

Thomas Hardy's *Unexpected Elegies*: The Fictionalization of Emma Hardy

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The female characters in the novels of Thomas Hardy are not always completely perfect, but he does fashion them to be something of the ideal woman. He even has a “type” that a majority of those female characters fall under: the born and raised country girl with a touch of class and culture. His wife Emma is said to have believed that Hardy “loved the women he imagined far better than any real woman” (Tomalin), implying that he would rather disappear into the fantasy worlds of his novels and spend time with his characters than be present in England with Emma. He retreated too far into his writing, however, causing an estrangement between them that became so severe that the couple barely spoke to one another. They never reconciled before Emma's death, so Hardy turned to his writing in an attempt to make peace with her passing. In doing this, Hardy turns his wife into another of his perfect fictional characters. Emma appears often in his poems as a forgiving ghostly figure, but this phantom is entirely of Hardy's creation, and therefore is not an accurate representation of the real life Emma. He also enters into a process of fictionalization through idealization with both Emma and his marriage, ultimately misrepresenting both as far more perfect than they were in reality. There could be a complex range of emotions behind this process for Hardy, ranging from nostalgia and a desire to recapture a lost period of innocence to feelings of guilt and rationalization for his own contributions to their marital failures.

Thomas Hardy met Emma Gifford in 1870 and, despite protests from members of both of their families, they married in 1874 (Tomalin). They lived happily together for a few years, but as Hardy became more and more successful as an author, “for much of the time he needed to be absorbed in his own private mental world... There were days when he hardly noticed [Emma's]

existence” (Thomas). It was likely this, combined with Hardy’s numerous flirtations and affairs with younger and prettier women, that led to the discord in their marriage; by the 1890s, they were almost completely estranged (Tomalin). There is ample evidence that Hardy neglected, discouraged, and excluded his wife at every turn. For one, he refused to allow her to be a part of the most important moments in his career, reportedly turning down a knighthood without consulting her and sending her out of the room so she could not witness him being presented with the Royal Society’s gold medal in 1912 (Thomas). For another, Hardy refused to encourage or work with Emma as a writer, which must have hurt all the more given that he later worked toward publish the writings of numerous other women, including that of his second wife, Florence, whose writing was no more accomplished than Emma’s (Thomas).

Emma, by all accounts, retaliated by being openly rude about her husband in front of guests and in writing. She has been described as being “at best...a thoroughly commonplace middle-class woman with no taste, whose attempts at writing literature were ridiculous... At worst she has been described as guileful, schizophrenic, deluded, paranoid, stupid, ridiculous, stout and ugly” (Thomas). Some scholars believe that this vision of Emma is far from the truth, however. In reality, she was a keen humanitarian and a strong supporter of the women’s suffrage movement, as well as a member of animal rights’ groups (Tomalin). She wrote, painted, sketched, and looked after her many cats, and she undoubtedly suffered from being the partner of a man “married to his work” (Thomas). It is clear that Florence and Emma disliked each other in life as rivals for Hardy’s affection, and there is ample evidence that Florence worked to ensure Emma was misrepresented after her death (Thomas). Florence and Hardy took part in many bonfires after Emma’s death in which they burned her diaries and other writing, which would have offered a more accurate look into Emma’s life had they survived, and Florence may even

have encouraged in Hardy the belief that Emma was mentally unstable (Thomas). This widespread destruction of Emma's self-chosen legacy paved the way for Hardy to reconstruct her memory in the way that he wanted through *Unexpected Elegies*, which he wrote about her shortly after her death.

Some of Hardy's poems about Emma are written from Emma's point of view, and she appears as a ghostly figure that "haunts" Hardy nightly (Hardy). When analyzing poems where Emma is the speaker, it is essential to consider that this is only Hardy's imagining of what Emma is saying or thinking, so they therefore cannot be taken at face value because Hardy is unable to be objective. In reality, being dead means Emma cannot say or think anything at all, and even if she could, her thoughts could be completely different from what Hardy writes. It is also important to take into account the immense amount of control this lends Hardy. As Jahan Ramazani states in his article, "Hardy and the Poetics of Melancholia: Poems of 1912-13 and Other Elegies for Emma," Hardy "displaces the earlier images of an 'indifferent' wife and a 'ruthless' nature... Uncontrollable, Emma annoyed Hardy with her independence of mind" (Ramazani). In death, Emma is finally easy for Hardy to control; he is able to mold her into anything he wants, and if he felt anger at Emma or their estrangement while she lived, he can now deal with it by altering reality through writing. It is therefore impossible to know whether we are getting Hardy's true impression or merely the one he wants to make through his poems.

