

*Late Nostalgia to the Memory of an Early
Disappointed Love Experience: A Study in
Thomas Hardy's Selected Late Elegies*

Dr. Ibtisaam Natheer Hameed^()*

Abstract

This paper in brief sheds light on the tragedy of love, a true love which had started passionately for a while, then it suffered from cold relationship which lasted for a very long time and all of a sudden ended with death. The shocking death of his wife, Emma Clifford, awakened in the poet's (Hardy's) heart all old memories revived from under ashes and became alive in front of him, in a vivid vision that led him to the edge of being haunted. Thomas Hardy renewed his old love memories in a series of elegies, notable among them are: "The Going", "Your Last Drive", "Rain on a Grave", "After a Journey", "The Haunter",etc.

(*) Dept. of English - College of Arts / University of Mosul.

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) is a great man of deep suffering. Throughout his long career, he agonized many insolvable dilemmas, which left profound impressions on his life and were evidently reflected on his literary products, his late poetry in particular. Notable among these problems were two crises. First, the crisis of religious belief which resulted from the complicated scientific impact of Charles Darwin's theory: The Origin of Species, which imbred in him a skeptical attitude toward Heavenly principal belief of the creation of man. Second, his frustrated love experience with his first wife, Emma Clifford, with whom he had lived a bitterly suffering married life. As a result, he had been subject to severe mental as well as emotional stresses which made him a miserable man.

However, Hardy was a poet in essence, whose style was poetic even in his fiction. As a poet, he belonged to the twentieth century. He was in part responsible for the flowering of the modern English poetry. The agonizing personal circumstances he had passed through was an additional factor which made him a creative poet.

Hardy came from a poor family. He was in fact a self-educated literary character, yet he was talented and started his life writing poetry, but as he felt that poetry could not make good living, he shifted to fiction. He later came back to what he had already begun as a poet. But, his later poems were totally different from his early

ones. Besides, one important reason for his shift from prose to poetry was that his deep feelings of personal loss, alienation, loneliness and emotional and intellectual failure (Hynes, p.16).

Thus, the change is quite obvious not only in the shift from prose to verse, but in the type of the poems he began to write. The poems of this period are darker than those of his early years. He indeed expressed a personal pain and a sense of alienation from human society, so tense that the speaker sees death as a welcome release from imprisoned life. One may think that these poems are simply the latest terms in an increasingly pessimistic view of the universe that Hardy had previously made in his novels. So the sense of misfortune and lost hope is too personal in the poems of that period.

Hardy wrote a collection of poems entitled Ashes of an Old Flame, (Gitting, 1978). These are some of his finest which described his early meetings with his first wife, and his subsequent loss. Ezra Pound described the collected poems as "the harvest of having written twenty novels" (Hydes, p.16), taking Hardy's twenty-five years of novel writing as merely a long apprenticeship in the use of language. It is true that the mature poetical voice does come out of the later novels.

To begin with, love is the major theme of Hardy's works both in fiction and verse especially in poems of 1912-13. It begins in fascination in which the lover fixes his whole life on the beloved. His keen desire for her makes her the centre of the world. Such love changes everything around her and makes a sign of her presence everywhere. As soon as the lover reaches his goal, the lady he loves so dearly loses all her magical power. In one way or another, he is led to betray her or to be betrayed by her and to suffer a lifelong remorse for the suffering this infidelity causes. This is exactly what happens in his real life and is reflected in his poems. A tragic life dominates all his love poems. He once describes love as: "Love is a terrible thing, sweet for a space and then all mourning, mourning" (Gitting, p.276).

Thus, the poems of 1912-13 are mostly poems of memories. They are also called love poems or elegies in some of the poetry anthologies. The best of them are written to the memory of his wife and refer to events forty years earlier.

The sense of the past finds its ultimate expression in the theme of death. It is a subject to which Hardy returned again and again as he grieved for the loss of dear persons (such as parents, friends, lover...etc.) but most important of all was the death of his wife. In 1912 his first wife, Emma, died. Hardy responded to her death with a series of elegies that are his finest poems which held the central

themes of his poetry. He idealizes the dead wife who is still alive with him. These poems deal honestly with his complex feelings represented in sense of guilt for his cruelty, his regret since his marriage had failed, his need to believe that his wife somehow still lived within him. These elegies are extraordinary achievements. They are old man's love poems to a dead woman – the love poems that he could not write while she was living – full of love and desire, but honest and therefore also full of loss. However, during Emma's life, the situation was completely different.

