and assonance of the words "Mead" and "me" further link the speaker with his environment, suggesting he's no different from that meadow; the wind carelessly blows across both.

The idea of this voice not being real makes the speaker consider the harsh reality of death: perhaps the woman really has gone forever. The metaphor in lines 11 and 12 hammers

home the utter finality of death:

> You being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness,
> Heard no more again far or near?

Death, here, is a dissolution; the body disintegrates into nothingness. The speaker describes this latter state as "wan listlessness." Wan means pale/weak, and "wistlessness" is Hardy's own coinage (his original draft read "existlessness"). To be wist*ful* involves yearning and desire, so to be "wistless" suggests an utter lack of feeling. Essentially, the speaker is wondering if this woman has, in fact, dissolved into oblivion.

LINES 13-16

> *Thus I; faltering forward,*
> *Leaves around me falling,*
> *Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,*
> *And the woman calling.*

The poem concludes with an image of the speaker "faltering forward," moving ahead in a state of grief and confusion.

Notice how the poem pitches this as a kind of logical conclusion: "Thus I." But that "thus" is intentionally weak—it doesn't introduce some clever summary of what has come before. Instead, it's more like the speaker is saying, "Well, here I am." The caesura after "I" has a stumbling (or "faltering") quality, stopping the line in its tracks.

The "Leaves" around the speaker fall, representing the coming of winter and the death of the natural world. Likewise, the cold wind "oozing" through the bushes casts a chill upon the poem's lonely final moments. "Oozing" is a deeply unsettling way to describe the wind's movements, as it's a word more associated with liquid than air. It's a bodily, fleshy word that conjures up images of wounds and, again, death. The speaker still hears "the woman calling," but there's no resolution; the speaker isn't sure whether the voice is real or not. Instead, he's simply left alone, hearing the echo of a past he knows he can't touch.

Notice how the poem's meter changes in this final stanza. Most of the poem up to this point conforms, more or less, to dactylic tetrameter (again, four feet per line, each following a DUM-da-da pattern). None of these lines quite fit that scheme, however, with lines 13, 14, and 16 being markedly shorter:

> Thus I; | fal|tering | for|ward,
> Leaves a- | round me | fall|ing,
> Wind oo|zing | thin through the | thorn from |
> nor|ward,
> And the | wom|an | call|ing.

There are a few ways one could scan these lines, which still feature lots of front-loaded stresses (including plenty of trochees, DUM-das). Yet the rhythm here is a clear departure from what the poem has used so far. The shortness of the lines (apart from 15) even suggests the disintegration of the poem, as though it is "dissolving" as though the voice—and thereby the woman it belongs to—seems more and more distant and unreal. The trochees also mirror the speaker's "faltering," the leaves "falling," and the woman's voice fading, as the sounds of the lines themselves "fall" from stressed to unstressed beats.

SYMBOLS

THE AIR-BLUE GOWN

The "air-blue" gown mentioned in the second stanza symbolizes the unspoiled freshness of the speaker's early relationship with his lover, as well as this woman's own youthful purity and beauty.

The speaker remembers this gown when envisioning the happier days of his relationship, back when he and his partner were first courting and everything seemed wonderful. Then, the woman would stand in "wait" for the speaker as he "drew near to the town," an image that speaks to her faithfulness and passion.

This dress has a direct association with these better times; the speaker's mind draws a nostalgic link between the dress and being in love. He says it's "the original" gown, perhaps suggesting that the woman altered or recreated it in later years but that it was never the same. Similarly, the couple could never recapture the bliss of their early romance.

The fact that this gown is "air-blue" also links it with the color of a clear sky. Such a sky connotes a lovely day, one not married by storm clouds or rain. In this way, the color of the dress further implies the idyllic nature of the speaker's early relationship.

Finally, Mary, the mother of Jesus, is often depicted wearing blue robes in the Christian tradition. The fact that the woman wears a pale blue dress thus might reflect her purity or even divinity; the speaker feels there's something holy or heavenly about her.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 8:** "air-blue gown"

POETIC DEVICES

APOSTROPHE

The first three stanzas of the poem all feature apostrophe, as the speaker directly addresses the "voice" of the poem's title. This voice belongs to the "Woman much missed" of line 1—that is, to the speaker's dead lover, someone he (thinks he) hears calling to him.