In the first stanza of "The Haunter," Emma says, "How shall I let him know / That whither his fancy sets him wandering / I, too, alertly go? / Hover and hover a few feet from him... / But cannot answer the words he lifts me— / Only listen thereto!" (Hardy). Here, Hardy is imagining that Emma is still with him all the time, even after her death, and that she wishes she could tell him this. He is also telling the reader that when he goes for walks, he speaks out

loud to Emma as if she were there. Emma's ghost seems to long to reply, considering the exclamation used in the final line, as well as the fact that she constantly lingers near him, as if waiting for something. In reality, the couple barely spoke or saw each other in the final years of their marriage (Tomalin). Hardy is describing the exact opposite of what actually happened through these lines: Emma did not linger near him, but avoided him by moving to the attic, and Hardy did not speak to her but ignored her (Tomalin). This suggests that Hardy regrets the way he acted before Emma died. He likely feels guilty about ignoring her, and so is trying to create a space in this poem where they have reconciled in that each does want to talk to the other.

This is further supported when Hardy writes, "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" (Hardy). This again emphasizes the fact that Hardy talks constantly to the ghost figure of his wife, and he himself admits that it was only after her death that he wanted to see her "more than he used to" (Hardy). It is too late to talk to or make peace with the real life Emma, however, so Hardy writes, "O tell 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... / And to bring peace thereto" (Hardy). These words imply reconciliation even more than those from previous lines. In them, Hardy fashions the ghost Emma into something of a guardian angel who rushes to his side at the first sign of his distress to soothe him and "bring peace," and all because she loves him. It is certainly true that Emma loved Hardy once, but in more recent years, there was no love lost in their marriage, making this an unrealistic image of Emma. What is more, Ramazani characterizes this section of the poem by saying, "The poet grants Emma independence in giving her a voice of her own, but he also severely restricts that independence by making her voice one of submission." This is certainly true; Hardy has written Emma into a fictional ghost who forgives him because

of his own guilt about their estrangement, and in doing so forces Emma to submit to his will in death as she never did in life. There is no evidence that the real life Emma would have acted this way, making this a “stunningly open fantasy of wish fulfillment” (Ramazani) on Hardy’s part.

Not all of Hardy’s poems that feature the ghost-Emma are from her point of view, however. In “The Phantom Horsewoman,” in which Ramazani states that Hardy “comes closer than ever before in the sequence to admitting that his reanimation of Emma’s past is a narcissistic fantasy,” Emma is described as “a phantom of his own figuring... // He see[s] this sight / ...everywhere / In his brain—day, night, / As if on the air / It were drawn rose bright... // A ghost-girl-rider” (Hardy). In “Something Tapped,” she is described similarly when Hardy investigates a tapping at the window, saying, “I rose and neared the window-glass, / But vanished thence had she: / Only a pallid moth, alas, / Tapped at the pane for me” (Hardy). In both of these poems, the ghost-Emma appears as less of a guardian angel and more of the “haunter” the previous poem’s title suggests, an apparition tormenting Hardy by appearing before him constantly to remind him of what he has lost. If these anecdotes are fact, Hardy admits that this phantom is “of his own figuring,” suggesting not only that this is yet another false image of Emma, but also that he is in reality tormenting himself due to guilt. It also seems clear that Hardy’s regret is deep enough that he sees her everywhere, whether on the cliffs where she used to ride horseback or in a moth at the window.

The poem “Your Last Drive” describes the final time the real life Emma left their home before she died, and it presents yet another of Hardy’s versions of Emma. He says, “I drove not with you... Yet had I sat / At your side that eve I should not have seen / That the countenance I was glancing at / Had a last-time look in the flickering sheen” (Hardy). The first line of this stanza seems filled with regret, as the ellipsis implies a thoughtful pause, as if Hardy is

imagining how things might have been different if he had driven with Emma. This is supported by the next lines, which describe one of these possible outcomes, although by choosing this one Hardy is saying that riding with her would not have changed her death, and perhaps by extension would not have altered their estrangement. In describing a scene in which making a different choice changes nothing, Hardy appears to be trying to make himself feel better about not spending much time with Emma, since it is already far too late to change things.

