

Poems 1912-1913 – A psychoanalytical walkthrough of Thomas Hardy's elegies for Emma Lavinia

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Abstract:

Elegiac poetry has an apparent reason for existence: mourning. However, the mourning for the faded one, is mostly written and heard by the living rather than the buried one. Therefore, elegies often involve more prominence of the poet's self, who could have a thousand intertwined ideas each one evolving a renewed image of the one who passed away. And hence, express their interpretations under the lead of those notions and reflections to fulfill the lack of this figure. We can seek here the essential idea of the elegy: to relieve the living through engaging with the passed away figure, as the elegy keeps us away from the sin of forgetting the dead.

Keywords: Elegiac poetry, elegies, Hardy, poet, Emma

In Hardy's elegies, we can encounter the merge and even the revolution of those intertwined ideas through the trend and form of certain poems: anger, fear, loss, loneliness, eagerness, despair, query..... which composes the first part of this essay and will complement the later statements as analytical proof. Secondly, it is necessary to discuss the way Hardy mourns Emma: the death brought back the joyful memories that were hidden due to their rivalry and often inharmonious life as a couple. Yet, although the power of manipulating his wife within the writing was given, Hardy still conserves a certain level of doubt for the accuracy or adequacy of his writings, as will be explained in the penultimate section. Hardy's projection of feelings can be explained as a set of analysis and reencountering with Emma, which helps him to find relief, while giving him the close companionship of her existence being kept still with him inside his mind.

The regret

Among those raveled up feelings, there was a certain level of self-recrimination for Emma's death. For example, in 'The Walk'¹, he confessed his ignorance when he realized how he abandoned her: 'Not thinking of you as left behind.' The anaphoric phrases started by the conjunctive coordinator 'and' with consecutive commas, dissected the line in two halves ('And I went alone, and I did not mind,'), create a sense of hesitation and regret towards his past restraint with Emma. Furthermore, this late realization of Emma's restraint was pictured by Hardy in 'The Haunter'² too. In this poem, Hardy stands from Emma's side and points out her pity, especially within the second stanza, where a tragic contrast of time was built with the use of parallel structure: The first half representing

the time when they were both alive, but Hardy rejected communication: "When I could answer he did not say them: /When I could let him know..."; while the next half presents the desperate impossibility of their understanding, due to Hardy's dismissal: "Never he sees my faithful phantom/ Though he speaks thereto." At the context of the patriarchal society, the women were bended on housework, which restricted the freedom of Emma, forcing her into the traditional role of the 'angel in the hearth'. It is not a surprise that Emma felt isolated, while the privileged males like Hardy can seek several lovers and create literary achievements. And the empathy Hardy had shown to Emma's experience with him, revealed only after her death, reflects his parallel situation after she passed away: he was the one who remains alone in 'The Walk' of the life by then.

Then, to alleviate himself from the sorrow and isolation, Hardy adapted a more blaming attitude towards Emma, because she left him behind. Such as in "The Voice"³, where he names Emma 'Woman much missed' using post-nomination to empathize Emma as the one he is devoting to, strengthening the weight of his despair; adding up with the use of a peculiar subject 'Woman' that shows anonymity that extends the sense of distance, which conveys an accusing sense to Emma, who he may think of being the culpable one for his pain. Also, in "Without Ceremony"⁴, his complaining about how Emma 'vanish without a word' and 'you were all on a sudden gone/before I had thought thereon', leaving him without any preparation, by short dictions and enjambment, creates a compact rhythm representing the ephemeral and unexpected death. His resentment towards Emma and her selfishness, represented

by the line 'forever in that swift style', which holds an invidious tone toward Emma's easy departure, relieving his guilt through passing the sin of abandonment over to Emma, comforting himself for being a victim too. Nevertheless, these transferred recriminations can be interpreted as well as an imitation of the past conflicts between the couple, which could also console Hardy, replenishing the emptiness in his life where the quarrel between Hardy and Emma used to fill.

The apparition

Speaking of replenishing the figures, Hardy often sought his past as source of inspiration to puzzle the figure of Emma. Even though every memory after the death became memories of the past, their good old days are what Hardy highlighted to balance the struggles at their elderly. He deliberately chose many fragmented and blurred extracts of their past, where Emma is presented both as an anonymous phantom and a delightful woman.

Such as in 'After a journey'⁵, Hardy applied a warm, sweet vision of Emma: 'With your nut-coloured hair,/ And gray eyes, and rose-flush coming and going.'. This set of color imageries are moving as they seem natural and realistic, with emphasis on Emma's appearance and the joyous mood of their relationship.

But Hardy did not limit his replenishing action in memories: he often extended it into a lunatic present. For example, in 'The Haunter'⁶, Hardy described Emma's phantom as a genuinely devoted partner, with the following intention as she followed him:

"If he but sigh since my loss befell him
Straight to his side I go.
Tell him a faithful one is doing
All that love can do"

From the lexical pattern (straight, faithful one, all, love) that suggests loyalty, we can see how Hardy intended to shed a positive light on Emma's portrayal. In this poem, the forehand rigors were all replaced by the regret between the couple and their returning devotion to each other. This could be intended to show the possible forgiveness or even companionship that Hardy imagined Emma would be able to offer to him in this appearance and manner.

