

# AQA English Literature A-level

## Poetry: Love Through the Ages Anthology (Pre-1900)

Thomas Hardy: 'At an Inn'

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## AT AN INN

Thomas Hardy

### Brief Summary

'At an Inn' explores an **inconsistent love** experienced by the speaker and the woman he addresses; one that does not and then suddenly does exist. The poem is five stanzas of octets with alternating metrical patterns which gives the poem a **uniformity reminiscent of easy conversation**. The poem considers perspectives and the **judgemental eye of society** as the couples' relationship is examined by those around them (although it is not what it appears). By the final stanza, we find that although they were not what they once seemed, they are now in love but tragically unable to be together.

### Synopsis

Stanza 1: The two "**strangers**" walk into a pub together and the speaker seems to think that the people in the pub assume that they are a couple. The speaker's **preoccupation with how the couple are perceived** suggests his own **engrossment in what they could be**, rather than what they are. Clearly, they are not together in the way he hopes, otherwise he would not comment and **fixate** on it.

Stanza 2: The pub dwellers aren't questioning in the way that the speaker is, as we move into "**maybe/ The spheres about made them our ministers**". The speaker wonders if **supernatural forces** want the couple to be together. The onlookers seek what the speaker and his companion seem to have.

Stanza 3: The speaker reveals that unfortunately **their situation is tragic**; there was no love or chemistry between them. There is no alliteration which marks a painful and chilling **change in tone**. As readers, we are disappointed; the relationship seemed to have so much hope but by the third stanza, we see that there is no hope. It is hard to tell whether the speaker is mourning this fact or upset it was ever mentioned. There are no emotions

### Summary

**Context** – Some suggestion that the poem is autobiographical, based on the relationship between Hardy and Florence Henniker.

**Structure** – Five stanzas of octets with an alternating metrical pattern of iambic trimeters and shorter lines of diameters. The regular rhyme scheme creates a conversational tone, like he is recounting a story known well to them both.

**Language** – Cosmic imagery, with reference made to spiritual and otherworldly forces as part of the speakers' attempt to explain his emotions. Alliteration fulfils different functions throughout: At first it is light-hearted and helps create the comfortable aura of the inn, whilst later on it signifies the silencing of hope and the futility of the pair's love. Personification of love: It becomes something that manifests into a close and physical being he is unable to ignore.

**Key points** – The speaker calls on his companion to reflect on the past and the moment that he has described to rekindle old feelings. The speaker is troubled by the sense that he has lost opportunity in love. The paradox of their relationship exasperates him and the poem is infused with regret.



between the two at this point in the poem; their **relationship is as futile as a fly hitting the glass** of a window pane.

Stanza 4: The speaker and his companion prepare to leave and do not kiss each other. The implication is that if things had been as the people in the inn thought, they would have kissed. There's a **shift to a third person narrative**. This feels more powerful, almost like the speaker is questioning God, a God he doesn't believe in (if we take the speaker to be Hardy himself). People at the inn expect them to kiss. The speaker is frustrated that it is a **"bloom not ours"**, why would others or God suggest their love could work if it is certain it cannot? He asks why God treats him like a play-thing, **referencing King Lear** who makes the mistake of judgement. **"In after hours"** suggests that maybe they shouldn't be together for other reasons we are not aware of but also suggests the drawn-out nature of their love; it has blossomed late.

Stanza 5: Time has intensified the speaker's love and the speaker returns to that day again. Now they are not together but **perhaps they wish to have been together**, they look back on that moment as a turning point. It becomes apparent that now things have changed; they used to look like they were in love but were not and now it looks like they aren't but are. Certain things keep them apart and so they cannot engage in the physical side of their emotions. The last lines are **desperate**, he seeks a way to return to the inn where it would've been possible for them to love one another as they wish to now.

Perhaps Hardy uses this poem to **ignite questions of how Victorian society makes superficial judgements**. The speaker seems bitter and angry at the possibilities of what this relationship could have been. It is possible they are caught in a **loop of paranoia** or is it something more harrowing than that still? **Questions are left unanswered and unresolved** for the reader by the end of the poem. Hardy's style is **pessimistic and brutal**, a speaker who resents what is rather than what could have been.