The poem next progresses into a conversation Hardy imagines having with Emma, in which she speaks about what might happen after her death. She says, "You may miss me then. But I shall not know / How many times you visit [my grave], / Or what your thoughts are, or if you go / There never at all. And I shall not care" (Hardy). Hardy then replies, "True: never you'll know... You are past love, praise, indifference, blame" (Hardy). If the first half of the poem was about Hardy trying to make himself feel better about their estrangement, the second half seems to do the opposite. The ghost-Emma states outright that she does not care what Hardy does after her death. This could be something of a precursor to what Hardy talks about in his reply, as in saying that Emma will not care merely means she will not know, because she is "past" all feeling in death. If this is true, however, saying that she would not "know" rather than she would not "care" makes more sense. To say that Emma does not care could be an unconscious concession on Hardy's part concerning their estrangement and his guilt.

In addition to writing poems through which he could process Emma's death, Hardy also wrote several elegies for her, which he himself refers to as "unexpected" because of the depth of his grief and guilt in spite of their estrangement (Tomalin). They are hauntingly beautiful and represent some of Hardy's best work, but they also fictionalize Emma because they depict an idealized image of her rather than how she really was. It is a common occurrence for someone,

especially a spouse, to view a loved one through rose-colored glasses after their death, but it is especially strange and interesting in this case because, as Hardy says, "...you could not know / That such swift fleeing / No soul foreseeing— / Not even I—would undo me so" (Hardy). In other words, no one, not even Hardy himself, expected him to be so affected by Emma's death because he wanted nothing to do with her while she was alive (Tomalin). This implies that Hardy's descriptions of Emma in these poems, which are filled with yearning and admiration, portray a perfect, idealized, and therefore fictional version of her.

In "The Voice," Hardy begins with the line, "Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me" (Hardy), setting up a tone of longing and intense sadness with the repetition of "call to me," in which the two long "a" sounds sound like a lament. He then goes on to say the following with the next stanza: "Let me view you, then, / Standing as when I drew near to the town / Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then, / Even to the original air-blue gown!" (Hardy). In this quote, Hardy is purportedly speaking to his wife, but with some analysis it is clear that he is speaking instead to his fictionalized version of her. As A.J. Nickerson says in his article "'How You Call to Me, Call to Me': Hardy's Self-Remembering Syntax," Emma's voice "is no longer the subject of attention but rather that of explication and translation." This calls attention to the fact that the poem's focus has switched from Hardy acknowledging the ghost's presence and lamenting his wife's loss to him making demands of her. He starts off with a command to Emma, "let me view you," but it is Hardy himself who conjures the next image of her. The way he describes this image is extremely indicative of fictionalization. Hardy places Emma standing in wait for him, while the reality is that Emma has left him far behind in death, a fact he decries in many of these poems. He also states that she should be "as I knew you then,"

meaning the distant past when they were happy, but that time of their lives was already long gone at the time of Emma's passing.

The most interesting part of this image is Hardy's vision of her wearing "the original air-blue gown," as it is unclear what exactly this means. It could be a mere indication of color, but Ruby Merchant presents a more compelling point of view in her article "The Figure Of The Ghost In Thomas Hardy's *Poems Of 1912-13*." She states that Hardy "visualizes Emma in the 'original air-blue gown', but while it is 'blue', it is 'air-blue', implying she is invisible even in her most vivid form" (Merchant). In other words, this could be an acknowledgement of Emma's ghost figure status, clear as air in both body and clothing. When the rest of the stanza is taken into account, however, it seems most likely that this is another step in Hardy's creation of an ideal Emma in this poem. The use of the word "even" shows that Hardy is perfecting Emma down to the very last detail, so that when he sees her, she is "even" wearing his favorite dress. The language of "air-blue gown" brings to mind a fantastical image of a princess wearing a pale dress floating around her in a breeze, like something out of a fairy tale. Additionally, calling the dress "original" could indicate that it is something he remembers from his past, but using that specific word is likely a subliminal acknowledgement of the fact that this version of Emma is an original creation of Hardy's. In other words, even he knows, if only unconsciously, that the Emma of this poem is fiction.

