

Lesson Four: Analysis of “Ah are you digging on my grave” by Thomas Hardy
Level: First year (BA)
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Ah, are you digging on my grave by Thomas Hardy

"Ah, are you digging on my grave,
 My loved one? — planting rue?"
— "No: yesterday he went to wed
One of the brightest wealth has bred.
'It cannot hurt her now,' he said,
 'That I should not be true.'"

"Then who is digging on my grave,
 My nearest dearest kin?"
— "Ah, no: they sit and think, 'What use!
What good will planting flowers produce?
No tendance of her mound can loose
 Her spirit from Death's gin.'"

"But someone digs upon my grave?
 My enemy? — prodding sly?"
— "Nay: when she heard you had passed the Gate
That shuts on all flesh soon or late,
She thought you no more worth her hate,
 And cares not where you lie.

"Then, who is digging on my grave?
 Say — since I have not guessed!"
— "O it is I, my mistress dear,
Your little dog, who still lives near,
And much I hope my movements here
 Have not disturbed your rest?"

"Ah yes! You dig upon my grave...
 Why flashed it not to me
That one true heart was left behind!
What feeling do we ever find
To equal among human kind
 A dog's fidelity!"

"Mistress, I dug upon your grave
 To bury a bone, in case
I should be hungry near this spot
When passing on my daily trot.
I am sorry, but I quite forgot
 It was your resting place."

Poem Structure: this poem follows the rhyme of ABCCCB in all of its stanzas. The meter of this poem is irregular.

Summary:

- This poem centers on notions of death and the possibility of the after-life.
- This poem negates the notion of death remembrance because it is generally pre-assumed that memories of a dead person are permanent and durable.
- Thomas Hardy in this poem dissects such illusion by demonstrating how memories of a dead person perish with time.
- The events of this poem are presented in a humorous way and it is structured as a dialogue between a dead woman and an anonymous digger whose identity is revealed in the second half of the poem.
- As the woman attempts to guess the identity of the digger, she portrays a desire for being remembered only to become disappointed in the end because the digger unravels that all her loved ones, as well as her enemy, have forsaken her memory.
- Finally, it is revealed that the digger is the deceased woman's dog who also appears to be unconcerned over her loss as he informs her that he is only digging on her grave to bury a bone.
- Hardy in this poem shows a bleak vision of human condition because memories of the deceased are completely erased from the memory of the living.
- The pessimistic vision of human nature that Hardy offers in this poem reflects the historical period in which the poem was published (1913).
- Moral values such as gentility of manners of the Victorian period started to perish by the start of the First World War (1914).
- During this period (1913), the change affected how the world was perceived and how the individual perceived himself/herself.
- Accordingly, in this poem it is evident that the individual is devoid of emotions; such as the dead woman's loved ones who seem to have no memory of her.

Poem analysis: (Stanza 1-2-3)

- The first lines of the poem offer an unpleasant picture of a possible after-life experience.
- The poem opens with a dialogue between the deceased woman and a mysterious digger.
- It can be suggested that the dead woman is personified because a human characteristic of speaking is given to a corpse.
- In the first stanza, the dead woman asks “Ah, are you digging on my grave, /my loved one, planting rue?. “rue” means bitter regret and sorrow, by asking this question the woman assumes that her death caused sorrow for a loved one and that she remains alive in their memory.
- We learn from the anonymous digger that her lover remarried a wealthy woman and forsaken her memory.
- Stanza two opens with a refrain “who is digging on my grave?”, the woman suggests that it is a family member but the mysterious digger confirms that they have also forgotten about her as they think that it is pointless to visit her grave because this act will not bring her back from the “death gin” which symbolizes the act of falling in the trap of death.
- The deceased woman continues to guess the identity of the digger, assuming that it is her enemy who might be here to cause some harm to her grave. This shows the extent to which she is desperate to find someone who still remembers her.
- The digger again replies that even her enemy no longer has her in mind since the time she has learned that she “had passed the gate”. The “gate” in this verse can be said to refer to the gate that leads to death as it shuts on all human flesh.

Poem Analysis (Stanzas 4-5-6)

- Stanza four opens with a desperate last plea for the digger to reveal their identity and turns out that it is her dog. Hence, we can say that the dog is also personified as he is given the ability to speak.
- Now that the mystery is solved, the dead woman starts to feel some hope to believe that she is being remembered by her loyal dog.
- The last stanza presents a final irony, in that the dog indicates that he is only there because he is burying a bone around her grave and even apologizes for disturbing her

rest. This emphasizes further the fact that the woman has been totally forgotten by her lover, family, enemy and even her dog.

- The “bone” in this stanza can be said to symbolize the fact that those who are dead are merely seen as a pile of bones by the living.

Theme of the poem:

The central theme of this poem is “the pessimistic view of human condition” delivered in a satiric manner by Hardy. The poet presents a bleak view of human nature in the sense that human feelings are ephemeral. This occurs in the poem where the dead woman is not remembered by her loved ones. The dark humor and irony reveal a sorrowful message that the dead are excluded from the memory of the living. The poem is also satiric because it mocks the sentimentalism of continual devotion to the dead.