## Context

### The Victorian period:

- In Victorian society, it was **inappropriate** for a man to go for a drink with a woman if they were not together. This leads the reader to question;
  - How are the couple together and not together in the poem?
- England experienced **great change during the years under Queen Victoria**. The advances in technology resulted in greater factory production and accelerated growth of European economies. This in turn saw the creation of large amounts of wealth which mostly benefited the middle class.
- New scientific discovery, such as Darwin's "natural selection" theory meant there was a challenge posed to the Church.



- The new market economy favoured industrial development and discouraged agriculture which resulted in large numbers of farmers and peasants losing their livelihoods and moving to the cities in search for employment.

### Literary Context:

- The Victorian period (1837-1901) was known to be **carefully censored, straight and exacting in standards**, for example the values of the period such as religion, morality, evangelism and personal improvement, took root in Victorian morality. Hardy **passionately opposed these constraints** in his literary work as a poet and a novelist.
- The Victorian period was extremely **strict in terms of permitted sexual relations**; sex was not openly discussed which meant that many people born into the Victorian age were both factually uninformed and emotionally ill at ease about sexual matters. Additionally, **moral panic over prostitution** was at height in the 1850s and 1869s. This was partly because it betokened visible female freedom from social control. Female prostitutes enjoyed economic and personal freedom.
- One of the most notable things about **Victorian-age poetry** is the constant return to **themes of isolation and loss of innocence** as well as romantic love and social injustice. 'At an Inn' looks at the **phases of love**, that the first flush of love and desire, when anticipation is everything and lovers are yet to consummate their feelings is when two lovers' romantic and sexual attachment is most apparent to the world. It is when they have loved for years that they may go unnoticed by the world.
- In the Victorian period, poetry was highly valued and very popular. Romantic poets such as William Wordsworth (died 1850) were particularly revered and recited.
- Much of Victorian poetry had a **moral purpose**, intended to **oppose and object to the unfair social and political systems**. This can be seen in 'At an Inn' as the speaker assesses the social constructs which hinder the blossoming of the love he desires. It is also seen in the scrutiny of the inn workers who make assumptions about the couple's status.
- Another notable characteristic of Victorian poetry is that it was **highly idealistic** and tackled issues of love, truth and justice. 'At an Inn' looks at the potential for love in a restrictive society and how this climate suppresses such expression.

### Hardy:

- Hardy is often considered a **Victorian realist**, examining the social constraints on the lives of those living in Victorian Britain. This is apparent in 'At an Inn' as the speaker makes note of the scrutinisation of the workers at the inn, their presumption that the two friends are lovers and their desire to see them kiss.
- Hardy was born in 1840 and died in 1928, meaning that he experienced life in **high Victorian decorum** and the awful destruction and devastation of World War I.



- The effect of these experiences means his work is often read to be justifiably angry and pessimistic.
- At the time, Hardy was best known for his poetry (in the 20th century he solely published poetry) and only later did his novels become recognised as great literary works. (such as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*).
- Most of his work **revolves around the tragedies caused by social circumstances**. In 'At an Inn' he addresses the conflicting issue of falling in love with a woman who (if we read the poem autobiographically) is married. Victorian society prevents the speaker from acknowledging any serious potential for the blossoming of such a love and then the tragedy in the final stanza of its impossibility when such restrictions are removed.
- Hardy wrote and published his poems at a time when ideas put into circulation by Darwin's *Origin of Species* were just beginning to take hold. Many of his readers would have still believed that the world was created by an all-powerful and loving God. This context is relevant in 'At an Inn' where the speaker draws on the ideas that a supernatural force brings the couple together. Hardy was **agnostic** and it is **significant that his speaker questions the influence of much greater forces** as a means of **explaining the intensity of emotion** and highlights his desperation to understand the situation.

#### Autobiographical elements:

- It is strongly suggested that 'At an Inn' is **based on the relationship Hardy had with Florence Henniker**. She was the wife of an army officer and at the time of their visit to The George Hotel in Winchester, in 1893, Hardy was married to his first wife, Emma Gifford.
- Florence Henniker is the "rare fair woman" mentioned in his poem 'Wessex Heights' and their platonic relationship also features in 'A Broken Appointment'.
- It seems that Hardy wanted more than friendship, in fact it is often suggested that he fell in love with Florence who he corresponded with for 30 years until her death in 1923.
- Here there is possibly a longing for fulfilment on Hardy's side, given that she did not want to pursue anything more than friendship. The poem suggests that love is thwarted and plagued by ill timing and lost opportunities.