Hardy continues to present an idealized version of his wife in "I Found Her Out There," an elegy in which he describes Emma's burial. The poem begins, "I found her out there / On a slope few see, / That falls westwardly / To the salt-edged air" (Hardy). Hardy characterizes the hill described here not as remote or isolated but specifically as one that few people see, implying its specialness to Emma, as if it was for their eyes only. Emma is then described by the

following: “While the dipping blaze / Dyed her face fire-red; // And would sigh at the tale / Of sunk Lyonesse, / As a wind-tugged tress / Flapped her cheek like a flail / Or listen at whiles / With a thought-bound brow / To the murmuring miles / She is far from now” (Hardy). This is a beautiful description, but it also appears to be an idealized one. Emma’s surroundings in this moment hold all the trappings of a stereotypical love scene in a romance novel; she sits by the ocean at sunset, gazing thoughtfully off into the middle distance as the wind blows her hair charmingly about her face. The mere mention of Lyonesse, which is an entirely fictional land in which some Arthurian legends are set, only furthers the idea that this description is fantasy.

In “Lament,” Hardy idealizes Emma further in making her out to be a wonderful hostess. He begins the poem by writing, “How she would have loved / A party to-day! - / Bright-hatted and gloved, / With table and tray / And chairs on the lawn / Her smiles would have shone / With welcomings” (Hardy). Here, Hardy seems to picture Emma as a beatific Angel in the House, dressed brightly and smiling with welcome as she prepares for a party. In reality, Emma was said to have dressed oddly in her later years, favoring oversized, elaborate hats and dark, flowing dresses over anything that would have been considered fashionable at the time (Tomalin). She had also become something of a recluse in her attic apartments by the time of her death, so it is highly unlikely she would actually have enjoyed going outside to plan a party (Tomalin).

The poem continues, “Or she would have reigned / At a dinner tonight / With ardours unfeigned, / And a generous delight; / All in her abode / She'd have freely bestowed / On her guests” (Hardy). Hardy seems to be continuing to paint his wife as the perfect hostess here, placing her in her element at the head of the table presiding over her guests. This, too, is quite an obvious fictionalization on Hardy’s part. Emma was considered odd by visitors to the Hardy estate, in particular for her habit of allowing her cats to sit on the dinner table during meals

(Tomalin). Instead of freely bestowing “generous delight” on her guests, she tended to make them uncomfortable by making strange remarks and openly criticizing Hardy and his work in front of him (Tomalin). The real life Emma was so far from being an Angel in the House that Hardy’s descriptions of her in this poem surpass idealization and become complete fiction.

In addition to fashioning a perfect, fictional Emma in his writing, Hardy also idealizes his relationship with Emma in many of his poems. In “A Two-Years’ Idyll,” Hardy speaks on the first two years of their marriage, which are thought to be their happiest years together (Tomalin). The title word “idyll” is telling because it implies a scene that is not only extremely happy, but also inherently idealized by its very definition. Hardy goes on to say, “those two seasons unsought, / Sweeping like summertide winds on our ways; / Moving, as straws, / Hearts quick as ours in those days” (Hardy). To start, Hardy says that this idyllic time was “unsought,” making it seem all the better because it implies that they did not have to put in any hard work to have it. “Unsought” means that it fell into their laps, that they didn’t have to try for it, that it perhaps was even a pleasant surprise they didn’t see coming. Describing this period as “sweeping like summertide winds” develops this idea further, as it characterizes those two years as being like summer all the time, the season of warmth and light. Hardy also states that their hearts were “quick...in those days,” which implies that their hearts were always beating fast with love or desire during this period. All of these things are markedly unrealistic. One cannot have a relationship with anyone, but especially a marriage, without putting any work into it, and of course it can never actually be summer year-round. What is more, no matter how much Hardy and Emma loved each other, there is simply no way that they felt the deep love and desire described here at all times; no honeymoon period is that blissful.

Hardy ends this poem with the following: "...such beginning was all; / Nothing came after: romance straight forsook / Quickly somehow / Life when we sped from our nook, / Primed for new scenes with designs smart and tall... / A preface without any book, / A trumpet uplipped, but no call; / That seems it now" (Hardy). The first line of this quote continues the themes from the rest of the poem, as it describes this period of their relationship as being everything or "all." Then things get more interesting, as Hardy appears to be putting some honesty into this work of exaggeration and idealization. He describes their marriage after this idyllic period as "nothing," maximizing on the striking nature of this assertion by placing it immediately after the "all," its opposite of the previous line. He states that they had "designs" for their marriage to turn out differently, but that these "quickly" failed. Hardy then describes the latter part of their relationship through two metaphors, both of which capture well the feeling of anticipation followed by extreme let down that the Hardys perhaps felt themselves. With only a "preface," there is no book, and a trumpet needs not just lips but air to make a sound. Hardy may be suggesting that the marriage was lacking something essential that doomed it to fail, but whatever that thing may be, the overall meaning is clear. It is a surprisingly honest look into their relationship, especially when one considers the rest of the poem. Since the two sections of this work are so at odds with each other, it seems likely that Hardy's writing about his happiest years with Emma brought up feelings of guilt for his part in how their marriage ended up.

