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*URL: http://hdl.handle.net/10097/57597*
We understandably think of books as places in which to find added meaning, as compensation, perhaps, for the fear that life is, however implausibly, short of it. As is well known, the young Thomas Hardy suffered a loss of faith in the established religion of his native land. However, the loss I want to look at here is the kind that can happen to a person of any or no creed, and can happen, what’s more, at moments not necessarily of epoch-making cultural change, but when least expected. In order to live and have social relations we need to invest other people with meaning — with a meaning for us. Hardy, as both poet and novelist, appears to have been peculiarly sensitive to occasions when these investments would suddenly lose value. In *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* he assembled the circumstances in which such a loss could occur with tragic consequences, through errors of belief. Later, in *The Well-Beloved*, he concocted a theory-driven plot about its happening serially in relations between an artist at different phases in his life and three different generations of women — one which, in its preposterousness, points all the more sharply towards the bewildering anguish and disorientation that such losses produce.

Hardy’s poem ‘At Waking’ has the word ‘blank’ in its final line:

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O vision appalling
When the one believed-in thing
Is seen falling, falling,
With all to which hope can cling.
Off: it is not true;
For it cannot be
That the prize I drew
Is a blank to me!
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(224)
This conclusion depends upon ambiguities in uses of the word. These are prepared for in the opening quatrains when the dawn is compared to a dead body, in a line recalling ‘The Darkling Thrush’, where ‘The land’s sharp features seemed to be / The Century’s corpse ouleant’ (150). ‘At Waking’, from Hardy’s next collection of poems, begins:

When night was lifting,
And dawn had crept under its shade,
Amid cold clouds drifting
Dead-white as a corpse outlaid

This blank lack of colour, the ‘Dead-white’ of the clouds at dawn, is developed with the suggestion of a letter’s white paper — one which Hardy has, characteristically, half-revealed and half-concealed: ‘With a sudden scare / I seemed to behold / My Love in bare / Hard lines unfold.’ The hint of a lovers’ communication remains in the ‘Hard lines’ that conclude this opening verse. In the published version, it is only as if he were reading a letter delivered to him in the morning. A surviving manuscript draft of ‘At Waking’, though, makes this letter an element of the scene with its tenth line: ‘Those words she had written awry’. Hardy’s first version places another blank before readers in the sheet of paper on which have been written some words that ‘Killed her old endowment / And gifts that had cheapened all nigh’ (224).

Hardy further subjectivizes the moment in revision. He conceals the indication of a critical judgement about a hand-witten text which has been badly shaped, miss-spelt, or uses ungrammatical constructions, replacing it with a perception of the speaker’s alone: ‘An insight that would not die / Killed her old endowment / Of charm that had capped all nigh’. The revision also alters the reason for the loss of meaning. In the draft, it’s caused by critically reacting to the sign that the woman does not have a literary education. In the printed text, it is an insight about her self, as the speaker views it. The change of ‘gifts’ to ‘charm’ reinforces this effect, and it means that the phrase ‘bare / Hard lines’ in the first verse can signify the woman’s physical appearance, the lines of her face, and her power to ‘charm’, rather than ‘gifts’ of verbal skill or other talents.

This, then, gives the reader three blanks to bear in mind. There are the ‘cold clouds drifting’ in the dawn. There is the face, or perhaps the whole body, of ‘My Love in bare / Hard lines’. And there’s the letter, which remains as a trace element in the word ‘lines’, but has been more or less revised out with the cutting of ‘words she had written awry’.

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‘A blank to me’: Thomas Hardy and the Loss of Meaning
These different whitenesses, with their added sense of emptiness, of something lacking, are summed up in the poem’s concluding lines: ‘it cannot be / That the prize I drew / Is a blank to me!’ Here the meaning of ‘blank’ is that of a lottery ticket. You pick pieces of paper at random, and if a ‘prize’ has been won it will be written on the paper; if not, the paper will be a blank. Here Hardy is punning too on the word ‘prize’, used in a romantic sense, referring to the Love as valuable, a prize, or referring to the prize in a lottery.