Although it is often suggested that 'At an Inn' is autobiographical and personal and it is likely (as in many of Hardy's poems) that the poem is an **elegiac expression of personal grief and consolation**, it is important to remember that much is **conjecture** and the **application could be universal**. Although it is easy to refer to the speaker as Hardy himself and the companion as Florence, it has to be remembered that **Hardy has constructed the voices**, they are artistic representations and should be spoken about as such.



## At an Inn

Alliteration suggests a comfort in the location.

The people do not know who or what they are but they're interested in what they could be.

Verb and following rhyme suggests there's speculation that the two are married.

His fixation on the perception of the two as more than friends suggests the reality is the opposite and such a union is perhaps what he wants.

Alliteration emphasises what love looks like to the others in the Inn.

Idea that love makes your world run faster, expression of the excitement in love.

Ironic that the speaker quotes people in the pub in the last lines of stanza because they admire the couple and wish to be as happy as they look. They seek what the speaker and his companion seem to have. Dramatic irony because they are not together.

Personification of love.

Reality of relationship revealed, there was no chemistry between them.

Seems like they are cold in their intentions when they are together.

Homophone- pane and pain. Implies the relationship is futile; as pointless as a fly flying into the window pane.

Shift to 3rd person narrative, gives a sense of power, more powerful and God-like speaker.

It seems that was not within the speaker's power to create love, the ambiguous 'he' - perhaps love personified? - has power 'hold'

Judgemental speaker; judging a God that seems brutal. The tone makes the speaker sound very distressed and frustrated (why would others or

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?

Immediately struck as the two people walk in together.

Throughout the stanza there are layers of euphemism; "veiled smiles" suggests there's something hidden beneath the smiles. It is as if people have judged that these two are a couple, so the speaker assumes that others in the pub think the two are together.

Their love appears like they are in a young lover's dream.

He wonders whether supernatural powers are willing the two to be together. Though Hardy was strongly agnostic so here he tries desperately to understand how they have been brought together.

Cyclical- they are together but not, this idea is repeated in each stanza.

No alliteration marks a change in tone- tragic.

Irony of the situation has really built their relationship up as something more, simply because other people presumed so.

"Palsied" suggests this has paralysed their relationship and as the day draws they get closer to the death of their relationship.

The people in the pub expect them to kiss. We presume, the speaker also had hoped that at some point.

Alliteration emphasises the futility of hope for this love. Embjambed line is endstopped, mirroring hope abruptly cut off; numb - silences any ideas of hope.

Learned reference to King Lear where the King divides his kingdom and makes a mistake of judgement "as flies wanton void we are to the Gods, they kill us for their sport."

Suggestion that the speaker feels that he is the play thing of God.





God suggest our love could work if it cannot?)

Love is shaped by society's conventions.

Alliteration & assonance accentuates the divisions between these 2. There is a geographical severing but also the views of others, "the laws of men", limit their chances of being together.

Exclamation ignites a compelling emotive streak, yet resigned to its fate with a society that has strict rules. A poem of love that could have been but was never allowed to develop.

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!

Exaggerates the importance of time and the difference between then and now.

Sentiment reminiscent of Tennyson "better to have loved and lost than to not have loved at all". A disappointment, tinged with sadness that they are not together.

## Themes

### Love and loss:

- Love is **thwarted by lost opportunities**, there is a fascination with what could have been and the potential of the pair's relationship.
- This is seen in the speaker's **yearning** for the relationship, or perceived relationship he had in the past with the woman he speaks of. He is bitterly distraught by the final stanza that what was once a promising friendship/ relationship is now quashed by "**severing sea and land**" (line 37)
- The speaker makes clear the multiple forms of loss he feels: firstly, the loss of a friendship alluded to in the fact "**they opined/ us more than friends**" (lines 1-2). The voice, in saying this implies that the two were friends but the people in the pub thought they were more. Additionally, we can assume that before love would come friendship and this is what the poem suggests as we read on because the couple seem to get on so well that everyone around them thinks they are in love when they are actually just friends at this point in time. Another kind of loss the poet describes is the couple's audience's loss in understanding what they see before them. They are presumptuous; "**ah, God, that bliss like theirs/ would flush our day!**" (lines 18-19). Their determination to see love between the couple **clouds their vision** and veils them from the cold reality of the situation. The speaker then goes on to explain the absence of love between the two in this stage of their relationship; "**and**