A second example of Hardy idealizing his marriage can be found in a pair of poems about a picnic. The first, entitled "Where the Picnic Was," involves Hardy going out with his wife to have a picnic and make a fire, an outing that he describes as being completely ordinary in every way (Hardy). The only reason he seems to remember it is because "the spot still shows / As a burnt circle" where they had the fire (Hardy). In the second poem, "Under the Waterfall," Hardy

describes the same outing in a very different way. He tells us that when Emma was rinsing out a tumbler, the flow of water from the falls pushed it out of her hand so that it fell into the pool below and disappeared (Hardy). He then says, “There the glass still is... // By night, by day, when it shines or lours, / There lies intact that chalice of ours, / And its presence adds to the rhyme of love / Persistently sung by the fall above” (Hardy). Hardy appears to be idealizing the magnitude of his marriage to the point of having delusions of grandeur here. He imagines that the dropped glass still lies in the pool, which is possible, but he then goes far beyond this statement by saying “its presence adds” to the beauty of the falls. In reality, no one knows or cares that the glass is there, if it even still is, and it in no way changes the view of the falls for anyone except Hardy. What is more, he presents two versions of the same event in these poems; only one can be true, and “Under the Waterfall” describes a scene that is too good to be true.

Hardy goes through a similar process in “At Castle Boterel,” in which he speaks of a different outing when he and Emma went on a hike. He writes, “What we did as we climbed, and what we talked of / Matters not much, nor to what it led, — // 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” (Hardy). Though Hardy admits at the beginning of these lines that in the grand scheme of things their hike mattered “not much,” he goes on to romanticize it all the same. Despite his own acknowledgements that thousands of people before them climbed the hill, he insists that the moment of their climbing was the best thing to ever happen there, past or future. Hardy even said himself that “scarcely any author and his wife could have had a much more romantic meeting” (quoted from E. Hardy), which is a clear example of idealization. As Joanna Brown says in her book, *A Journey into Thomas Hardy’s Poetry*, “‘At Castle Boterel’ is a perfect imitation of life... Like a photographer

sorting his negatives, he has superimposed over the picture of the journey” (Brown). In other words, this poem is not an honest or realistic portrayal of either that day or their marriage; Hardy has fictionalized them so that, like an overexposed photo, they are far beyond recognition.

In conclusion, Hardy clearly fictionalizes Emma and his marriage throughout this series of poems, and he also used his writing to process Emma’s death by turning her into a forgiving ghostly figure. In works like “The Haunter” and “Your Last Drive,” Hardy writes from Emma’s point of view, but it is only his own imagining and therefore unlikely to be what Emma would really think or say. She appears as a ghost who sometimes professes love and forgiveness, sometimes sadness and indifference, but at all times these are merely projections Hardy creates to deal with his own guilt, and therefore probably say more about Hardy than they do Emma. He idealizes Emma into a submissive Angel in the House in works like “The Voice,” “I Found Her Out There,” and “Lament,” molding her into exactly what he wants as he never could with the real life Emma. He takes this process a step further by misrepresenting their marriage as being perfect in “A Two-Years’ Idyll,” and his inflated fantasies that their relationship had a wide impact on the universe are evident in “At Castle Boterel” and “Under the Waterfall.” It is impossible to know for sure whether all of this was done consciously or unconsciously; Hardy could have been a vindictive and prideful man who used his wife’s death as a way to control her and to boast about his marriage, or he could have been a flawed man like any other who realized his mistakes too late, and attempted to make up for them by writing beautiful, if idealized, poetry in his wife’s memory. Either way, it is clear that “most of the wonderful *Poems of 1912-13* are not...inspired by Emma Hardy, but by a nostalgic and wholly idealized reconstruction of Emma Gifford” (Thomas). Through these poems, Emma is not remembered as she was, but as how Hardy wanted her to be remembered.

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