

Ghosts in Thomas Hardy's Poems

Yuji TAKENAGA

Department of English

Faculty of Education

Ehime University

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to determine why ghosts so often appear in Hardy's poems and what he intended to represent by ghosts.

In the beginning, three aspects of the general background of his poems can be noted: Wessex, Hardy's mental obsession, and his old age. First, he lived throughout his life in Wessex, which appeared for him a region without a clear border of present and past. Next, he was said to have been deeply disturbed when his later novels were severely criticized; as a result, he gave up writing them. Finally, he was nearly sixty years old when he turned to a poet. He experienced the deaths of many friends and relatives and started to become conscious of his own mortality. These can be regarded as general reasons why ghosts appear in his poems.

Secondly, in several poems ghosts or bones buried in the graveyard play a significant role in order to criticize current social or political issues. A notable example is the poem 'Channel Firing': awakened from a peaceful sleep by the terrible sounds of gunnery practice, bones begin a comical dialogue in the midnight graveyard, complaining that the world has grown worse. Thus, Hardy indirectly expresses his anger against the approaching World War I.

Thirdly, some of ghosts are taken from traditional ballads. As a general effect, ghosts enhance the gothic atmosphere and dramatic tension in narrative poems. As a more specific effect, they deepen Hardy's sense of fatalism that men cannot be free from the cruel power of destiny.

Finally, almost all the ghosts that appear in the poems written after the death of Hardy's first wife, Emma, are Emma herself. In deep sorrow Hardy revisits St Juliot, a place of sweet marital memories after forty years' absence. In other words, this is a journey in which Hardy takes back an inner vision which he had lost through his own fault.

In conclusion, we can say that ghosts are suited for the gray landscapes of Hardy's

poems and that their actions and messages make the lyricism of the poems deeper, richer, and more unique.

Introduction

Traditionally, the most famous ghost in English literature is the one who appears in *Hamlet*. The ghost, Hamlet's father, appears at midnight, fills soldiers with horror, and reveals a hidden truth to Hamlet. It has become one of the controversial problems in drama and still invites many kinds of interpretation from modern literary theorists. This is one type of ghost. The film, 'Ghost', which was released a few years ago, became a big hit and moved many spectators to tears all over the world. A ghost in the movie, a handsome young man who was assaulted and murdered by a ruffian, always stands by his love and protects her from every danger like a traditional guardian angel. This is another type of ghost.

Ghosts or phantoms often appear in Hardy's poems and they seem to constitute one of the unique features of Hardy's literary world. However, though it is well known that Hardy was inclined to believe in supernatural things,¹ ghosts in his poems have not been given full consideration by the critics. For this reason, this paper will consider what meanings ghosts have and what functions they perform in creating Hardy's unique poetic world.

I. General Background

Almost all the works of Hardy are influenced by the surroundings of Wessex. He consistently used this obsolete name to indicate Dorset and the neighboring region where he was born, grew up, lived as a novelist, and then as a poet, died. This archaic reference to the place is strongly reminiscent of ancient times, events and people. In short, Wessex is an attractive environment for ghosts to haunt.² For example, in the poem 'After the Fair', when midnight comes at the end of a county festival, the empty street of Casterbridge is crowded with ghosts:

And midnight clears High Street of all but the ghosts
Of its buried burghees,
From the latest far back to those old Roman hosts
Whose remains one yet sees,
Who loved, laughed, and fought, hailed their friends, drank their toasts
At their meeting-times here, just as these! (CP. 242-3)

The speaker is left with the ghosts of citizens, stretching back to the Romans, whose remains were to be seen in many places in Wessex, where we can feel the past is still alive. In the first place, therefore, ghosts mean the past.