They first met in 1870 when Hardy was a trainer architect and got married in 1874. At first, they were happy; they had a two year happiness, but soon turned into indifference and bitterness. In 1889, Hardy wrote: "Loves on propinquity but dies of contact" (Gitting, p.96), and over the next twenty years he often treated his wife carelessly. Emma responded by filling her diary with bitter accusations of Hardy, full of poison, hatred and abuse. They then estranged from each other. But he was shocked by her sudden death, a shock which led him to destroy most of his miserable diaries and tried to hide his guilty feelings from his second wife. The poems he wrote in this period were full of self-blame, regret and surprised affection. These poems are the most famous love poems written in November 1912. He called them "a compensation".

I believe it would be said by people who know me well that I have a faculty possibly not uncommon for burying an emotion in my heart or brain for forty years and exhuming it at the end of that time as fresh as when interred.

(<http://www.rose.cc.ok.us/research/re05059.htm>)

Poems of 1912-13 therefore are a full description of the self, specially they use weather, objects in nature and landscape – particularly Emma's own Cornish landscape to show the difference between past pleasure and present pain. They exhibit his long standing fascination with hosts and haunting. They keep faith with the visible world of actual things, while transforming them into a mythical landscape, a place where nature is played out as beauty and place names, picnic cups, hills, rain-drops do not merely support an act of memory but carry the influence of the past. This leads to the conclusion that Hardy's best poems are all elegies in their various ways, and that the best of these are the poems addressed to Emma.

What had begun as a marriage of joy became later a marriage of quarrelling and heavy silence. Mrs Hardy seems to have been subject to mild madness, and owing to her snobbery, which drove her to assume an air of superiority over his origins. She regarded him inferior to herself because of his social status. She began to keep a

diary of bitter scandal of Hardy, of his family, of his ways under the title of "What I Think of my Husband". She spoke "slightly and darkly of Hardy's peasant origin" (Gittings, p.98). The marriage had worsened over the years and Emma's death awakened remorseful memories of their earlier love and later estrangement that issued sharply in poems. However, Hardy made an attempt of hiding his private sense of failure when he wrote "the verse came, it was quite natural. One looks through the years and sees some pictures, a loss like that makes one's old brain vocal" (Burton, pp. 8-9).

His most widely admired elegies are the twenty-one poems, remarkable among them are: "The Going", "Your Last Drive", "Rain on a Grave", "After a Journey", "The Haunter".

What comes back to him is the whole tragic involvement of a relationship sustained through forty years and in the end gone dead. In "The Going", Hardy regrets haunting his memory with a great sadness.

*Why did you give no hint that night
That quickly after the morrow's dawn,
And calmly, as if indifferent quite,
You would close your term here, up and be gone.*
(Motion, p.89, lines: 1-4)^(*)

(*) Andrew Motion, Thomas Hardy Selected Poem (London: Everyman, Penguin Books Ltd., 1998), P.89. Further references to this edition will parenthetically be cited within the text.

This poem opens the sequence of poems which have reference to the death of Emma Hardy. The deepest note struck in these poems is not only regret but the recapture of experience as well. Regret leads to an opening of memory, a flood which returns sometimes almost an illusion of seeing the past as a vision following a memory.

Hardy applies the possibility of encounter which results from the association of a certain person with a particular place or setting. Such preparation lends an air of inevitability to the phantom visit. The real or illusory ghostly phantom in Hardy's poetry:

*Why do you make me leave the house
And think for a breath it is you see
At the end of the ally of bending boughs,
Where so often at dusk you used to be..*

(Lines: 5-8)

It is clear from these lines that there is a pain so cruel as to provoke him into a wild criticism, but the criticism softens in his waiting for the illusion of ghost's return.

Past and present tend to mix in these poems which treat a return to the Cornish landscape of the lovers' courtship. The geographical journey becomes a journey in time, therefore, to cross over old love's province is to recover the past:

*Why, then, lately, did we not speak
Did we not think of those days long
And ere your vanishing strive to seek dead,
That's renewal? We might have said,
In this bright spring weather
We'll visit together
Those places that once we visited.*

(Lines: 9-15)

A return to such places is a return to the past time they embody. In the last line of this poem when Hardy says: "I seem but a dead man held on end... would undo me so", perhaps is the most effective part of this poem, the self-knowledge that has come with Emma's death but Hardy's feelings and thoughts do not know it until the tragedy reveals them (Hynes, p.80).