**we were left alone/ as Love's own pair;/ yet never the love-light shone**" (lines 17-19) There is a loss of opportunity made evident by the speaker as he makes the point that when the couple had the chance to engage in love, they missed each other for between them was only friendship. This is the root of the speaker's true pain and the main sense of loss within the poem; the speaker is most damned by the loss of opportunity to love the woman he once had the chance to love. **"And now we seem not what/ we aching are"** (line 35-36); the use of **"aching"** emphasises the speaker and his companions' yearning for a return to the past when love was possible.

- In the final stanza, the pair want to love each other unlike before but now the situation no longer allows for them to be together.

### The past being better than the present:

- One of the tragic elements of the poem is the speaker's supposed conviction that what the couple had before they fell in love may have been better than the pain he feels in the final stanza despite the fact that their relationship was not founded in love; **"never the love light shone"** (line 19) This demonstrates a yearning for the past and the speaker's **dangerous use of retrospective**. Retrospective makes it easier for him to glorify the past and forget the challenges such a relationship would have posed. His poem is a walling in **self-pity** as he wishes for something that really could never have been.
- The past is preferable to the present; the speaker looks back **nostalgically** to when the couple were physically close, although he admits they were emotionally distant. This contrasts to his current sense of emotional closeness but physical distance, indicated by the pair's separation by **"sea and land"** (line 37)

### Irony:

- Though the guests around them think the pair are lovers, Hardy writes that kisses **"came not"** (line 26) and that, **oxymoronically**, **"love lingered numb"** (line 27). It is **ironic** that the surrounding audience perceive the couple as lovers because the speaker makes it clear that they were not in love; **"no love-light shone"** (line 19) This consequently changes the way we read certain lines such as **"and that swift sympathy/ with living love/ which quicks the world- maybe"** (lines 9-11). The speaker's tone may be considered wistful here as he retrospectively observes how the couple used to be perceived as lovers and he wished now, at the point of writing when they are separated and now in love, that he could experience the dizzying whirlwind of falling in love with this woman.
- The ironic and **tragic** element is found at the end of the poem especially, when the narrator suggests that **now the couple desire each other** as lovers, **the opportunity is gone**.





### Proximity and distance:

- The pair are close, drinking together 'At an Inn' at the start but emotionally and sexually distant. This is contrasted at the end when they are emotionally close but physically distant and unable to act on their feelings.
- Hardy's speaker **rails against** the sea and the land and the laws of men which forces lovers to be divided.
- A reader might ask, has love (as yearning) blossomed **in spite of distance, or because of distance**? When they were together, their relationship was **"chilled"** (line 21) and there seemed no possibility of love; now that the pair are separated, they are close and **"aching"** (line 36) for each other. Is this because **distance has allowed them to idealise the other**, to create an image of the other that does not match reality?

### Gender and sexuality:

- The speaker bemoans the social laws which prevent the lovers from being together, the tragedy here is seen as politically challenging.
- "At an Inn" follows gender expectations, the only voice we hear is masculine. The companion, whom we presume is a woman, is both nameless and voiceless and **seems to uphold the societal ideals of a lady**; she does not push or make any hints at a desire for more than friendship with the speaker.

### God, Gods and the indifference of the universe:

- Hardy offers in his tragic verse **evidence of an uncaring universe**. He questions how the couple can be drawn together and yet not allowed to consummate their feelings. He suggests this cruelty and manipulation could only be the work of some superhuman power. Hardy references Shakespeare's *King Lear* when the speaker opines that an ambiguous "he" **"shaped [the pair] for his sport"** (line 31); this recalls the line "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport" that Gloucester utters after he is blinded.

## Structure

### Form:

- 5 stanzas of **octets** (8 lines each).
- **Regularity of form** reflects the speaker's comfort in the inn with his companion. Their friendship is easy and comes naturally.