However, it is more often that Emma's response becomes more neutral or even transparent in attitude, where he stretches his sorrow and grievance of the present life. As they all ended up vanishing or distancing from Hardy at the end of the elegy, leaving Hardy without any option than to pursue them as he did in the 'Without ceremony'⁷ (and I hastened in/to rejoin you, as I inferred). The memories cannot provide a longitudinal consolation, as Hardy may have aimed for, but a temporary revival of the sweetness they used to have. As suggested by Mr. Jeremy Axelrod⁸, Hardy's elegies can be interpreted metaphorically as

Orpheus and his lyre. And the fact that 'as a modern poet Hardy identifies with the limits of Orpheus's songs, not the triumphs.', indicates that Hardy recognized his vulnerability in life, and that he could not do anything for Emma anymore. But, nor he could stop being attracted by the phantom as he expressed in 'After a Journey'⁹, the comparison in the third stanza's ending couplet conveys such ideas, as the alliterative terms 'all aglow' symbolizing the past with the vowel 'a', creates a more positive and romantic atmosphere in sound along with the light imagery, largely contrasting with the fricative 'frailly follow', relating with the weakness while connoting to fragility. Furthermore, the difference of subject applied here also infers to Hardy's blurred consciousness of what was Emma, and what is his literary creation. Unlike the mythical background of Orpheus, who gained the mercy of Hades and Persephone, Emma is an unquestionably muted figure. So, the retrieval of memories while comparing it to the actual present mindset, could not help Hardy to relieve, but addictively pursuing more, as he confessed in the last stanza of 'After a journey', 'bring me here again!', to come back to their old haunts and revisit the scenery of their past.

The uncertainty

Hence, this repeated disappearance of Emma's phantom highlights the uncertainty of Hardy towards his feelings. From 'The Voice'¹⁰, the development of the anonymous voice, with a clear volta dissecting in half the 4 stanzas that composed the full elegy, which ended the second stanza with a color imagery that foreshadowed through the diction 'air-blue' gown, emphasizing the vagueness of the figure and the possible fact that she is just an illusion. Then, the ABAB rhyme scheme here applies a sensation of angst and a bit of a recital mood, which conveys Hardy's despair at calling Emma back. Afterwards, the use a conjunctive sentence starter 'Or' that enhanced the suspense and doubt at the third stanza, which finished at the questioning sentence 'Heard no more again far or near?', resembling Hardy's actual fear at facing the disappearance of Emma, and the end of their journey together. In addition, he sensation of eagerness facing the 'frail figure' he imagined as Emma's representation in 'After a journey'¹¹, also reveals his painful struggle at handling his interpretation of Emma to cope with the grief of her death, as they only deepen his sense of being abandoned and cannot escape from the fact that Emma is dead. He did not treasure the ghost more than living memories, and always found the sense of imagination too empty to replace Emma. The sense of distrust, anxiety, realizing how he trapped himself in the illusion of Emma, could not be adequate as a consolation, nor helped him to pass over the stage of forgiveness.

In addition, Hardy also intended in certain occasions to

portray the death as inevitable, which may give him comfort and gives a more flexible and freer version of Emma apart from their relationship. In 'Last Performance'¹², his character is almost calm and peaceful, or perhaps closer to the sense of being beaten up, as the broken rhythm suggested. As the full poem is engaged with the imagery of 'pour' and 'outflew' that creates a lexical pattern of 'fading' away, while Hardy just 'wondered' how everything was decided – and how Emma knew it would happen. This poem as well as other elegies that Hardy composed involved mysticism but from a distinct perspective, where Emma takes a more prominent role and is pictured with more protagonism and lead, and still alive while performing every action. It may suggest his alternative view towards the position of Emma which differed from what he knew then. Moreover, it gives lesser emotional breakdown but query to the character of Hardy, as if trying to focus on the fact that there had been unknown secrets that separated them and made them distant. Although, the underlying curiosity still entangles Hardy with Emma, as he was still wondering when he writes all the elegies about Emma and him, in all their stages of love.

In conclusion, Hardy's elegies achieved a degree of appeasement with himself at cases like self-accusation but are far from gaining himself an eternal relief from Emma's death. We can track down evidence of his guilt, fury and complex sorrow while investigating how to define their

journey together, while looking back at the old memories, and his giving up on the idea of refixing her figure.

This essay intends to seek through the elegies of Hardy, the outline of the mourning of a poet that had a partner and shared a large life together but still made depart insincere. It was intended to contribute the topic of 'how Emma's figure was portrayed' but was discarded as the 'Emma' was certainly malleable and could be composed only from Hardy's feelings; and a fuller analysis of each the elegies more extendedly may create better comprehensions of how the conclusion was reached; lastly, the fact of Hardy dying not long after Emma provided me a large source of influence while writing the consolation being given or not through the elegies. Who could confirm if the elegies for Emma were worth it for Hardy or not? At least he did not forget Emma and had rejoined her at last, while we are here now to contemplate these bittersweet lines and appreciate our present too.

References

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^{[4][5][6][7][9][10][11][12]}

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