Secondly, we must remember why Hardy became a poet. His ambitious novels, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895) were both cruelly criticized for their fatalism and bold descriptions of sex. Most Victorian readers, who were optimistic about their future, could not accept Hardy's pessimism. Deeply disappointed, Hardy was said to have given up writing novels. This disappointment is apparently reflected in the next group of ghosts who haunt and trouble him in the poem 'Wessex Heights':

There's a ghost at Yell'ham Bottom chiding loud at the fall of the night,
 There's a ghost in Froom-side Vale, thin-lipped and vague, in a shroud of white,
 There is one in the railway train whenever I do not want it near,
 I see its profile against the pane, saying what I would not hear. (CP. 320)

In the low land of Wessex the speaker is always haunted by many ghosts, 'saying what I (the speaker) would not hear.' When he stands on one of the mountains or hills of Wessex, he can be free from this persecution for a short while, because 'mind-chains do not clank where one's next neighbour is the sky.' Here, therefore, ghosts mean Hardy's spiritual wounds, or his psychological obsessions.

Thirdly, Hardy's age has much to do with the gray atmosphere of his poems, as he was rapidly growing old when he began to write them. One characteristic topic of his poems is death and in such poems the poet often goes to the graveyard and meditates on dead people in front of their tombstones. For example, in the poem 'Voices from Things Growing in a Churchyard', the poet listens to voices uttered by objects transformed from the dead, such as flowers, grasses, or trees growing in the churchyard:

These flowers are I, poor Fanny Hurd,
 Sir or Madam,
 A little girl here sepultured.
 Once I flit-fluttered like a bird
 Above the grass, as now I wave
 In daisy shapes above my grave,
 All day cheerily,
 All night eerily! (CP. 623)

The speaker fancies that daisies are a transformation of a dead girl and their waving sounds are her speaking voices. He seems to enjoy conversing with the dead. Thirdly, therefore, ghosts mean an old man's consciousness of death.³

II. Satire

In several poems Hardy criticizes the world of his age from the standards of the past,

through the voices of dead people or skeletons buried in the churchyard. In this case, Hardy indirectly deplors the fact that our civilization has not developed much from the past. In the poem 'Lausanne: In Gibbon's Old Garden: 11-12 p.m.', the poet fancies that the spirit of Gibbon, the famous historian who wrote *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88), passed before him. According to *Life*, Hardy spent one night in the former country house of Gibbon in Lausanne with his wife, used as a hotel that time, during their tour of Switzerland. The day when they stayed at the hotel was coincidentally the 110th anniversary of the completion of the '*Decline and Fall*':⁴

A spirit seems to pass,
Formal in pose, but grave withal and grand:
He contemplates a volume in his hand,
And far lamps flicker through the thin acacias. (CP. 105-6)

The poet fancies that this spirit asks him as follows:

'How fares the Truth now?-Ill?
- Do pens but slyly further her advance?
May one not speed her but in phrase askance?
Do scribes aver the Comic to be Reverend still? (CP. 106)

The spirit worries about the condition of truth, and hopes it has improved from 110 years before. The poet could only answer negatively. In this historical context, therefore, the ghost represents one criterion of the past by which the worsening state of the present age could be revealed.

Hardy is very witty in the next two poems in which he bitterly satirizes the movements of the modern world through the comic dialogues of skeletons. It is the unexpected angle of his view that makes the poems very effective. In the poem 'The Levelled Churchyard', deprived of their peaceful rest in the churchyard by the restoration work going on in the church, the bones of the dead buried there complain of their miserable, disordered condition to passers-by:

'O PASSENGER, pray list and catch
Our sighs and piteous groans,
Half stifled in this jumbled patch
Of wrenched memorial stones!

'We late-lamented, resting here,
Are mixed to human jam,
And each to each exclaims in fear,

"I know not which I am!"

The wicked people have annexed
The verses on the good;
A roaring drunkard sports the text
Teetotal Tommy should! (CP. 157-6)

The bones deplore that the good and the wicked, or the teetotaler and the drunkard, are disorderly mixed together by the restoration work.