### Metre:

- There is an **alternating metrical pattern** of iambic trimetres and shorter lines of dimetres (2 metrical feet).

### Rhyme Scheme:

- Structured rhyme scheme throughout; each octet is divided in half so the pattern is **abab cdcd** throughout.
- This rhyme scheme gives the poem a conversational tone, an **ease between the couple is established**. It is as if he is recounting a story known well by the both of them in a **light-hearted** and reminiscent way.
- However, the **manipulation of the accented beats** on particular words **reveal tension** beneath this casual tone.

**“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.”**

- There is an ambiguity in the word **“strangers”** - does the speaker mean strangers to each other or to the people at the inn?
- The contrast between the two strangers and the idle gossipers at the inn is made evident in the way the stanza's **focus switches between the two groups** **“we as strangers” / “their...care” / “veiled smiles/ what we were” / “they opined/ Us more than friends”**.
- The half rhyme of **“care”** and **“were”** emphasises the distance from the time he describes in the past and what they supposedly have now. What they **“were”**, implying they are something different in the present. It also highlights the **presumptions** of the people watching, who all **made assumptions from visual signifiers**. Hardy comments on the way society has a desire to understand or be involved in everyone's life. There is a strong desire for **gossip** and for knowing which he subtly criticises.



## Language

### Alliteration:

#### “Strangers sought” / “catering care” (lines 1-2)

- This alliteration at the start of the poem in stanza one creates a tone of comfort and affection in its softness.
- It sets the tone of the first stanza and the atmosphere expected from the title 'At an Inn'.

#### “Swift sympathy” / With living love” (line 9-10)

- The alliteration here gives the reader an idea of how the people in the inn perceive the couple's affection. The “s” of “swift sympathy” creates a swooping sensation, the reader can almost sense the way the **sympathy for the pair** spread throughout the space as they are observed and perceived to be in love.
- It's “s” also creates an immediacy, implying the readiness of others to pass judgements on visual signifiers such as a man and a woman 'At an Inn' talking and sharing drinks.
- The “l” sound is impatient in contrast to the softness of the “s” and gives the words “living love” a **vibrancy** which demonstrates the people's **eagerness to interpret the situation as the one that brings them most joy**; that the pair are a happy couple in love.

#### “Love lingered numb” (line 28)

- The “l” here is elongated, partly due to the single syllable of “love” being followed by the double syllable word. It has the effect of sounding as it means. The single syllable of “numb” works to the same effect.
- There is a silencing of hope and the futility of the pair's love is made evident.

### Personification:

#### “Love's own pair” (line 18)

- Implies their love does not belong to them, instead they are at the whim of Love.
- This gives the speaker and his companion a **lack of control**, a sense of helplessness and unable to make decisions for themselves. This may hint at the controlling and dictating functionality of society but also relates to the speaker's **inability to grapple with the immensity of his emotions** which he decides must be the working of a supernatural force he has no control over.
- The speaker suggests the couple are owned, they are not autonomous beings.
- In this line, however, they are united as a “pair”, implying the speaker's wishes for such a union despite its improbability.



**“Love lingered”** (line 28)

- Love is **given a persona**, as if it has **autonomy and is a physical presence** rather than an **intangible emotion** shared between people.
- Possibly, the appearance of love between the pair is so great that it is almost **palpable**.
- The couple and the others watching them felt something so strong that it is as if love were a person who just left the room and their aura is still felt.

**“Why cast he on our port**

**A bloom not ours?**

**Why shaped us for his sport**

**In after-hours?”** (lines 29-32)

- The ‘he’ is ambiguous and could refer to a deity (as *King Lear*’s Gloucester refers to a deity when he exclaims ‘As flies wanton to wanton boys are we are to the Gods/ They kill us for their sport’) but could also refer to the capitalised and personified ‘Love’ of the preceding line. The idea that love is playing a cruel ‘sport’ with them is **paradoxical** - love, by definition, cannot be cruel.