Apostrophe creates a sense of intimacy throughout the poem,

as though the reader is privy to a deeply personal conversation. The use of apostrophe also reflects the speaker's longing to communicate with someone who is no longer around.

Of course, this conversation is one-sided. The speaker says that the woman calls to him, but readers never actually hear her; she's never quoted directly in the poem, and the speaker effectively tells her what to say in the second stanza. As such, it's unclear whether the speaker is really hearing any voice at all or simply letting his imagination run wild.

Indeed, when the speaker asks the voice if it's really his beloved that he's hearing or if it's just the breeze, there's no direct reply (at least not one put on display for the reader to hear). Apostrophe thus emphasizes the *divide* between life and death, making the poem seem more *monologue* than dialogue.

Notably, the last stanza drops the apostrophe and refers to the voice as "the woman" (not as "your voice"). This emphasizes that the speaker is, in the end, alone.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

METAPHOR

The are quite a few metaphors in "The Voice," which help to illustrate the speaker's feelings towards his lost beloved. The first metaphor is subtle, appearing at the close of the opening quatrain:

> But as at first, when our day was fair.

This language casts the early stage of the speaker's relationship as a nice day. If a troubled relationship might be described as stormy, then this metaphorical day "was fair": the weather was sunny, bright, and clear. This metaphor captures the happiness of falling in love, and it also sets up a contrast with the bleak, wintry weather elsewhere in the poem.

There's another metaphor in the third stanza, where the speaker wonders if the dead woman has been "ever dissolved to wan wistlessness." In other words, he wonders if she really has ceased to exist ("wistlessness" was "existlessness" in an earlier draft). The word "dissolved" metaphorically captures the shift from physical existence into non-being; it's as though the woman's very self has disintegrated into oblivion: a state of wanting, feeling, and desiring nothing.

In the last stanza, the poem describes the wind as "oozing" rather than "blowing." This creates a striking bit of imagery: wind can't literally ooze, as this word describes the slow movement of a liquid (and might bring to mind blood seeping from a wound). The image is thus an unsettling one, ending the poem on an eerie note.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "when our day was fair"
- **Line 11:** "You being ever dissolved to wan wistlessness,"
- **Line 15:** "Wind oozing thin through the thorn from norward,"

PATHETIC FALLACY

"The Voice" features some characteristically English weather. It's a damp squib of a day; the trees are shedding their leaves, and a wind from the north moves aimlessly through the shrubbery and across a soggy meadow.

Of course, this scenery reflects the speaker's mood perfectly! This imagery, some of which is metaphorical, can be considered an example of pathetic fallacy. That is, the speaker seems to be projecting his own mental state onto the surroundings, filling the landscape with his melancholy.

The "listlessness" of the breeze conveys the lazy, meandering way the wind blows across the meadow. This word also suggests that the speaker himself feels aimless, that he's struggling to find a sense of meaning or stability in his grief.

And this wind doesn't just blow—it seems to *ooze* (line 15). This is an unsettling verb, more appropriate for blood seeping out of a wound than wind traveling across a meadow. It heightens the eerie atmosphere, making everything feel slightly off and ending the poem with a sense of irresolution and discomfort. Contrast all of this bad weather with the speaker's memory of the "fair" days of the past, when the speaker and his lover were in love and thought they would be forever.

Where Pathetic Fallacy appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "Or is it only the breeze, in its listlessness / Travelling across the wet mead to me here,"

REPETITION

Repetition appears in the very first line of "The Voice," where the speaker says:

> Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me,

The repeated "call to me," specifically an example of the device epizeuxis, works a bit like an echo. The repetition implies that the voice calls out to the speaker again and again, perhaps even haunting him.

According to the speaker, this voice tells him that she (the owner of the voice) has been restored an earlier, more carefree version of herself:

> Saying that now you are not as you were

The repetitive language of this line highlights the juxtaposition between the woman's two personalities: the woman as she was when the couple first met and who she became later on (in the speaker's eyes).

The repetition of "then" in the next stanza, at the ends of lines 5 and 7, subtly reminds the reader that the speaker is talking about the *past*. "Let me view you, then," is even something of a pun: the speaker is using "then" to mean "well, let's take a look at you" *and* "let me see you as you were."