Glowry’s advice to Scythrop in Thomas Love Peacock’s *Nightmare Abbey* (1818) leans upon precisely this metaphor:

Marriage is, therefore, a lottery, and the less choice and selection a man bestows on his ticket the better; for, if he has incurred considerable pains and expense to obtain a lucky number, and his lucky number proves a blank, he experiences not a simple, but a complicated disappointment; the loss of labour and money being superadded to the disappointment of drawing a blank, which, constituting simply and entirely the grievance of him who has chosen his ticket at random, is, from its simplicity, the more endurable.²

The more painful insight in Hardy’s poem is in the recognition that the value written on the paper, the prize, can disappear even as you are reading it — for love, Hardy seems be saying, is a lottery in which the tickets don’t necessarily retain their significance. They can suddenly become ‘blank’. Unlike the worldly-wise anti-romantic advice in the Peacock, Hardy’s psychologized sense of the lottery makes its workings not merely a matter of judgement but also change produced by time, or circumstance, or failures of sensibility, understanding, or even fate. It is such a loss of meaning that he has tried, in the penultimate verse, desperately to avoid: ‘I covered my eyes / As to cover the thought, / And unrecognize / What the morn had taught.’ But the verb ‘unrecognize’, a Hardyism, indicates how hopeless the attempt is: the verb does not exist because the concept is alien to us, or vice versa. Once you have thought something, you can forget it, try to ignore it, or put it out of your mind, but you can’t unthink it. Hardy invents the word to indicate an effort that will prove vain. Just as he won’t be able to ‘unrecognize’ his ‘insight that would not die’, so it seems all the more likely that ‘the prize I drew / Is a blank to me!’

The woman whose words and features are shadowed in the poem (they are hardly described) could well have some reason for feeling upset. She had been ‘the one believed-in thing’, but has come to seem
‘but one / Of the common crowd’ and ‘a sample / Of earth’s poor aver-
age kind’. Yet the poem concentrates on the man’s predicament, and reveals a source of his problem in that she may have been asked to bear too much meaning for him — being, as it says, ‘the one believed-in thing’. ‘At Waking’ emphasizes that the anguish is produced by a change in perceived value not in that of some supposed essential quality: it states that ‘I seemed to behold’. Removing her words ‘written awry’, it insists on his ‘insight’. The poem notes that ‘She seemed but a sam-
ple’ and reiterates verbs of sight: ‘behold’, ‘vanished’, ‘showed’, ‘seen’. The speaker says that ‘I covered my eyes’ and addresses, as if in desper-
ation, the ‘vision appalling’. This insistent subjectivizing, making the problem the speaker’s alone, is, as I say, effected by removing the wom-
an’s clumsy writing — something that might be judged by independent standards and would amount to a value outside that of the speaker’s feel-
ings for his love. It has the advantage too of removing a snobbish calligraphic perfectionism from the speaker’s repertoire of reasons for falling out of love.

Earlier literary usages of the word ‘blank’ would tend to reinforce the perceptual emphasis in ‘At Waking’. Hardy’s poem was likely com-
posed upon contextual associations of the word. In ‘Dejection: An Ode’ Coleridge is suffering the frustration of his powers in various forms and gazes at the sky ‘with how blank an eye!’3 Wordsworth took up the note when, responding in his ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality’, he praised:

Blank misgivings of a Creature
Moving about in worlds not realized,
High instincts, before which our mortal Nature
Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprized! 4

When shaping his own early morning vision of lost meaning in part seven of In Memoriam, Tennyson collocates the word ‘blank’ with a ‘guilty thing’. Such a combined association was all but effaced in the revision of Coleridge’s Ode from its source in ‘A Letter to ____’, just as Hardy was all but to efface it in ‘At Waking’:

And like a guilty thing I creep
At earliest morning to the door.

He is not here; but far away
The noise of life begins again,
And ghastly thro’ the drizzling rain
On the bald street breaks the blank day.5
The Biblical allusion and the divergence from the Gospel phrase ‘He is not here: but is risen’ (Luke 24. 6) in the Tennyson poem indicates how the loss of meaning I’m exploring can be associated with the altering nature of Christian belief over the Century. Hardy recalls In Memoriam part seven’s final line in ‘After a Romantic Day’ when he writes that ‘the blank lack of any charm / Of landscape did no harm. / The bald steep cutting, rigid, rough, / And moon-lit, was enough / For poetry of place’ (641). Just as the ‘blank’ in Coleridge likely derives from King Lear (‘the true blank of thine eye’), so ‘guilty thing’ is drawn from Hamlet, where the ghost ‘started like a guilty thing’.6

