

Notes on The Convergence of Twain by Thomas Hardy:

In A Nutshell

For those of you too young to remember, we'd like to grace you with a memorable Titanic performance. Yes, we're crying too, probably due to Celine Dion's passionate chest pounding, or maybe it's Leo's dreamy eyes. Anyway, we digress—but not too much, since "The Convergence of the Twain" (published in 1915) is about that same iconic ship that crashed into an iceberg in 1912. Although Thomas Hardy refrains from chest pounding, we can still sense a similar visceral connection to the kinds of mysterious and lonely emotions that must have been running rampant for the folks who went down. No matter if it's Celine Dion or an English poet, we're dealing with a story that people are still fascinated and moved by so many years later.

The cool thing about Hardy's take is that his focus is more on the ship and the iceberg than the unfortunate folks who went down. His speaker works with the actual parts of the ship that were built within the same timeframe that its "sinister mate" (the iceberg) was growing too. So we get this foreshadowing surrounding the entire construction of the ship and the ominous, inevitable threat of nature itself.

Even better, we get to see the sunken parts of the ship that include jewels, mirrors, and steel chambers that all look eerily lifeless beneath the sea. Suddenly all of man's glory and vanity that went into building the ship become little more than useless things that sea-worms crawl in and out of. In a way then, we get to see man's creation as a kind of artifact that nature curiously observes, rather than the other way around. And who doesn't like to see "dim moon-eyed fishes" checking out a huge hunk of steel wondering what in the world it is?

Hardy's speaker avoids getting overly sentimental about the crash itself. By focusing on natural forces and a sort of mysterious "Immanent Will" that drives everything together, we get to imagine the Titanic with the same curiosity of the fishes. And yet the solitude of the sea and the lifeless objects that lie beneath remind us of the loneliness we might feel if we ever found ourselves in similar circumstances.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

1912 was a long time ago, but still there's something surrounding the actual circumstances of the Titanic's crash that we can't help but feel intrigued by. Thomas Hardy's poem only serves to make that intrigue even more palpable by putting the mystery right out there in the open for us to observe like curious fish.

There's something much deeper going on in "The Convergence of the Twain" than just a boat crash. It involves man's vanity, which winds up at the bottom of the sea looking lifeless and kinda silly. After all, pretty jewels and mirrors are as useless as they come once their only companion becomes an indifferent sea-worm. So what's left once our pride and glory rest with the fishes and cease to impress anyone?

Hardy's speaker leaves all that open for interpretation. But if we were to venture a guess right here and now, we'd say that what's left are the kinds of things we might value besides pretty jewels and trinkets. In other words, what we end up with after all of the jewels and mirrors are gone is simply who we are and what we value beyond all of our "stuff." The tragedy of the

Titanic reminds us of how fragile our existence really is and that we ought to look for more meaningful experiences beyond pretty jewels and trinkets.

Blub, blub, blub... the poem opens with the imagery of the sea that's holding the Titanic deep at the bottom. All of the steel chambers, mirrors, jewels and other pretty things are at the bottom too, only this time they're surrounded by curious fish and sea-worms that are none too impressed. But since they're in the sea now, those jewels aren't as pretty since they're lightless (no light at the bottom of the sea) and of no use to anyone. The speaker then goes on to tell the story of the Titanic's construction that was simultaneously underway while the iceberg was growing too. So the two are kind of cosmically connected, but not in a good way. When the two do eventually meet, these worlds collide with some awfully tragic circumstances.

Lines 1-3

In a solitude of the sea
Deep from human vanity,
And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she.

The sea is kind of a lonely place when we think about how vast it is. The same idea holds true here as the speaker introduces the poem with the setting of the "solitude of the sea." And since the sea is so removed from humanity and all its creations, it's far from things like vanity and glory. Notice that we're already deep at the bottom of the sea in line 2. So the speaker isn't wasting any time in establishing the setting in a way that's far removed from man's vanity.

Notice too how the speaker is first focused on the sea rather than the Titanic itself. (Heck, at this point it's not clear to anyone that the Titanic is even the subject yet.) So we may be getting hints that this poem is taking a slightly different approach, perhaps one that's more metaphysical (philosophical), when it comes to this famous story.

