At Castle Boterel

As I drive to the junction of lane and highway,
And the drizzle bedrenches the waggonette,
I look behind at the fading byway,
And see on its slope, now glistening wet,
Distinctly yet

Myself and a girlish form benighted
In dry March weather. We climb the road
Beside a chaise. We had just alighted
To ease the sturdy pony's load
When he sighed and slowed.

What we did as we climbed, and what we talked of
Matters not much, nor to what it led,-
Something that life will not be balked of
Without rude reason till hope is dead,
And feeling fled.

It filled but a minute. But was there ever
A time of such quality, since or before,
In that hill's story? To one mind never,
Though it has been climbed, foot-swift, foot-sore,
By thousands more.

Primaeval rocks form the road's steep border,
And much have they faced there, first and last,
Of the transitory in Earth's long order;
But what they record in colour and cast
Is - that we two passed.

And to me, though Time's unflinching rigour,
In mindless rote, has ruled from sight
The substance now, one phantom figure
Remains on the slope, as when that night
Saw us alight.

I look and see it there, shrinking, shrinking,
I look back at it amid the rain
For the very last time; for my sand is sinking,
And I shall traverse old love's domain
Never again.
This poem was written during March 1913 when Hardy visited Cornwall after the death of his wife. Castle Boterel is Boscastle about a mile from St. Juliot where Emma lived when she first met Hardy. Travelling along a road near Boscastle, Hardy recalled a particular incident which took place on it between himself and Emma forty years before.

**Stanza 1**

The poem opens in the present with Hardy driving to the junction of a lane and highway in a wagonette with drizzle falling. (a) What is the effect of "drizzle bedrenches", and "fading"? and "glistening wet"? They suggest the sombre, unhappy quality of the present. He looks behind him physically, the adjective "fading" suggesting (b) increasing distance and fading light, and therefore the lessening importance of present reality.

**Stanza 2**

In the backward look he sees backwards in memory to a scene many years before on the same road when he and a girl were overtaken by night: "benighted" (c) what is the effect of "In dry March weather"? It contrasts with the present wet, unpleasant March weather and suggests the greater happiness of the March of the past. It continues in the present tense - "We climb the road" - the intensity of his memory making the recollection seem for the moment reality. (d) Comment on the use of accurate details in the picture given. The "pony sighing and slowing" and the description of Hardy and Emma alighting to "ease the pony's load" gives a sense of a particular and real moment. The alliteration of 's' dramatises the pony's fatigue.

**Stanza 3**

In the third stanza Hardy suggests that what he and Emma did and talked about then does not matter but the "something that life will not be baulked of" is the real importance of the occasion. What this "something" was is not clear but it seems to refer to a declaration of love. Only the loss of hope and feeling could deny this "something" Hardy says. The idea of the future is very fluid in this stanza. It is both the past's future (what that moment led to) and the present's future for the significance of that moment will outlive the present day of drizzle and last until hope is dead/And feeling fled.

**Stanza 4**

What is really important about this occasion is emphasised in Stanza four. While it filled only a minute, Hardy asks if ever there was a "time of such quality" in "that hill's story" and states that he believes there never was. (e) Explain "A time of such quality" in "that hill's story" and states that he believes there never was. "Though it has been climbed foot-swift, foot-sore,/By thousands more". "A time of such quality" and "Though it has been climbed ..." imply that there were many moments recalled perhaps by the "thousands more" who have climbed the hill but "one mind", Hardy's, is convinced that of all the hill's moments one in particular is pre-eminent. The stanza expresses the idea that it is the quality of life which is important rather than its length and in saying this is expressing a defiance of Time.

**Stanza 5**

In this stanza Hardy increases the time-scale to the pre-human (f) How? "Primaeval rocks" emphasise the great age and permanence of the hill, and Hardy reflects on how much of transitory life they must
have observed. (g) What is the real significance of this place? In spite of the age of the rocks and all that they have seen, to Hardy the rocks seem to record in colour and shape that "we two passed." In a sense this is a defiance of Time. Time cannot alter the quality of that moment.

Stanza 6

This idea of the defiance of Time is continued in this stanza. (h) Explain how, making sure you explain the phrases "Time's unflinching rigour" and "In mindless rote". Time, in bringing death, and ruling "from sight the substance" of a person, is personified as a stern taskmaster who will stop for no one and is like a mindless machine in repeating the process. But Hardy's memory allows him to see "one phantom figure" - Emma - even though Time has removed the real person, "the substance". In this way Hardy is able to defy "Time's unflinching rigour".

Stanza 7

In the last stanza Hardy returns to the present and reality, seeing the "phantom figure" "Shrinking, shrinking" repeating the word with powerful effect. (i) What is the mood of this verse? The mood is of sadness and resignation as he accepts that the moment ("it") "for the very last time,?" as he is becoming old and will never return to this place.

(j) Explain "for my sand is sinking". The phrase is a metaphor of sand in an hour-glass and is a poignant reference to the fact that the poet has not long to live.
The impact of the last two lines is made the more powerful by the joy of the memory now fading and the defiance of Time earlier.

CONCLUSION

In all the poems of 1912-3, and indeed in many more, the survival of the past simultaneously with the present is the theme which brings Hardy's poetry to its most moving pitch. It is in "At Castle Boterel" that the idea of time is most insistently expressed. It is not simply that Hardy was moved by memory: it is always the past in specific relation to some later time. Usually the later time is more bitter and drabber than the earlier, so that the past often seems more real than the present.