Milton’s hymn to light from Paradise Lost also contributes to this horrid sense of meaning gone:

But cloud in stead, and ever-during dark
Surrounds me, from the cheerful waies of men
Cut off, and for the Book of knowledg fair
Presented with a Universal blanc 7

Shelley’s ‘Epipsychidion’ employs the word to effect the inspiring contrast of a beautiful woman and a dull surrounding atmosphere:

The glory of her being, issuing thence,
Stains the dead, blank, cold air with a warm shade
Of unentangled admixture, made
By Love, of light and motion 8

Hardy adopted a phrase from the same poem, one which appears some forty lines after this passage, for an early working title to Tess of the d’Urbervilles: ‘too late / Belovèd’.9 The Well-Beloved, too, has a plot whose indebtedness to Shelley’s ideas are clear from the epigraph borrowed from ‘The Revolt of Islam’, and various allusions to ‘Epipsychidion’.10 Hardy’s poem ‘At Waking’ draws on these various literary uses of ‘blank’, as well as associations with a ‘guilty thing’ at dawn from Hamlet and Tennyson’s lyric. These combinations of verbal echo contribute a psychological and perceptual dismay to the poem’s reading of a face and a letter on a dull seaside morning.

However, a further source for ‘blank’ points towards the woman in ‘At Waking’. In Twelfth Night Viola, disguised as Cesario and in intimate conversation with Orsino, tells of an ‘imaginary’ sister — herself:

My father had a daughter lov’d a man,
As it might be, perhaps, were I a woman,  
I should your lordship.

_Duke._ And what’s her history?

_Viola._ A blank, my lord.\(^{11}\)

This equally possible allusion prompts thoughts about the reciprocal hurt in such moments when women are obliged to sit ‘like Patience on a monument, / Smiling at grief.’\(^{12}\) It is appalling to have your charms vanish in a loved one’s eyes ‘Like the gilt of a cloud’, and it’s hardly far-fetched to hear an echo of ‘guilty thing’ in ‘gilt of a cloud’. It’s similarly and equally horrible to experience the loss of meaning in another person taking place before your very eyes, in your own mind, and in the presence of your body.

‘At Waking’ was first collected in _Time’s Laughingstocks and Other Verses_ (1909). Beneath the poem is a reference to experiences, or perhaps to an occasion of initial poetic composition, from forty years before: ‘Weymouth, 1869’. Critics and biographers have attempted to associate ‘At Waking’ with what Philip Larkin has called ‘a real girl in a real place’:\(^{13}\)

Because of the occurrence of ‘prize’ both here and in the one poem (‘Thoughts of Phena’) which can confidently be associated with Tryphena Sparks, ‘At Waking’ has been read as in some sense documenting the breakdown of that relationship. But the word is common enough in Hardy’s work and the poem probably refers — as both ‘Her Initials’, also 1869, and the slightly later ‘The Wind’s Prophecy’, appear to do — to the final renunciation of a vainly cherished loyalty to Jane Nichols.\(^{14}\)

Yet, since we’re speculating, to add to the inconclusive evidence of the word ‘prize’ there’s also the first line’s reference to writing in ‘Thoughts of Phena’: ‘Not a line of her writing have I’ (62). As already noted, ‘At Waking’ contains all-but-suppressed references to a woman’s writing. In ‘Thoughts of Phena’, Hardy also emphasizes that his image of the dead woman has been refined by time not least because he has no relics of Tryphena:

_Thus I do but the phantom retain_  
_Of the maiden of yore_  
_As my relic; yet haply the best of her — fined in my brain_  
_It may be the more_  
_That no line of her writing have I_
Hardy perpetually underlines the perceptual relationship between the man and the woman, printed through with psychological complexity. He was ready to weigh the damage to both sexes consequent upon the fluctuations of such perceiving. In a notebook entry for May 1870, the poet wrote just before his thirtieth birthday that ‘A sweet face is a page of sadness to a man over thirty — the raw material of a corpse.’\textsuperscript{15} Three of the blanks that shape the associations of ‘At Waking’ are already in place here. Perhaps the poem also contains a vision of professional self-doubt in a writer’s fear that his page will lose its meaning, that the blank prize on the lottery ticket, the words ‘written awry’, will be his own work.