We have some alliteration here too ("solitude" and "sea") that emphasizes the soft sounds of the sea waves. Check out "Sound Check" for more on sound in this poem.

We also have a perfect rhyme in these three lines ("sea," "vanity," "she"). Already we feel a kind of smooth connectedness with that AAA rhyme scheme so let's see if the speaker keeps it up. (Check out "Form and Meter" for more details.)

Line 3 gives us some more perspective on the difference between man's "Pride of Life" (like vanity, glory, etc.) and the solitude of the sea that's far from all that. The former helped to build (or plan) while the latter ironically became the very thing that brought those plans down and now "couches (holds) she." So much for man's "Pride of Life," right?

But wait a hot second. Who is she, and what is she doing at the bottom of the ocean? Well, ya scurvy land lubbers, if you know anything about boats, you know that a) they go on the ocean and b) they are treated as women. So, the "she" here must be the Titanic. At this point, Hardy's readers would have been picking up on that reference, since the shipwreck would have still been fresh in their minds.

So which appears more powerful here, the sea or those great shipbuilding plans? Clearly the sea that cares little about man's "Pride of Life." Notice the capitalization of these words too

that's meant to emphasize the influence that man's pride has over his life and work, while nature is totally indifferent to all of it.

Lines 4-6

Steel chambers, late the pyres
Of her salamandrine fires,
Cold currents thrid, and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres.

What the what? Vocab much, Mr. Hardy? Don't stress, y'all. We'll walk you through this. So by the second stanza the speaker brings us into the actual parts of the ship that are at the bottom of the sea. We see some steel chambers first that would've presumably been used to heat the ship, but here those "pyres" (stuff to burn) are late, meaning they missed the boat, so to speak.

So those fires that would've been burning were "salamandrine." In ancient myth, salamanders were thought to be little fire beasts, immune to flame. "Salamandrine" just mean that these were epic fires, but now... not so much. Can't light a fire in the water, right?

Notice how the speaker is blending the parts of the ship and their intended purposes in this highly aquatic setting, which makes those parts appear totally useless.

Now, what's a "third"? Thrid is just an old fashioned word for passing through something. So

Those currents are passing through all of the Titanic's stuff. Instead of fires, we have "cold currents" that turn like the rhythmic sounds of a lyre (a stringed instrument common in Greek myths). Again, this is figurative language, so we have to use our imaginations a bit. Imagine the sound of the sea underwater and how it might sound like a soothing instrument. That's the kind of aural imagery the speaker wants us to hear.

So although it's kinda sad that those parts are going unused, we feel a kind of mysterious beauty here in the sea that's making the ship a part of the aquatic setting.

We also have another perfect rhyme in this stanza: "pyres," "fires," "lyres." So the speaker is being consistent so far in keeping a prescribed rhyme for each stanza, which gives the poem a kind of wavelike rhythm.

Lines 7-9

Over the mirrors meant
To glass the opulent
The sea-worm crawls — grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent.

First we had the steel chambers and now we have opulent mirrors that would've been used to frame all of the luxurious folks that were on the ship. Remember, the Titanic had a mighty pricey ticket cost, excluding the cheap seats, so most of the people on there would appreciate opulence.

But here those mirrors are just as useless as the steel chambers, since the speaker includes the imagery of sea-worms crawling all over them.

So not only are they useless, they're also depicted as kind of grotesque here because of those creeping worms. Opulence, therefore, looks a whole lot less opulent at the bottom of the sea. Notice how the speaker juxtaposes opulence with the sea-worm crawling all over the mirrors. He's making it clear that there's a big difference between what man sees as valuable and what nature sees as valuable. As it turns out, those sea-worms aren't too interested in opulence.

All of those adjectives that come after that dash in line 9 are what help to make that difference stand out. Opulence is being covered by something that's "grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent," which makes those mirrors seem even more useless and impractical.

Finally, we can't ignore the new rhyme we have here that is definitely keeping with that AAA pattern with different rhymes for each stanza.

Lines 10-12

Jewels in joy designed
To ravish the sensuous mind
Lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and blind.