In the final stanza of this poem, the bones pray for God to deliver them from their troubles:

From restorations of Thy fane,
From smoothings of Thy sward,
From zealous Churchmen's pick and plane
Deliver us O Lord! Amen!' (CP. 158)

Here Hardy is playfully making use of a hymnal form. The reader did not at all expect that the bones were in trouble and asking for help. In this way, Hardy skillfully expresses his indignation toward the restoration work.

In the poem 'Channel Firing', the comical dialogue of the bones is more effective. Under the surface is concealed Hardy's sense of crisis and his deep indignation toward the war. According to Pinion, this poem refers to the gunnery practice of the British navy on the south coast of England during the year, prior to World War I. In those days everybody feared that war might soon break out:⁵

That night your great guns, unawares,
Shook all our coffins as we lay,
And broke the chancel window-squares,
We thought it was the Judgment-day

And sat upright. While drearisome
Arose the howl of wakened hounds:
The mouse let fall the altar-crumbs,
The worms drew back into mounds,

The glebe cow drooled. Till God called, 'No;
It's gunnery practice out at sea
Just as before you went below;
The world is as it used to be: (CP. 305)

In contrast to ghost stories in general, here it is the ghosts who get scared by human actions. The peaceful sleep of the skeletons is broken by a terrible sound. They fearfully take it for the sound of the trumpet of Judgment Day. They are relieved to hear God replying that it is only the gunnery practice of the navy. God says 'the world is as it used to be'. This expression ironically shows that the society of men has not developed at all since the days when those skeletons were living on earth. This last line bitterly satirizes the easy conviction of men's progress based on Christian education:

So down we lay again. 'I wonder,
Will the world ever saner be,'
Said one, 'than when He sent us under
In our indifferent century!'

And many a skeleton shook his head.
'Instead of preaching forty year,'
My neighbour Parson Thirdly said,
'I wish I had stuck to pipes and beer.'

Again the guns disturbed the hour,
Roaring their readiness to avenge,
As far inland as Stourton Tower,
And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge. (CP. 306)

In the above quotation, Parson Thirdly's words, 'Instead of preaching forty year(s) . . . I wish I had stuck to pipes and beer' are not only humorous but also ironical. They indirectly satirize Christianity, which has long been the backbone of European ethics. Wars have repeatedly broken out since the ancient time of Stonehenge, and human nature has never really evolved. Figuratively speaking, in these instances, ghosts are performing the role of a mirror in which the present age is reflected as being far uglier than the past.

III. Ballads

It is often pointed out that Hardy was influenced by traditional ballads as was Wordsworth. Apparently, the simple narrative style of ballad fitted Hardy's sensibility. Moreover, he seemed to be interested in strange, supernatural stories narrated in this style. (One remarkable example is *An Ancient Mariner* by Coleridge.) In his ballads, or narrative poems, which can be considered variations of the ballad, ghosts often appear. In this context they generally mean a spell, or an unknown force of the past influencing and controlling the present life. (Most of the love stories in his novels are based on this fatalistic conception.)

In 'The Supplanter' a man traveled many miles to a grave where his former lover was

buried. When he arrived there it was almost dark. By chance, there was a birthday party for a country girl living near the graveyard. He was tempted by the girl to spend a night merrily with dance and wine. Then he seemed to see the phantom of his former lover:

I mark a phantom through the pane,
 That beckons in despair,
 Its mouth all drawn with heavy moan -
 Her to whom once I swore! -
 'Nay; 'tis the lately carven stone
 Of some strange girl laid there!' - (CP. 178)

The girl mockingly said it was only his illusion and in the end he yielded to her temptation. At this stage of the tale the new girl entralls the man in place of the dead lover. In other words, this means triumph of the present life over the past. But the next morning the man completely repented and left the girl quickly. After one year, the man returned to lay a wreath of flowers on the tomb of his lover. There the girl appears holding a baby, the fruit of their physical union, and entreats him to pity her and the baby and stay with them:

'O surely for a little while
 You can be kind to me.
 For do you love her, do you hate,
 She knows not - cares not she:
 Only the living feel the weight
 Of loveless misery! (CP. 180)

But her painful words do not appeal to him at all, as he had already made firm resolutions to be faithful to his dead lover. Indifferently saying 'I know you not!', the man leaves her never to return. Thus, the end of the story shows the triumph of the past life over the present.