The word ‘blank’ appears in the penultimate paragraph of the chapter describing Tess Durbyfield’s ‘seduction or rape’\textsuperscript{16}:

Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive; why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thus, the wrong man the woman, the wrong woman the man, many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain to our sense of order. (77)\textsuperscript{17}

The account of Tess’s sexual encounter with Alec is evasive to a fault, and necessarily so. Hardy reverts to conventional imagery to indicate a judgment about what has befallen his heroine. The use of ‘blank’ with the phrase ‘traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive’ points once again to the besmirching of white paper with ink, as well as the sexual violation that has just taken place. There is thus an uneasy alignment of the author, who has been striving to inscribe on his white pages ‘A Pure Woman, Faithfully presented’, with Alec d’Urberville — the character who has been writing Tess’s history into her own body by tracing his ‘coarse pattern’ into the ‘feminine tissue’ which is ‘Practically blank as snow’.

The epigraph to \textit{Tess} is from Shakespeare’s \textit{Two Gentlemen of Verona}: ‘... Poor wounded name, my bosom as a bed / Shall lodge thee’. These lines are spoken in Act 1 by Julia about Proteus, one of the two gentlemen, who all-but rapes Silvia in a forest in Act 5:

\textit{Pro.} Nay, if the gentle spirit of moving words
Can no way change you to a milder form,
I’ll woo you like a soldier, at arm’s end,
And love you ’gainst the nature of love: force ye.

Sil. O heaven! 18

It is only the fortunate intervention of the other gentleman, Valentine, which saves her from this fate. Hardy’s novel has its two gentlemen too; but it may be that the author imagined himself as the one doing the intervening, notably on his book’s title page. Yet, as already suggested, the detail of his novel shows him necessarily compromised on all sides. In *Tess* Hardy is obliged to keep away from describing in detail the course of his heroine’s violation, from making it clear exactly what has happened. The question about whether it is a ‘rape or seduction’ won’t issue in a convenient answer because the equivocation between these possibilities, and their uncertainty, is required for what is subsequently to happen.19 Whatever the constraints imposed by his editors’ readership expectations, Hardy’s reticence, the narrative lacuna, is essential for the workings of his plot. It is equally necessary that Tess should not be, in some unequivocal way, entirely and simply innocent — even if she is a pure woman. Angel has to have something to recoil from; and, though in error, he mustn’t be absurdly so. If he were, Hardy’s criticism of the young man’s beliefs would have no bite, and his ‘too late’ change of heart would not actually be one. This necessary equivocation is established in the novel’s ambiguous subtitle. Those words can mean that Tess is an unsullied and sincere woman, or that she is nothing but a woman in all the vicissitudes of her history.

Adrian Poole has noted ways in which Hardy’s attribution of Shakespeare allusions to Alec — including one to the ‘Patience on a monument’ passage from *Twelfth Night* — works to align his literary readers with the seducer. He reports the scene in which Alec shows the still innocent Tess how to whistle: ‘He suited the action to the word, and whistled a line of ‘Take O take those lips away.’ But the allusion was lost upon Tess’ (63). While it is quite true, as Poole notes, that ‘This is awkward for readers on whom Alec’s allusions are not lost, in so far as it makes us complicit with him’20, it is also plain that Hardy conspires in the literary nudge and wink. He is complicit with Alec as well. Yet equally he lets on to us that Tess doesn’t know her Shakespeare, drawing readers to the woman’s side of the partial exchange at the very same moment. Poole points out that ‘the same is true, more painfully so, when it comes to Tess’s rupture with Angel after the wedding.’ Angel’s echoing words from *Hamlet* and *Lear* ‘are between the two of them just so
many lost allusions.’21 As Poole’s pun suggests, and as in the poem ‘At Waking’, it is characteristic of Hardy to compound the loss of meaning for Angel with a lack of literary education, an absence of perceived meaning, in Tess. This also makes her ‘innocent’ in at least two senses of the word.