Just like the useless mirrors, the jewels that were designed to ravish people's minds lie lightless at the bottom of the sea because, well, there's no light at the bottom of the sea. And if there's no light at the bottom of the sea, those jewels can't catch the light and sparkle, right?

So all of those pretty sparkles that might have hypnotized folks on the boat have lost all of their intended power here. Instead they're "bleared and black and blind," since they have no light to sparkle with. Without sparkles, they serve no real purpose other than taking up space in the sea. Some alliteration of B words hammers home that point.

Notice the parallelism we have going on in these last two stanzas that illustrates man's vanity with plans, trinkets, etc., and then positions those things in the sea in a way that makes them lose all value. It seems these fancy devices might make us reconsider what we believe to be valuable.

Maybe man's intended design, like jewels, mirrors, and luxury boats, all end up looking kind of "lightless" because there's nothing real about them in any meaningful sense. Jewels can't whisper life's mysteries into your ear, right? Only things like love, nature, and other people can help to illuminate some of the big questions we have about life.

Lines 13-15

Dim moon-eyed fishes near
Gaze at the gilded gear
And query: "What does this vaingloriousness down here?" ...

Aw, cute—moon-eyed fishes, gang. These guys have big peepers to help them see in the very little light that reaches the bottom of the ocean. And what do they spy? They're looking at all of

the ship's glorious stuff and wondering what in the world it is. The speaker seems to be making the point that man's vanity is so far removed from nature that nature's creatures can't make sense of it. It all just looks like weird useless stuff.

More specifically, the fishes think it's just a bunch of "vaingloriousness" (another way of saying vanity).

This is also where we start seeing more of nature looking at man's vanity as a kind of strange artifact. The fish can't eat any of the "gilded gear," nor can they use it in any useful way, so it all just appears strange.

The ending rhetorical question in line 15 emphasizes the speaker's ideas that make us wonder what the point of man's vanity really is. So far all of these things have no real purpose and are certainly of no use to the people who went down with the Titanic.

So why do we bother to waste so much time building these things and convincing ourselves that they're valuable?

Lines 16-18

Well: while was fashioning
This creature of cleaving wing,
The Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything

Although the speaker doesn't directly answer that rhetorical question from the previous stanza, he does give us a little background here. At this point we see the ship's cleaved body (split in half), which brings us back to when it was first being fashioned (built).

So in the midst of the Titanic's construction we find this "Immanent Will" that's hovering over everything in a way that guides all things. Immanent, by the way, means something that's inside of us and all parts of the universe. It's kind of like a divine force of some sort that moves all things whether we're aware of it or not. We're talking Star Wars kind of stuff, you know, Luke using the force and such.

The speaker is juxtaposing that Immanent Will with the actual construction of the Titanic that is stirred and urged by that same force. Nothing, including that luxurious ship, is outside of its influence and pull.

Notice that the speaker has also capitalized Immanent Will, just like he did with Pride of Life. So again we see him bringing together man's priorities with the immanent forces that lie in nature and in man. Don't forget to check out "Symbols, Imagery, and Wordplay" for more on that.

Lines 19-21

Prepared a sinister mate
For her — so gaily great —
A Shape of Ice, for the time far and dissociate.

That Immanent Will isn't just about stirring and urging everything that's pretty in the universe. It also has an uglier side that's prepared a "sinister mate" for the Titanic. So we see that this force has two sides to it, one that is creative and one that is destructive.

So who is her sinister mate? The "Shape of Ice" (iceberg) that is far and dissociated with the Titanic at this time.

So we get this feeling of a kind of ominous plan in the works that's somewhat sinister, but we're not sure why. Notice too that we see Shape of Ice capitalized too, which draws further emphasis to the important role it's going to play in this infamous story, even though it's far away at this time.

We also have some more alliteration in "gaily great" that has a kind of sarcastic effect, since we recognize here that her greatness is about to face a sinister end. It kind of sounds like the speaker is saying, it may be great now, but watch what happens with history's ironic twist.