Finally, note how the poem essentially ends just as it began, with the voice calling to the speaker. The speaker hasn't concluded whether or not the voice is real, but he continues to hear it nonetheless. His grief remains unresolved.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "call to me, call to me"
- **Line 2:** "you are," "you were"
- **Line 3:** "to me"
- **Line 5:** "then"
- **Line 7:** "then"
- **Line 16:** "the woman calling."

VOCABULARY

Fair (Line 4) - Clear, pleasant, and lovely.

Air-blue (Line 8) - The color of the sky.

Listlessness (Line 9) - Lack of energy, direction, or purpose; aimlessness.

Mead (Line 10) - Meadow.

Wan (Line 11) - Pale or sickly.

Wistlessness (Line 11) - Hardy's own coinage, meaning something like "undesiring/unknowing" (in other words, dead).

Faltering (Line 13) - Losing strength, moving hesitantly.

Oozing (Line 15) - Seeping slowly.

Thorn (Line 15) - Shrubbery.

Norward (Line 15) - The north.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Voice" consists of four quatrains (four-line stanzas) that follow an alternating (ABAB) rhyme scheme. Each stanza also concludes with a firm end-stop and signals a shift in direction in the speaker's thought process.

The uniform quatrain shape is common in Hardy's poetry and Victorian poetry more generally. Here, it might demonstrate the speaker's attempts to control and understand the experience of hearing the voice.

It's worth noting, too, how the poem loops back on itself. For all its internal wrangling, the poem starts with the woman calling and ends with her calling. This creates a sense of "listlessness," as though the speaker doesn't quite know what to do with himself and his feelings of nostalgia, longing, regret, and confusion.

METER

"The Voice" primarily uses dactylic tetrameter: lines of four dactyls, poetic feet with three beats in a stressed-unstressed-unstressed pattern (DUM-da-da). Here's the first line as an example:

> Woman much | missed, how you | call to me, | call to me,

Meters that move like this, from stressed to unstressed beats, are called "falling" meters. And the meter in "The Voice" does indeed create a kind of "faltering" motion; the poem keeps moving forward, but all these weak line endings make it sound unsure of where it's going.

A dactyl is almost like an echo—a strong sound followed by weaker ones—which speaks to the disembodied, unsettling quality of "the voice" itself. Think about a word like "listlessness" in line 9; that meter makes it sound as if the poem might be lifted off the ground and carried away on the wind. In this way, the poem's meter adds to an atmosphere of doubt and confusion.

Note, though, that the second and fourth lines of stanzas 1-3 are cut short—or, to get technical, use *catalexis*. Here's line 2:

> Saying that | now you are | not as you | were

This creates a kind of rising and falling, back and forth rhythm in throughout the poem.

The final stanza looks significantly shorter than the others. These lines switch up the meter through numerous variations (and fewer poetic feet):

> Thus I; | faltering | forward,
> Leaves a-| round me | falling,
> Wind oozing | thin through the | thorn from |
> norward,
> And the | woman | calling.

A number of these metrical substitutions are trochees (stressed-unstressed; DUM-da). The word "falling" itself, for example, is a trochee. Those trochees maintain the poem's falling meter, while the use of shorter lines makes this stanza feel a bit abrupt, as if the poem has started to lose energy (or the voice itself grows fainter). It's like the poem's main meter

has started to "dissolve," mirroring the woman's own disappearance from the world.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Voice" uses an alternating rhyme scheme, running ABAB / CDCD / EFEF etc.

This pattern feels particularly musical because, in many lines, the final three syllables (the entire final dactyl) rhyme. In lines 1, 3, 5, and 7, just the first **stressed** syllable of the dactyl changes (e.g., "**call** to me" and "**all** to me," "**view** you, then" and "**knew** you then").

All this rhyme leads to a richly musical poem, one that seems filled with sonic echoes. Those echoes, in turn, evoke the insistent echo of the "voice" that calls to the speaker.

SPEAKER

It's generally accepted that the speaker of "The Voice" is the poet, Thomas Hardy, himself. Hardy wrote this poem, and the others in the same sequence, shortly after his first wife, Emma Gifford, passed away. There are biographical details in the poem that match Hardy and Gifford's story: they were once in love (their early days were "fair") but grew estranged over the years.