In ‘Pure Tess: Hardy on Knowing a Woman’, Kathleen Blake begins by referring to Hardy’s subtitle, observing that ‘the reader knows Hardy’s heroine as Tess of the d’Urbervilles and as ‘A Pure Woman,’ in other words, as individual and as pure abstraction.’22 Yet the ‘individual’ is already three-parts idea, since her name is Tess Durbyfield, and, I would like to suggest, Hardy’s character is entirely made up in the abstraction of his writing. She is no more nor less than Hardy’s words. Though the author sides with Tess, as it were, on his title page, he also draws attention, implicitly, to the links between sexual ethics and writing when he calls her ‘Pure’ and describes his words as presenting her ‘Faithfully’. Hardy in his relations with his heroine is not, readers are to assume, like his main male characters who are differently unfaithful to her at different times. Yet, as I have already indicated, the words in the novel tell a more complex story. The writer is involved in the male activities of helping to produce Tess’s history by relating to a figure who is a composite of a distinct person and a creation of their own.

Just as he had written that ‘A sweet face is a page of sadness’, Hardy frequently returns to describing Tess as if she were a text. He claims, for example, to identify ‘the charm which is acquired by woman when she becomes part and parcel of outdoor nature’, adding that ‘a field-woman ... has somehow lost her own margin’ (93). This literary characterization he later attributes to Angel Clare. Praising Tess’s qualities to his parents, the vicar’s son says that ‘she’s brim-full of poetry — actualized poetry, if I may use the expression. She lives what paper poets only write ...’ (166). A little later, Angel presses Tess to marry him, and, when she’s unable to speak, he is driven to reading her face:

‘[ ]I am in no hurry, Tess, but I want to know — to hear from your own warm lips — that you will some day be mine — any time you may choose; but some day?’
She could only shake her head and look away from him.
Clare regarded her attentively, conned the characters of her face as if they had been hieroglyphics. The denial seemed real. (176)

Succumbing to his appeals and marrying him, it is as if Tess has received Angel’s imprint, imagining herself as he has described her:
'She was a sort of celestial person, who owed her being to poetry; one of those classical divinities Clare was accustomed to talk to her about when they took their walks together.’ (211) The novel may close by inviting readers to imagine that ‘the President of the Immortals ... had ended his sport with Tess’ (384), but they may prefer to think that it is Hardy who has finished playing with conceptions of his heroine. As Kathleen Blake asked, since ‘the novel incurs a danger comparable to the one it exposes’ and since ‘many critics complain about Angel’, ‘should we also be complaining about the creator?’

Perhaps a first thing to consider is whether, or in what terms, critics should complain about Angel Clare. There is, after all, something absurd about criticizing a character in a novel as if he had a mind of his own. He too, like Tess, is entirely a figure of Hardy’s words. There is danger in Angel’s idealizing of Tess. Yet she takes part in it and, even when hinting that he may be disappointed to learn her true history, reinforces the idealization — her purity — by contrasting it with an idea of her still implicit degradation by Alec: “O my love, my love, why do I love you so!” she whispered there alone; ‘for she you love is not my real self, but one in my image; the one I might have been.” (212) The dramatic contrast here implied between imagined purity and a real self is itself a part of the structure that helps destroy Tess. Her ‘purity’ is then part of what traps her, and Hardy collaborates in this too. This is a further reason why his subtitle has to be ambiguous.

With the words ‘she you love is not my real self’, Tess is reflecting back to Angel the dualistic pattern which he himself seems to live by. Certainly, just before Tess narrates her relations with Alec, Angel calls himself ‘a believer in good morals’. He describes his ethics in terms of contrasts between what he loves and hates: ‘I admired spotlessness, even though I could lay no claim to it, and hated impurity, as I hope I do now.’ (221) This comes just a page or so before the End of Phase the Fourth, and the dramatic irony which Hardy shapes is agonizing when Angel patronizes Tess, inviting her to begin her confession: “Now then for it, wicked little one.” (221) What I find most unendurable is not Tess’s or Angel’s wickedness, but Hardy’s shaping hand.