"Your Last Drive", the second poem in the cycle was written less than a month after Emma's death, when the shock of her departure was very fresh. In the first stanza, one can see the bright features of heroine, most likely darkly "by the borough lights ahead". Her features are absent and the only explanation for the poet's missing his opportunity to picture them is the perspective of the cycle already existing in his head. What is present, in this stanza, is her speech, reflected in "And you told of the charm of that haloed

view" one hears in this line her "haloed view" indicating that she was by all accounts a religious woman.

He describes an evocation of her returning home in the evening from a routine outing that proved to be her last. The carriage carrying the heroine past the place where she shortly will be buried seems to arrest the poet's imagination.

Seemingly, the heroine's outing had occurred one week before she died, she was brought on the eighth day at this place apparently to her last as she drove home by the moorway. Seeking detail, as an example in one of his notes he writes, "Lonely places in the country have each their own peculiar silences", (Hardy, P.735). One easily observes the sense of loss, unbearable absence and all harmful memory. Actually, the central theme here is the heroine's lack of any sign or idea of her approaching end. Throughout these poems, the poet insists on the sadness of Emma's death, who was tortured with all sorts of diseases, including a mental disorder. At last the poet addresses his lady in the grave:

*I go hence soon to my resting place;
You may miss me then. But I shall not know
How many times you visit me there,
Or what your thoughts are, or if you go
There near at all. And I shall not care.*

*Should you censure me I shall take no heed,
And even your praises no more shall need.*

(Lines: 15-22)

Thus, Emma is capable of invading her husband's future to the point of making him defend himself. In fact, she is far more than just a memory. She is an entity he can address, a presence or absence he is familiar with.

Further, in "Rain on a Grave", the poet provides a vivid example of Hardy's revision of the elegiac tradition. The poem signals the beginning of recovery and consolation which is part of the traditional elegiac poetry. Rain, as a sign of the tears that come with mourning, contributes to the normal cycle of growth and flowering that are frequent features of elegies:

*Clouds spout upon her
Their waters a main
In ruthless disdain
Her who but lately
Had shivered with pain
As at a touch of dishonour
If there had lit on her
So coldly, so straightly
Such arrows of rain.*

(Lines: 1-9)

Here is a touch of romantic involvement. The diction suggests that the woman felt dishonour at being touched. The pun in "arrows of rain", sounds like "eros" of rain end evokes the penetrating of her body. Through his romantic involvement, the poet reaches what he feels as loving maturity. He feels that through the body's decay, she will become part of the flowers on her grave and even "the sweet heart of them"; though she is decayed materially.

In the middle of the poem, the speaker implies that during "the prime of the year", they wandered together as lovers on sunny days and clear evenings. The rain that now falls on her grave began not at her death but much earlier. The recovery of that sunny time, the reversal of the double loss that occurred first through estrangement and then through death, is more than the poem can achieve. Even the statement in the final line that "All her life's round" suggests her circular existence which forms part of his solace.

The theme of haunting is seen in most of his elegies. His elegies focus on personal past, which represents the high peak of his poetic achievements. The ghost in Hardy's modern poetry of haunting is an image of invasion of the past into the present scene and haunting has become as a means of communication between his present and the past. This approach is to present the living woman in frame only so that she is merely a shape or a shadow.

In "After a Journey", the poet is seen in vision at the edge of the sea at night, communicating with the "ghost" of the woman he had been with forty years before:

*And the cave just under, with a voice still so hallow
That it seems to call out to me from forty years ago
When you were all aglow*

(Lines: 1-3)

Once again one is aware of that unique sense of recall across the years. "After a Journey" is written in four eight-line verses, and "the theme of it is a return to the past" (Jibson, p.38). However, this dream does not last long, soon it vanishes away with the daylight:

*Soon you will have, Dear, to vanish from me
for the stars close their shutters and the dawn
whitens hazily,*

(Lines: 10-11)

Thus, talking to himself and his dead wife, he summons the life they had. Irving Howe says, "grief, regret, pain are neither brushed away nor willfully magnified. They fill the scene in quiet, and then lead past themselves to a final dry clarity" (Howe, 1968, p.183). Although much of the poem is addressed "you", it begins with a monologue that never turns into a dialogue with the

"voiceless ghost" –This ghost is the poet's dead lover, his dream, and a version of echo.