Cosmic imagery:

**“Spheres above”** (line 12)

**“Quicks the world”** (line 11)

**“Breath/ Of afternoon”** (lines 21-22)

- The speaker is so **unsure** of how he has developed a desire for more than friendship with his companion, how they appeared so in love when they are not and how the universe has brought them together and yet no love is born.
- His questioning exceeds the space of Earth and moves into the supernatural. This is because what he asks **seems to have no worldly explanation**.
- Not only does the imagery illuminate the speaker’s unanswerable and illogical questions, it also alludes to the **overpowering, magical nature of love** itself.
- “Quicks the world” implies that love is such a powerful force that it appears to make the world spin faster. The **first flushes of love** are so spurred and intoxicating that the lovers’ worlds move at a quicker pace.
- These **whimsical and romantic notions** liken the power of love to those of God or supernatural forces. As readers we can discern from the speaker’s expressions that he is **familiar with love**, but whether this is love borne of as-yet unrequited feelings for his “chilled” companion, we do not know.



### Cyclical structure:

- Hardy **starts and ends with the same memories**, this gives a sense of helplessness. The speaker returns over and over to what could have been.
- The cosmic imagery adds the cyclical feeling and could possibly hint at the inability of the speaker to comprehend what has happened; it is beyond him.

### Metaphor:

#### **“Yet never the love-light shone / Between us there!” (line 19-20)**

- Love is described as something which emits light, as a **source of clarity**, something which enables sight. This is significant as something the speaker deeply desires. He wants his questions of the universe answered, he wants an explanation for his emotions, he wants more than friendship from his companion.
- The use of “shone” also implies other, amicable and warming elements to the “love light” whilst making the reader pity the speaker for the tragedy that it never shone between the two back when they were at the inn.
- **Love light** was also **a word which meant the light in a lover’s eyes**, first used in 1823.

### **Critical Views**

#### Albert J Guerard: “The Illusion of Simplicity: the shorter poems of Thomas Hardy”

**“What irritated the late Victorians is pleasing to us, who prefer...the pure un sentimental notes of sadness, loneliness and deprivation sounded decade after decade; the sense of a life as a succession of small undramatic defeats; the honest declaration of unfaith and unhope”**

- Guerard considers the simplification of extremely complex feelings of loss that the speaker feels; **the pain is “pure”** in a way that is **unfamiliar to the ways other poems in the anthology explore the theme of love and loss**. For example, Keats in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” uses the imagery of the medieval knight and a bewitching fairy figure to evoke the sense of love loss and sickness, whereas Hardy maintains a truthfulness which leaves a quiet “loneliness and deprivation”.
- The mention of “small undramatic defeats” is striking as Hardy uses circumstances that feel real and true to translate the speaker’s pain into words. The image of the couple being together 'At an Inn' and now separated by sea and land is not complex or far-fetched, it’s tangible and realistic, which makes the scenario more heart breaking.
- Guerard also draws on the concept of “honest declaration”, which we may interpret as the speaker being the poet himself. If we take this to be the case, the poem



takes on **a new level of sincerity** as Hardy's personal circumstances are the result of the melancholy tone. Hardy was an extremely private man and didn't write himself into much of his prose work, in fact, he **avoided any form of personal iteration within his novels**, but seemed to have been more autobiographical in his poetry. His first wife is known to have said, "There is more autobiography in a hundred lines of Mr Hardy's poems than in all of his novels".

**"There is a very modern awareness of psychic fatigue, of tiredness and dullness of spirit. And there is also, of course, the ironic awareness of ordinary human incompatibilities, of misplaced hopes and absurdly mismatched destinies."**

- Guerard points out Hardy's fatigue; the tone of 'At an Inn' demonstrates this **lethargy** through the speaker's **quietly disappointed angst** that he will never be able to live the life he now desires with the woman he speaks of. The **pace is slow** as the speaker comes to terms with the situation. He is disappointed and seems frustrated but his frustration is not expressed in overly angry tones.
- In 'At an Inn', the mismatched paths of the couple are evident in the fact that when they had the chance to be together, they were not in love but when they are eventually emotionally in love, they are physically separated. The irony is expressed by Guerard as "mismatched hopes" which is especially present and persistent in the speaker's wishing for alternative circumstances despite their impossibilities.