This is present too in his describing how the objects in the room seem to alter under Angel’s regard during Tess’s revelation. Readers are invited to imagine them as if in Angel’s eyes as his ears receive Tess’s words, words which are only reported as having been spoken. Hardy does not give her confession in direct speech. What in the poem ‘The Walk’ he calls ‘that underlying sense / Of the look of a room’ (340) appears to change before a reader’s imagining eyes:
But the complexion even of external things seemed to suffer transmutation as her announcement progressed. The fire in the grate looked impish, demoniacally funny, as if it did not care in the least about her strait. The fender grinned idly, as if it, too, did not care. The light from the water-bottle was merely engaged in a chromatic problem. All material objects around announced their irresponsibility with terrible iteration. And yet nothing had changed since the moments when he had been kissing her; or rather nothing in the substance of things. But the essence of things had changed. (225)

Powerfully persuasive, this paragraph performs various sleights of hand. It begins by emphasizing a process of perception: ‘things seemed’, ‘the grate looked’. Then two ‘as if’ phrases which would serve to imply that the fender and the water-bottle did care, if either the attribution of feeling or its denial were not equally anthropomorphizing tendencies. And then, as if the next sentences too were governed by an ‘as if’, Hardy writes declaratively that ‘the water-bottle was merely engaged’ and ‘objects around announced’. The author then aligns these perceptions with his male character’s image of his heroine by reminding us of ‘the moments when he had kissed her’. This makes the description of the room’s altering its appearance into a metaphor for Tess’s altering hers. The paragraph concludes by stating that ‘the substance of things’ had not changed, but that ‘the essence of things’ had.

This is debatable, and more so if the objects in the room are read as standing for Tess’s substance and essence — as the reference to his ‘kissing her’ suggests. It is at least arguable that not the ‘essence’ but merely the appearance of things has changed. Nothing essential to the water-bottle, for instance, has altered, only Angel’s view of it. The ‘essence of things’ can only mean Angel’s idea of them, not anything intrinsic to these objects. Yet with Tess ‘the substance of things’ has changed: a woman who has been raped or seduced, and who has then had a relationship with the man involved and born his child is physically different (thanks to the release of hormones in pregnancy, for example) from a virgin. It is important to recognize that Angel does have a point:

‘I repeat, the woman I have been loving is not you.’
‘But who?’
‘Another woman in your shape.’

She perceived in his words the realization of her own apprehensive foreboding in former times. He looked upon her as a species of impostor; a guilty woman in the guise of an innocent one. Terror was upon her white face as she saw it; her cheek was flaccid, and
her mouth had almost the aspect of a little round hole. The horrible
sense of his view of her so deadened her that she staggered; and he
stepped forward, thinking she was going to fall. (226-7)

Tess has not lost meaning for us, but she legitimately has for Clare. Her
substance has not changed because we have known for some time what
has happened to her; but Angel has not, and in this sense her words do
not change her essence, but her substance, for him. Tess had been ‘a
species of impostor’, but not ‘a guilty woman in the guise of an innocent
one’, rather a sexually experienced mother in the guise of a virgin.
Angel has two immediate responses that critics could complain about.
First, he is more forgiving, it seems, of his own lapse from purity than
he is of Tess’s, and so has different sexual standards for men and
women. Secondly, Tess’s physical state, whether virgin or mother,
makes a moral difference to him: he cannot accept her as an experienced
woman and a mother. It is not blameworthy that he feels she is different,
for this is the beginning of his awakening to her real history.

Hardy, though, frames the awakening in such a way as to delay the
acceptance of Tess’s substance, of his awakened real view of her, by
having Angel remain in the realm of appearances, appearances which
are mistaken for essences. Angel’s reaction to Tess’s confession is to
feel something like a physical revulsion: ‘She did sit down, without
knowing where she was, that strained look still upon her face, and her
eyes such as to make his flesh creep.’ (227) Hardy, in this devastating
scene, is bringing together three distinguishable issues and combining
them into a complexly entangled series of responses on Tess’s and
Angel’s part. First, as I have suggested, he questions a double standard
in male and female sexual morality whereby it appears more acceptable
for men to ‘sow their wild oats’ than for women to lose their virginity.
Secondly, he addresses the relationship between a man’s attraction to a
woman and his knowledge of her history, by showing how this can be
disturbed by adherence to over-rigid moral categories. The ethical
meaning of Tess’s history is distinguishable from Angel’s moralistic response,
and both are separable from the facts of what she has endured in her life.
Angel, too late it turns out, comes to accept and understand where he
had at first merely reacted. The point I want to emphasize, though, is
that he has reason for reacting. The problem is that though Angel does
have some reason to react, in the fact of Tess’s difference, Hardy com-
ounds this reason with his theme of idealization.
This is Hardy’s third ingredient. Angel has been described as temperamentally inclined to seek out essences to love, rather than flawed human bodies:

Though not cold-natured, he was rather bright than hot; less Byronic that Shelleyan. He could love desperately, but with a love more especially inclined to the imaginative and ethereal; it was a fastidious emotion which could jealously guard the loved one against his very self. This amazed and enraptured Tess, whose slight experiences had been so infelicitous till now; and in her reaction from indignation against the male sex she swerved to excess of honour for Clare.