According to Pinion, 'The Re-Enactment' is 'an imaginary story arising from Hardy's return to St Juliot in 1913'.⁶ Hardy's first wife, Emma Gifford, died from a heart attack in November, 1912. It is reported that for the last several years of their marriage they had been in a complete estrangement. On her sudden death, however, Hardy's love for her was renewed and he deeply repented his cruel attitudes towards her. In order to make atonement for his sins, he revisited St Juliot in Cornwall where they had met for the first time and fallen passionately in love. In 'The Re-Enactment', a woman, the narrator of this poem, is waiting for her lover in a lonely residence near the seashore, which strongly reminds us of St Juliot. Before her appears a strange man, who is certainly a dramatized character of Hardy himself. His behavior is unusual. He mistook the woman for his love for

a while but recognizing the difference at last, he says . . .

Yet no. How so? You wear not
The same gown,
Your locks show woful difference,
Are not brown:
What, is it not as when I hither came from town?

'And the place But you seem other -
Can it be?
What's this that Time is doing
Unto me?
You dwell here, unknown woman? . . . Whereabouts, then, is she? (CP. 363)

Though this man can recognize the difference at last, he apparently dislikes the change. He deliberately lives in the past and wants to see illusions of his past lover who seems to have been dead for some years. In this regard, his present life is ruled by the past. Moreover, the drama of 'the predestined sorrowers' (the unhappy end of love of Hardy and Emma) acted before the narrator (a new tenant of the house where Hardy and Emma lived forty years ago), strangely affects the narrator's present love relationship and destroys it:

I sat depressed; till, later,
My Love came;
But something in the chamber
Dimmed our flame, -
An emanation, making our due words fall tame,

As if the intenser drama
Shown me there
Of what the walls had witnessed
Filled the air,
And left no room for later passion anywhere. (CP. 364)

Thus, it is suggested that this house has a horrible spell leading those who dwell there to unhappy destinies. The strange man who is the old tenant, and the narrator who is the new tenant, are both victims of this spell.

In the ballad 'The Second Night', a man, the narrator of this poem, breaks his promise to come to see his love because he had another woman. The next night, however, he goes to see her, affecting a faithful attitude. But she already knows the truth and behaves coldly to him. In anger he leaves her forever. Just then he looks at a falling star in the sky which

ominously forebodes some sad event in the future:

A mad star crossed the sky to the sea,
Wasting in sparks as it streamed,
And when I looked back at her wistfully
She had changed, much changed, it seemed: (CP. 661)

Then he hears the shocking news that the woman killed herself the night before in despair of her love's change of heart. He realizes that he met her ghost. Once again he sees a star falling across the sky. Perhaps the star is a changed form of the dead woman and it seems to send him a silent message. The world of superstition reflected in astrological influences was still powerful in Hardy's time. Accordingly, this last scene in the poem hints that the future of the man will be controlled by the spell of the past event.

IV. Emma

Hardy was seventy-two years old when his wife Emma died. For the last several years of their married life they had not been happy, as mentioned above. But her death brought a far greater grief to Hardy than expected. On one hand, he was deeply ashamed of himself, recalling his bad behavior toward her; on the other, he suffered from unrelieved loneliness and passionately longed for her in vain. From this strange mixture of painful contrition and revived passion toward his wife a series of beautiful love lyrics was created. It is incredible that such an old man still had such a fresh spring of creativity.

'The Haunter' is a dramatic monologue spoken by the ghost of Emma, who incessantly speaks to her husband, even though he cannot hear what she says. The ghost says that she always follows him and hovers a few feet away when he goes out for a walk. This action shows that she, a ghost, has the same affection for her husband as when she was living. It is painful for her, and for the reader as well, that her husband cannot realize this truth:

He does not think that I haunt here nightly:
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
Just as I used to do,
But cannot answer the words he lifts me -
Only listen thereto!