Readers don't need to know this backstory in order to understand the speaker's perspective, however. It's clear from the poem itself that the speaker's relationship with the woman behind "the voice" soured over time, and that, even as he mourns her death, he's deeply nostalgic for their early courtship. Years ago, this woman "was all" to the speaker; she meant everything to him. He longs to have *this* version of the woman he loved back and seems to convince himself, at least momentarily, that he's hearing her voice and seeing her once more.

At the same time, the speaker also seems to sense the permanence of death. He questions whether the voice he hears is real or not and allows that it might just be the wind.

Given that it's told entirely from the speaker's first-person perspective, the poem only offers one side of the relationship. The reader can't know how the woman actually felt about the speaker or what happened between them. That is, the speaker might be unreliable, his visions of the relationship warped by time and grief.

SETTING

The poem is set on a late autumn or early winter day, featuring some characteristically British weather: it's windy, wet, and likely pretty cold. The speaker appears to be out for a walk, hearing the voice of the "woman much missed" calling to him "across the wet mead"—that is, the damp meadow. Contrast this with the mention of "fair" weather in line 4, which, though metaphorical, makes the poem's present seem even bleaker.

The weather mirrors the speaker's grief. The falling leaves are a reminder of the passage of time, as well as the inevitability of death and decay, while the "oozing" wind seems aimless, as though it has no purpose or destination. This helps to convey the speaker's confusion over this woman's: he's got a whole bunch of feelings, but he's not quite sure what to do with them, "faltering forward" from one moment to the next.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 and became one of the most successful novelists of the Victorian era. His later novels—works like *Jude the Obscure* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*—challenged Victorian sensibilities, and the often angry reaction to their publication led to him focusing on poetry in his later years.

"The Voice" is part of a sequence of elegiac poems written in response to the death of Hardy's first wife, Emma Gifford. Hardy and Gifford were not a happy couple by the time she died; in fact, they were barely a couple at all. Gifford spent much of her later years in the attic of their home, referring to the space as "my sweet refuge and solace." Her death forced Hardy to confront not just her passing, but the entire arc of their relationship and his treatment of her.

Though the poem and the wider sequence were written after the death of Queen Victoria, Hardy's work is often considered part of a general trend of Victorian pessimism that saw writers confronting the religious and societal assumptions that had been cast into doubt by scientific advances. Notice how, in "The Voice," there is only uncertainty: no god appears to offer a comforting vision of the afterlife, and the speaker ends the poem confused, "faltering forward" through life.

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 poem was written in Hardy's later years, however, following the death of his first wife, Emma Gifford, in 1912.

The pair had met way back in 1870: Hardy had been commissioned to write a report on the condition of a church in the southwest of England near where Gifford was living at the time. They married four years later, though their relationship already had its problems by this point. Gifford felt resentful that she was marrying someone technically of a lower class; Hardy felt drawn to other women, including Florence Dugdale, whom he married two years after Gifford's death.

By all accounts, the pair grew resentful and Gifford spent most of her time cloistered away in an attic room. She wrote a set of diaries about Hardy entitled "What I Think of My Husband"—which he famously burned after her death. Of Hardy, she once claimed "he understands only the women he invents—the others not at all."

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Poems of 1912-1913 — Read the full elegiac sequence in which "The Voice" appears. (https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Hardy_PoemsOf1912-13.pdf)
- Thomas Hardy and Emma Gifford — Learn more about the relationship that inspired this poem. (http://personal.rhul.ac.uk/uhle/012/poems%20of%201912-13.pdf)
- Emma Gifford Hardy's Biography — Learn more about the woman who inspired the poem. (https://spartacus-educational.com/JgiffordEH.htm)
- Victorian Pessimism — The British podcast "In Our Time" discusses the general atmosphere of pessimism in which Hardy was writing. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007d9k6)
- The Hardy Society — Explore a treasure trove of resources about the poet provided by the Hardy society. (https://www.hardysociety.org/resources/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER THOMAS HARDY POEMS

- At an Inn
- A Wife in London
- Channel Firing
- Drummer Hodge
- Hap
- He Never Expected Much
- Neutral Tones
- The Convergence of the Twain
- The Darkling Thrush
- The Man He Killed
- The Ruined Maid

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*The Voice*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 1 Aug 2022. Web. 18 Aug 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*The Voice*." LitCharts LLC, August 1, 2022. Retrieved August 18, 2022. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/thomas-hardy/the-voice.