(193)

This is beautifully poised by Hardy, indicating that because Tess has been physically used by Alec, she is peculiarly susceptible to what appears a disembodied passion for her, a passion by which Angel himself thwarts his own sexuality so as to protect and preserve a pure image of the woman. It is hardly surprising that Tess’s face and eyes, after she has revealed her true history to Angel seemed ‘such as to make his flesh creep.’ So, if the novel is read as a study of male sexuality, Alec’s fate dramatizes the punishment of an under-socialized desire, while Angel’s represents a self-punishment inflicted by means of desire’s etherealization. Tess’s role in the novel is to occasion both punishments, and, with her own cruel fate, to heap further incrimination upon the already manifold sins of the two gentlemen.

3

Again Katherine Blake asked: ‘should we also be complaining about the creator?’ Well, frankly, I’m more inclined to praise him — because Hardy is examining and criticizing his own guilty involvement with an idealizing tendency that ‘guards the loved one against his very self.’ That’s a recipe for loneliness and unhappiness, one which Hardy explored in the next novel he began, his last to be published, *The Well-Beloved*. Hardy indicates once more a link between writing and a dynamics and ethics of love in his epigraph to ‘Part First: A Young Man of Twenty’ the second verse of which reads:

Her that dares be
What these lines wish to see:
I seek no further, it is She.       (8)
Richard Crashaw’s thirty-eighth verse in ‘Wishes to His (Supposed) Mistress’ expects the woman to risk conforming to what his literary form proposes. Similarly, Jocelyn Pierston, the sculptor protagonist of Hardy’s novel, is described as being possessed by a sexual ideal which flits skittishly from person to person, residing most consistently in three generations of the Caro family. The Well-Beloved is valuable because it concentrates whole-heartedly upon this seemingly willful and unmotivated changeability in the love object, and it examines once again the loss of meaning summed up in the final stanza to a poem of the same name:

Thereat she vanished by the lane  
Adjoining Kingsbere town,  
Near where, men say, once stood the Fane  
To Venus, on the Down.  

— When I arrived and met my bride  
Her look was pinched and thin,  
As if her soul had shrunk and died,  
And left a waste within. (134-5)

The plot of this ballad resembles Angel’s awakening in Tess because it too concerns a bridegroom meeting his bride. The Well-Beloved is a spirit love who seems to have put a spell on the bridegroom so that when he comes to the real girl in the real place she has been stripped, somehow, of her charm. The poem’s conclusion also recalls ‘At Waking’, except that the fairy-tale setting gives distance and a mysterious pagan arbitrariness to the poem’s close.

Though the process of an ideal flitting from body to body is what largely provides the plot, and extensively determines the sculptor’s experiences, Hardy allows emotional emphasis to fall, I believe, not on the inspiration that the ideal’s arrival in some body implies, but the devastation that its departure effects. Discussing his predicament with his friend Somers, a painter, Pierston asks if he should marry Maria Bencomb, the most recent candidate for the role of well-beloved — who has suddenly supplanted Avice Caro the first:

‘Certainly not,’ said Somers. ‘Though, if anybody, little Avice. But not even her. You are like other men, only rather worse. Essentially, all men are fickle, like you; but not with such perceptiveness.’

‘Surely fickle is not the word? Fickleness means getting weary of a thing while the thing remains the same. But I have always been
faithful to the elusive creature whom I have never been able to get a firm hold of, unless I have done so now. And let me tell you that her flitting from each to each individual has been anything but a pleasure for me — certainly not a wanton game of my instigation. To see a creature who has hitherto been perfect, divine, lose under your very gaze the divinity which has informed her, grow commonplace, turn from flame to ashes, from a radiant vitality to a relic, is anything but a pleasure for any man, and has been nothing less than a racking spectacle to my sight. Each mournful emptied shape stands ever after like the nest of some beautiful bird from which the inhabitant has departed and left it to fill with snow. I have been absolutely miserable when I have looked in a face for her I used to see there, and could see her there no more.’ (40)