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 wished 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. (CP. 345)

Here the dramatic monologue effectively functions in two ways. First, it is ironic: the couple rarely used to converse when they were alive together; on the contrary, they earnestly wish to do so now when they cannot, as they are completely separated by death. Secondly, it reveals an unknown aspect of the speaker, the ghost of Emma. She had been a faithful wife until she died and she has been 'a good haunter' since then. However, it is impossible for her husband to realize this truth:

What a good haunter I am, O tell him!
Quickly make him know
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
Still that his path may be worth pursuing,
And to bring peace thereto. (CP. 346)

Lastly, from a critical point of view, what can we say of this poem? Certainly, it is very beautiful and moving, but at the same time it is very artificial. Emma in this poem is not the real Emma. The ghost of Emma is probably an ideal form recreated beautifully by Hardy. It is reported that Emma died hating Hardy, without any reconciliation with him. Hardy blamed himself and suffered terribly and searched for a chance to make amends. Writing a series of elegies to her gave him one chance to do so and making a journey to the west, that is, to revisit St Juliot in Cornwall, gave him another.⁷

In contrast to 'The Haunter', the poem 'After a Journey' shows Hardy following 'a voiceless ghost' of Emma. Hardy is now again in Pentargan Bay, one of the places filled with the adolescent memories that he shared with Emma.

HERETO I come to view a voiceless ghost;
Whither, O whither will its whim now draw me?
Up the cliff, down, till I'm lonely, lost,
And the unseen waters' ejaculations awe me.
Where you will next be there's no knowing,

Facing round about me everywhere,
 With your nut-coloured hair,
 And gray eyes, and rose-flush coming and going. (CP. 349)

Hardy is wandering here and there in Pentagan Bay. It seems to him as if he caught sight of the ghost of Emma for a moment, and he is blindly pursuing it. It looks like a young Emma with 'nut-coloured hair, and gray eyes, and rose-flush coming and going.' But he does not know when and where it will appear again. This is not a sentimental journey at all for Hardy. He does not expect any pleasure from the sweet memories of his happy days. Rather, he looks very stoic and ready to take any pain and punishment.

At last Hardy understands what the ghost is intending to do by taking him to various memorable spots for both. The ghost is intending that they return together to what they were when they came to this place forty years ago.

I see what you are doing: you are leading me on
 To the spots we knew when we haunted here together,
 The waterfall, above which the mist-bow shone
 At the then fair hour in the then fair weather,
 And the cave just under, with a voice still so hollow
 That it seems to call out to me from forty years ago,
 When you were all aglow,
 And not the thin ghost that I now frailly follow! (CP. 349)

Dennis Taylor connects ghosts in Hardy's poems with two themes: "romantic visions and apocalyptic awakenings."⁸ According to his view, the ghost in this poem represents a romantic vision, one of the two themes. It certainly appears to symbolize a lost ideal, as Hardy is searching for what is not. At the same time, however, he is a realist, and not the kind of man who loses himself in a mystic world. After all, what he is doing is reconstructing his history, his life, firmly based on historical facts, confirming to himself that the most important fact among them is the love shared with Emma.

In 'At Castle Boterel' Hardy makes the love between himself and Emma eternal. The real name of Castle Boterel is Boscastle, one of the scenic places in Cornwall they used to go together 40 years ago. Hardy is now driving through this place by wagon on a wet day. Through the mist, one of the sweet scenes of the old days comes back to his mind. A young man and a girl, Hardy and Emma in their younger days, are climbing the steep slope of the hill together on foot, following a pony:

As I drive to the junction of lane and highway,
 And the drizzle bedrenches the waggonette,
 I look behind at the fading byway,

Ghosts in Thomas Hardy's Poems

And see on its slope, now glistening wet,
Distinctly yet

Myself and a girlish form benighted
In dry March weather. We climb the road
Beside a chaise. We had just alighted
To ease the sturdy pony's load
When he sighed and slowed. (CP. 351)

Hardy cannot remember well what they talked of, but he now believes that they shared a supreme quality of emotion and it filled the air of this place, however briefly it lasted. Further, he confirms that it will remain eternally in the history of this hill because it is the most sublime moment the hill has ever had:

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.