Lines 22-24

And as the smart ship grew
In stature, grace, and hue,
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

Some more about that smart great ship that's growing at the same time the iceberg is growing too (notice Iceberg is also capitalized). We definitely feel an equal but opposite feeling going on here between creation and destruction that's symbolized respectively as the ship and iceberg. And since the destructive part (iceberg) is growing in shadowy silent distance, the speaker may be suggesting that the more chaotic aspects of the Immanent Will are harder to see and understand.

That makes sense when we think of some of those big mysteries in life related to life and death that we just can't understand all the time. The easy stuff is, well, easy to understand, but the chaotic, more "sinister" stuff—not so much.

So again we see the speaker juxtaposing opposites here to maybe accent that life is made up of opposing forces that work together in a kind of cosmic unity. It sounds weird and groovy, but it makes more sense when we imagine the iceberg and Titanic "growing" at the same time.

And no matter how smart and graceful a thing may be, it's still susceptible to both forces that are hard to fully anticipate or explain.

The alliteration in "shadowy silent" distance draws our ear to the speaker's point that this sort of plan is just as mysterious to understand as the actual collision of these unseen forces. It's kind of like the universe itself that we recognize as being both creative and destructive, but we're still trying to put the pieces together.

Lines 25-27

Alien they seemed to be;
No mortal eye could see

The intimate welding of their later history,

The speaker even goes so far as to say one side of this immanent force is alien to the other, just like the Titanic that's unaware of its sinister mate. So it's impossible for a mortal eye, any random dude, to really see or anticipate the welding of these forces in any particular event. But still, as the speaker tells us in line 27, these events comprise "history" and happen nonetheless.

The word "alien" really emphasizes the opposite but equal idea the speaker is working with. One thing is just as alien to the other, and yet they're doomed to meet each other in such a tragic welding of history. They may be "alien" but they're destined for an intimate connection in the not so distant future.

So there's no denying the impact of the collision of such forces, whether they're creative or destructive. The foreshadowing we see in line 27 tells us that these kinds of collisions are what make history so memorable and "intimate" since these stories tend to really hit home.

After all, events that make us reconsider our understanding of such powerful but necessary forces tend to reveal all sorts of questions about creation and destruction. Deep stuff here, right?

Lines 28-30

Or sign that they were bent
By paths coincident
On being anon twin halves of one august event,

Those mortal eyes can't see the "signs" that might indicate what's about to happen either. Instead folks just call events like these coincidences ("coincident"), since we can't really understand how stuff like this can happen.

But still when those opposite but equal halves meet (Titanic and Iceberg) they create one "august" (memorable) throwdown.

Notice too that the speaker uses the word "twin" to further emphasize his opposite but equal motif.

What's cool here too is that the speaker imagines the two as twin halves of one whole event, which allows us to imagine the collision of creative and destructive forces in a more tangible way. It's kind of like imagining a Yin and Yang symbol. We know those forces exist and when we imagine them together, they start to make more sense.

But the question still remains, is it coincidence or the Immanent Will that drove these two paths together? The speaker doesn't answer his own question since it's kind of the mystery of life. But we encourage you to engage in a friendly debate on the topic. Try putting it in the context of this poem and see what kind of ideas come to mind.

Lines 31-33

Till the Spinner of the Years
Said "Now!" And each one hears,
And consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres.

But by this stanza, we get the feeling that maybe the speaker is thinking that there is some sort of master plan that's equipped with a Spinner of the Years. Maybe he's referring to a kind of divine providence that unifies all things and therefore "spins" the years as we go.

So the spinner gives the final sign by line 32 that signals the big collision between these two alien halves. By then it's too late for either half to "hear" the signal, and the two are then consummated in tragic circumstances and brought together as one complete whole.

This kind of stuff brings to mind Shakespeare and the ideas he usually worked with in plays like Romeo and Juliet, where two opposite but equal forces are "consummated" in tragedy. So our speaker isn't just working with ideas about a big boat that crashed. He's getting at some very old theories that have been around for as long as opposites have been around (a.k.a. forever).

And since he uses the metaphor of the iceberg and Titanic being two "hemispheres," we feel even more the kind of universal vibe that the speaker is going with. It's as if the collision itself is a kind of metaphor for life's creative and destructive forces that are put forth via some "Immanent" force that unites all things. In the end though, it's still a big icy mystery.