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Representation and Symbolism of Character

Although Thomas Hardy's poem "Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?" is a conversation between a deceased woman and a voice above the ground, the message is not nearly as morbid, nor as negative towards human nature, as it might at first seem to the reader. On the contrary, if analyzed, one might find it to be one of the more realistic, natural, and somewhat reassuring poems written around the topic of death. Hardy paints an incredibly accurate image of human thought on the varying degrees of expected intimacy and loyalty in relationships in his poem "Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?" by using representation of common relationships through the sequence of symbolic character introduction.

The most passionate of human relationships is universally recognized as that of a lover. Other relationships have the potential to be equally as strong and lasting, perhaps even more so, than that of a lover, but they touch a completely different area of the heart than a romantic partner does. Love is spoken of and written about as an eternal, undying thing that lasts throughout and beyond time; naturally, when the nameless woman lying in her grave realizes that someone is digging on the ground she is buried beneath, she first supposes that it is the man she loved during her life planting flowers on the soil above her. Yet the anonymous individual above ground tells that it is not her lover and then goes on to reveal that her lover married another woman the day before, saying that "It cannot hurt

her now” (Hardy 2401). It is here that the reader is faced with the first of multiple painful tidings throughout the poem, where the nameless voice of the living tactfully shatters the trusting assumptions from the grave with the tactless facts of reality. Dennis Taylor touches upon the theme shown through the deceased woman’s naïve belief in her romance’s life after her death in his article on Hardy’s writing style. “Reverie,” he writes, “simultaneously expanding and growing blind to changing circumstance, can be the model for a wide range of activities in Hardy's world” (Taylor 269). He expands this theory while going deeper into detail, saying that “romantic visions, life styles, deep rooted ways of seeing the world, human relationships grow habitual over the years and eventually vulnerable. A marriage may take a certain form which, in ways the couple do not quickly see, no longer corresponds to the reality of what they are...” (Taylor 269). The reader witnesses the first blow to the woman’s post-death reality as she discovers that romantic love is not always as true and as loyal and as outside of time as humanity likes to believe. Although she loved and was loved by this man during her life, when her life ended his did not. Perhaps the reader sees here that romantic love does not necessarily end with the ending of a life, but it does take on an entirely different form than the one it previously held.

Family loyalty has been consistently held in high regard across different cultures all over the world throughout time. It seems logical, then, that the next person the reader inquires about is her “nearest and dearest kin” (Hardy 2402). For the second time the gracious, unidentified visitor explains that it is not who she has guessed, and goes on to share that her family thinks that there is no use in visiting her grave, for “no tendance of her mound can loose/ her spirit from Death’s gin” (Hardy 2402). Again, despite what would

at the very least be described as painful news to any living person, the woman does not seem distressed, and she makes her next guess.

It is remarkably curious that Hardy decided that the woman's enemy should be included as a character in this poem. At first it comes across as rather jarring and out of place, but like the rest of this poem, upon further analysis it is incredibly logical and quite realistic. Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe once stated that "the assault of our enemies is not part of our life; it is only part of our experience; we throw it off and guard ourselves against it as against frost, storm, rain, hail, or any other of the external evils which may be expected to happen" (Goethe). Understandably, after the woman is told that it is not her lover nor her closest family that is visiting her grave, her mind goes to the person who hates her most: her enemy. As with the other characters mentioned we are not given a name or any further background or detail in regards to their relation to the dead woman, leaving them as a symbolic icon that humanity can relate to. Even after death this woman is thinking from a beautifully human, mortal standpoint.

At last the considerate, solicitous, nameless being that has been anonymously conversing with the woman reveals that it is her "little dog, who still lives near" (Hardy 2402). It is fitting that the concluding relationship Hardy included in this poem is an animal, for as David Moldstad explains in his review of *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy: A Handbook and a Commentary*, by J. O. Bailey, "Hardy always championed kindness to animals" and one of his "lifelong beliefs" was "that all creatures, animals and men, are kin" (Moldstad 465). But beyond Hardy's personal beliefs, dogs are considered man's best friend, so it seems true to form that the dog is the visitor at the grave. Upon this discovery the woman wonders why she did not think to guess that it was her dog from the start,

saying, “what feeling do we ever find/ to equal among human kind/ a dog’s fidelity!” (Hardy 2402). But of course, the dog must once again cordially correct her, explaining he was merely burying his bone and had forgotten this was where she lied in death. This seems to be a strangely comical yet mildly unsettling ending to this conversation, with no redemption for either side of the grave. This unapologetically dissatisfying ending is rather typical in Hardy’s poetry, as Susan Miller writes in her article addressing Hardy’s work, “We are aware, reading Hardy, of a steely certainty hovering over and around many of these poems, which do not leave themselves open-ended or recognize the need to be even-handed in a world of many possibilities” (Miller 96). She goes even further, stating that “Hardy’s poems know what they know, and they insist especially on certain patterns of disappointment with a relentlessness that hints at conviction” (Miller 96). “Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave” showcases this tendency of Hardy’s very clearly, leaving the reader feeling vaguely displeased with the abrupt ending. The entire poem is wrapped in such mortality, from the hope to be remembered after death to the lack of deep loyalty from the living. And yet the message would be false if it were portrayed any other way, for humanity is not black and white but shades of grey. Every one of this woman’s relationships in the world ended with her, but if she goes on after death her life stays frozen with her where it ended: relationships suspended mid-air, no conclusion. It would be odd and unhealthy if those that were still living refused to go on with their lives in regards to the dead woman, and it would be inhuman and fabricated if she did not hope they would remember her after her death.

Some people strongly believe that this poem loudly displays the vain egocentricity of mankind. Vern B. Lentz is one of these people, and in his article on Hardy’s use of

disembodied voices in his work Lentz writes that Hardy used “disembodied voices for humorous effect”, saying “both “The Levelled Churchyard” and "Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?" use the voice from the grave to mock the self-centered concerns of individuals” (Lentz 4). Yet again, through analysis, the reader might come to a different conclusion. It may seem a bit strange that the deceased woman does not seem to be even the slightest bit troubled when she is told that her lover is not visiting her and has moved on and married another, or that her family does not see worth in visiting her grave. There is no emotional response to any of the statements made by the dog, instead the woman simply makes her next logical guess as to who might be visiting her. When she is told again and again that it is not who she assumes it is, her response is surprisingly not one of disappointment. She does not seem to be the least bit upset with her friends and family for not visiting her grave; her questions seem to be born out of curiosity rather than expectation. To hear that her lover and her family have gone on and do not visit her any longer would be incredibly painful news to any living person, but this dead woman seems to have accepted the idea that her loved ones have moved on exceptionally well. There is a very human balance between a hope and desire to be remembered and loved in absence, yet also an understanding and adaptation to the fact that life goes on and brings the living with it. Hardy is realistic in the portrayal of the human soul after death, not glossing it over with a gauzy, angelic haze or giving a mortal a saint-like nature simply because they are dead; rather, he displays the finite condition of mankind in the abrupt conclusion of a life. Life is always fatal. “Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?” is not so much a portrait of human self-absorption as it is a genuine portrayal of what an individual’s view of their relationships in life might have

looked like had they been given the chance to reflect after death in contrast with the response of the world in regards to the end of the individual's life.

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