Primaeval rocks form the road's steep border,
And much have they faced there, first and last,
Of the transitory in Earth's long order;
But what they record in colour and cast
Is - that we two passed. (CP. 352)

Hardy seems now to experience the most dramatic rise of emotion. He can believe that their love was pure and true in the beginning, though it ended unhappily. After this recognition, he was able to leave the ghost of Emma standing on the slope and return to live the rest of life, however short it was to be.

And to me, though Time's unflinching rigour,
In mindless rote, has ruled from sight
The substance now, one phantom figure
Remains on the slope, as when that night
Saw us alight.

I look and see it there, shrinking, shrinking,
I look back at it amid the rain
For the very last time; for my sand is sinking,

And I shall traverse old love's domain
Never again. (CP. 352)

The ghost of Emma has a more serious meaning for Hardy than the other ghosts. For some personal reasons, it sometimes rejects Hardy and at other times stands by him, or it sometimes troubles him and at other times soothes him. But it plays an important role in leading him to past memories, that is, to St. Juliot, after a forty year interval. Through this journey, Hardy was able to realize the true meaning of love with Emma.

Conclusion

In summary, the ghosts in Hardy's poems may be classified into the two groups. The first group stands for spiritualism. Hardy is giving warning against the rapidly spreading materialism of the modern world, and gives opportunities for the past to speak freely. The words of the dead reflect a worsening state of the present world. Moreover, in some narrative poems based on ballads, ghosts indicate fatalism beyond rational understanding. Of course it is easy to dismiss this way of thinking as an anachronism. However, Hardy appears to choose this stance on purpose. In other words, this is his strategy for revealing many defects of the modern world from an outdated, unexpected point of view.

The second group of ghosts represents Emma. Emma's death changed everything. Shocked by her passing Hardy lost himself, though he was then seventy-two years old. Emma's ghosts led him to St Juliot where they had met forty years before. Through this journey, Hardy could restore his old flame of love for Emma. Metaphorically speaking, Hardy was able to reach an inner vision that would remain fresh forever, unchanged by the passage of time.

Acknowledgement

My thanks to Professor R. J. Davies, a colleague in the Department of English, Faculty of Education, Ehime University for his proofreading of this manuscript.

Notes

Quotations of Hardy's poems are taken from *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. James Gibson (London : Macmillan, 1976).

- 1 Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1928* (London : Macmillan, 1962) p. 370.
- 2 See F.B. Pinion, 'Aspects of the Unusual and Irrational' in *A Hardy Companion* (London : Macmillan, 1968).
- 3 Samuel Hynes reads Hardy's poems from the perspective of 'Old Poets' and points out that 'age is ghost-haunted.' Samuel Hynes, 'How to be an Old poet: The Examples of Hardy and Yeats', in *Read-*

Ghosts in Thomas Hardy's Poems

- ing *Thomas Hardy* ed. Charles P. C. Pettit (London: Macmillan, 1998) p. 173.
- 4 *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, p. 293.
- 5 F.B. Pinion, *A Commentary on the Poems of Thomas Hardy* (London : Macmillan, 1976) pp. 91-2.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- 7 See Yuji Takenaga, 'Hardy's Journey to the West', in *The Bulletin of the Faculty of Education, Ehime University, Part II, 31,1* (Ehime, 1998) pp. 67-77.
- 8 Dennis Taylor, *Hardy's Poetry 1860-1928* (London : Macmillan, 1981) p. 106.

(Received on October 12, 1999)