## Comparisons

### "At an Inn" and "The Ruined Maid"

#### 1. Gender and sexuality

It is important to think about how Hardy presents gender and sexuality in his poems and where the narrator's sympathies lie. "The Ruined Maid" challenges some ideas about the way women are defined by Victorian culture. However, many of society's ideas are endorsed. This is seen in the **stereotypical representation** of the women in "The Ruined Maid", the way they uphold ideals of femininity and Amelia is presented as the woman with the more desirable life, as well as being particularly superficial - a supposedly feminine trait. In 'At an Inn', Hardy's speaker is unable to mask his desire to progress the relationship with his companion. However, his speaker **evinces no such desire** and the atmosphere between them remains "chilled" (line 21). In this way, she **upholds Victorian standards of female propriety**.

Women in Hardy are predominantly weak and men much stronger. In "The Ruined Maid", we are presented with a **strong rural woman** who appears to work just as hard as the men in the country. However, she is **susceptible to the ideals of femininity**, fashion and societal acceptance and the woman she admires is the epitome of this. Amelia's rejection





of the rural life exposes her as a fraud in upper-class society and the perception of a woman's fickleness and preoccupation with matters of appearance and social status. Similarly, in "At an Inn" the speaker's companion is **yoked to the expectations of society** and acts accordingly. Like the unnamed rural woman, the companion has no name and additionally, no voice. The poem is overpowered by masculine thought and desire.

## 2. Love and loss

'At an Inn' presents the tragedy of the irretrievable loss of opportunity. When the couple have access to each other, they appear to be in love but when the situation changes and they are separated by land and sea, they find themselves actually in love. The conflict for the narrator is the exasperation of considering what could have been and what he has lost because opportunity has come and passed him by. He is left, in the final stanza, grappling with a love he cannot hold onto. In 'The Ruined Maid', Amelia takes the opportunity to climb the social ladder but her persistence to elevate her status means that she has forgotten where she has come from. She has lost insight and the clarity of mind that her rural upbringing afforded her. This is made most obvious when she chastises her old friend for her aspirations to enter high society. Amelia has also lost physically, as a "ruined maid", she has lost her virginity and innocence, and not for love but for social acceptance. Thus, loss, in its **different manifestations** - is a theme in both poems.

## 3. Social conventions and taboos

Women are often victims of love and society, for example, in 'At an Inn' the restrictions of society prevent the pair from progressing their relationship further. A woman and a man together in public, unmarried, was also socially unacceptable. The speaker in the poem seems frustrated by the limits he must abide by. **'The Ruined Maid' criticises social conventions more overtly**, through the deeply ironic discussion between the two women. Social convention means that both women are essentially ruined, despite Amelia's apparent success in climbing the social ladder, she risks being rejected by respectful society as a woman who has engaged in sexual activity outside marriage.

## "At an Inn" and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"

### 1. Love and Loss

'At an Inn' explores several kinds of loss but most deeply examines **the loss of perceived opportunity**. The main focus of the poem is the speaker's regret in not feeling love towards a woman in the early stages of their relationship, or not allowing himself to (considering the context of the poem and the fact it may relate to Hardy's real life situation where the women he had desires for was married and so was he at the time). He explicitly points out **"never the love-light shone"** (line 19) clearly telling the reader the couple, although perceived as lovers, were not interested in each other romantically. However, by the end of the poem, we learn that this friendship and enjoyment of each other's company



has developed into love and this is what he yearns for. He wishes endlessly that there was now no barrier for them to be together but they are unfortunately separated by **“sea and land”** (line 37). This kind of loss causes the speaker a similar kind of yearning as the knight in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”. This is seen in the **nostalgic and retrospective nature of both poems**; both speakers take the form as an opportunity to reflect on a time when their lover was with them. In contrast, however, the knight tells the story of how he was smitten with the elfish woman and this distinguishes his loss from that of the speaker in Hardy’s poem as it seems more profoundly visceral. The speaker in ‘At an Inn’ wishes for more than he can remember in the past because he never had a romantic relationship with the woman he now loves, whereas the Knight feels the pain of a loss of something that he once had, even if it was in a dream.

Another **noticeably different way the poems deal with loss** is that the **Knight is completely alone** as he tells his story; **“And this is why I sojourn here,/ Alone and palely loitering”** (line 45-46). This loneliness is also made apparent by the sparse setting in which he is found and left, compared to the abundant nature descriptions of when he is with the elfish woman. By contrast, the speaker in ‘At an Inn’ **never seems to extract himself from the partnership** he longs for. He mentions the physical distance between the pair in the last stanza. However, a deeper emotional connection between the couple is implied by his assertion that they are **“aching”** (line 36) for each other. Thus, the speaker in ‘At an Inn’ is **only separated from his lover physically, whereas the Knight is both physically and emotionally estranged** from the woman he was involved with.