The woman he is sketching is slowly fading away from him. Even as he draws her, her features are hidden, turned away from him, gazing in another direction. The conclusion of the poem suggests that this last moment the poet appreciates; the moment is forever, but the relationship was not. The poet did not want it to end and is trying to approach the old moment. It leads one to wonder if this is not only the last time they were together in this spot, but if it was the last time the poet ever saw this woman.

Hardy is expert at making poetry out of a moment. "I Found Her Out There" is one of the poems written shortly after Emma's death. He made a trip to Cornwall to revisit some of the places where they had both been happy during their early courtship.

The poem is passionate and serious which implies a memorial but not an intimate poem, which brought her vividly to life: her face fire-red, and with hair flapping her cheeks like a slap. "Out there" she was wonderfully alive. In brief, the innocent fantasy of the subject has been replaced by a vivid memory.

In the final stanza, the speaker returns to his mood of fantasy, perhaps her shade will creep underground, back to that loved spot, the sea. George Macbeth refers to this point by saying that "the

notion of the shade creeping underground toward the sea, almost like some burrowing animal is deeply touching". He continues:

The idea of the shade needing to make this journey provides a focus and a symbol for Hardy's sense of guilt, his feeling that transporting his wife away from her natural environment in the west was only the first of his many unfairnesses to her.

(Macbeth, 1990, p.17)

The poet finally suggests that his lady should be buried "here" where they used to meet so that he could see her in vision alive in front of him. The poem thus turns out to be far more personal and far more deeply committed than it seemed at the beginning.

So many other poems were later written on the same topic such as "Under the Waterfall", "Lost Love" and "The Haunter". In the latter, the poet reached his emotional peak when he presented his dead wife suddenly speaking out, with some bitterness but much relief. She cannot answer the "words he lifts me":

*When I could answer he did not say them:
When I could let him know
How I would like to join in his journeys
Seldom he wishes to go,
Now that he goes and wants me with him*

*More than he used to do,
Never he sees my faithful phantom
Though he speaks thereto*

(Lines: 1-8)

James Jibson remarks that "the poignancy lies in the inability to communicate between the two worlds – that of the supposed spirit of the dead with that of the continuing cycle of the living" (Jibson, p.36).

To conclude, in dealing with his dead wife and love experience which were terribly disappointing, the poet fluctuated between going back to the emotionally troubled past and his miserable present state. This mixture of feelings of both joy and pain made him haunted with confused memories of both nostalgia to the past of remorseful painful feelings and the present which led him at least to the final surrender to the past, and become a sentimentally arrested man, fully indulged in pain and regret for there is a purge to self and openness to the shades and awareness of the past. All these elements have made Hardy haunted with the frustration of love started early in his life for a short period and lasted momentarily to the current time of the last stage of his life as a haunted man.

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ملخص

حين متأخر حيال ذكرى تجربة حب مبكرة خائبة: دراسة في مجموعة منتقاة من مرثيات توماس هاردي المتأخرة

م.م. ابتسام نذير حميد^(*)

يسلط البحث الضوء بشكل موجز على مأساة حب حقيقي بدأ متيمًا لفترة قصيرة ولكن سرعان ما أصيبت العلاقة بالبرود والتي استمرت لفترة طويلة جداً انتهت فجأة بالموت، إذ أيقظ موت زوجته ايما كليفورد الصاعق ذكريات قديمة في قلب الشاعر خرجت حياً من تحت الرماد لتصبح ماثلة أمامه في رؤية مفعمة بالحياة مما أدى به إلى حافة حالة التلبس بروحها. شرع الشاعر توماس هاردي بتجديد ذكريات حبه القديمة في سلسلة من المرثيات وتأتي في مقدمتها القصائد الآتية: "الرحيل"، "رحلتك الأخيرة"، "مطر فوق القبر"، "بعد الرحيل"، و "المتلبس"... الخ.

(*) قسم اللغة الانكليزية – كلية الآداب / جامعة الموصل.