## 2. Romantic love of many kinds

The love between the couple in ‘At an Inn’ appears to be a love that has come about after years of knowing one another. In “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” the love the knight experiences is sudden and **closer to infatuation or obsession**. He is so physically in love that it makes him sick and changes his countenance, hence his **“palely loitering”** (line 2) mode and why he is **“so haggard and wo-begone”** (line 6). However, while the two loves appear different, the love of the speaker in ‘At an Inn’ can also be called immature, despite their many years of knowing their distant partner. We can conjecture that it is a love that can only blossom with distance as, Guerard points out, there may be **“ordinary human incompatibilit[y]”** between them and it may only be the idealisation (and therefore distortion) of the other that distance allows that causes his heart to now **“ache”** (line 36). Another parallel between the loves described in the two poems is the **truncated nature** of both. The love between the pair in ‘At an Inn’ can never be **consummated or come to fruition**, and similarly the knight will never meet his lover again - who may well have been a fantasy anyway.

## 3. Love through the ages according to individual lives (young love and maturing love)

The love in ‘At an Inn’ seems more mature - the love of someone with more experience than the knight in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”. His tone is more measured and his



assessment of the love that he has lost or missed out on is mournful but in some ways accepting. He states the way it is, his poem is a wishing for something that cannot happen and he sees that now as at the end of the poem he calls out in exasperation **“ere death, once let us stand/ as we stood then!”** (lines 39-40). In this way, **he accepts that in this life, their union is not possible**. The knight, however, remains **“palely loitering”** (line 2) throughout the whole poem in the same baron landscape which he is found in. He is **lovesick to the point of no return**, and unable to move forward with his life. This is partly why he seems young and inexperienced in love, his description of being in love with the elfish woman is fast paced, sudden and we can liken it to the description in “At an Inn”; **“love/ which quicks the world”** (lines 10-11). He is caught up in an overwhelming feeling that is **unmatched** by the longing of the speaker in ‘At an Inn’.

#### 4. Proximity and distance

Proximity and distance are themes relevant to both poems. In neither poem do we actually meet the female lover, only **iterations of her through memories** in ‘At an Inn’ and **dreams/ memories** in ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’. The female lover is therefore **distant and ambiguous** in both poems. We do not know whether the lady in ‘La Belle Dame’ loved the knight, despite her (questionable) assertion that she **“love[d him] true”**. Likewise, we are not sure whether or not the speaker’s companion in ‘At an Inn’ harboured feelings for him all that time ago (that she simply did not act upon). In this way, the reader experiences a part of the distance her male lover feels.

The poems both move through modes of proximity, ultimately ending in distanced lovers. In ‘At an Inn’, the pair are initially physically close; **“left alone”** (line 17), **“Love’s own pair”** (line 18), **“between us”** (line 20, but by the end they are physically distanced by the **“severing sea and land”** (line 37). The initial physical proximity of the couple is counterbalanced by emotional distance, seen in **“never the love light-shone”** (line 19) and **“love lingered numb”** (line 28). This reverse is true in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, where the knight is firstly found **“alone and palely loitering”** (line 2). After he **“me[ets] a lady in the meads”** (line 13) his sense of distance from love is diminished and the couple engage in presumably sexual acts; **“she looked at me as she did love,/ and made sweet moan”** (line 19-20), **“I set her on my pacing steed”** (line 21), **“she took me”** (line 29), **“I shut her wild wild eyes”** (line 31). The proximity of the two is intense; they do a lot of things in rapid succession (almost something new in each stanza) whereas in ‘At an Inn’, the speaker uses the poem to only talk about one instance of proximity. The effect of this is that although the Knight and his elfish lady seem to do a lot, the experience seems **short and rushed** whereas love is **drawn out** in ‘At an Inn’. For this reason, the Knight’s sudden experience of distance; **“I awoke and found me here,/ On the cold hill’s side”** (line 43-44) is more painful and raw, possibly fresher than the **gradual distance** established by the speaker and his lover in Hardy’s poem.