Once again, in the simile of the nest filling with snow, Hardy resorts to an image of whiteness to figure this loss of meaning. The loss is also connected with a recognition of imperfection, as Angel’s was, and as with the ‘words she had written awry’ of the ‘At Waking’ manuscript. Pierston suffers an awful failure of object constancy at the close of the novel’s first part: ‘For months he would find her on the stage of a theatre: then she would flit away, leaving the poor, empty carcase that had lodged her to mumm on as best it could without her — a sorry lay figure to his eyes, heaped with imperfections and sullied with commonplace.’ (51)

On 28 October 1891, Hardy wrote in a diary:

> It is the incompleteness that is loved, when love is sterling and true. This is what differentiates the real one from the imaginary, the practicable from the impossible, the love who returns the kiss from the Vision that melts away. A man sees the Diana or the Venus in his Beloved, but what he loves is the difference.25

Pierston, a sculptor of Dianas and Venuses, is at first unable to make such a leap from the Vision to the incomplete, and Hardy gives Pierston’s life an absurdly unfortunate cast, bringing home thus the torture and unhappiness to both artist and temporary loved one. The first Avice Caro had suffered like Viola’s ‘Patience on a monument / Smiling at grief’ when Pierston abandoned her, partly because she had sent him a letter: ‘Jocelyn, having read the letter, was surprised at the naïveté it showed’ (22), Hardy writes. When her daughter realizes that it was the sculptor who had caused her mother to suffer, she exclaims: ‘Then I can never, never like you again!’ (128) This is his punishment, and it prompts in the artist a desire to make amends, though he is sixty-one years old. Yet even here there’s a misreading at the heart of relationship:
'Mrs. Pierston, in fearing to be frank, lest she might seem to be angling for his fortune, did not fully divine his cheerful readiness to offer it, if by so doing he could make amends for his infidelity to her family forty years back in the past.' (159) As if to underline the point, Hardy makes sure we realize that there is more to misread now: ‘there was history in his face — distinct chapters of it; his brow was not that blank page it once had been.’ (159-60)

Hardy, similarly, characterizes Pierston’s attraction to women as altering through his life. The sculptor becomes less fastidious about cultural refinement as he reaches forty, making this comparison between the first two Avices thus:

Judgment, hookwinked as it was, told him that she was colder in nature, commoner in character, than that well-read, bright little woman Avice the First. But twenty years make a difference in ideals, and the added demands of middle-age in physical form are more than balanced by its concessions as to spiritual content. (99)

Twenty years later, by the time Pierston is sixty, he has reached the state of being able to love incompleteness described in Hardy’s diary entry, a passage written when Hardy was himself fifty-one:

Once the individual had been nothing more to him than the temporary abiding-place of the typical or ideal; now his heart showed its bent to be a growing fidelity to the specimen, with all her pathetic flaws of detail; which flaws, so far from sending him further, increased his tenderness. (143)

This is, doubtless, a preferable state — even if reached at the cost to Pierston of losing his desire to create works of art.

In a letter to Swinburne, Hardy described his novel as ‘my fantastic little tale’ and defended his work when writing to a journal by noting: ‘There is, of course, underlying the fantasy followed by the visionary artist the truth that all men are pursuing a shadow, the Unattainable, and I venture to hope that this may redeem the tragi-comedy from the charge of frivolity’.26 As with many of Hardy’s general remarks about life, readers may add a pinch of salt to taste. I don’t myself believe that ‘all men are pursuing a shadow, the Unattainable’. However, it does seem a familiar enough experience, for both men and women, to find the particular incompletenesses of a person either loveable or the source of profound irritation and disturbance, while many have experienced the draining away, whether sudden or more slowly, of love. They have
known those blank misgivings when a seemingly permanent relationship is experienced as a sudden loss of meaning.

Katherine Blake concludes by noting that ‘It is easy to say that Angel wrongs Tess by perceiving her not just as herself but as an essence and type of womanhood, harder to face the ultimate force of the fact that he also loves her because of it. So does Hardy.’27 I have been arguing on the assumption that this is indeed true — but that the novel, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, is a guilty exploration of this fact, while *The Well-Beloved* is an attempted tragi-comic exorcism of a similar essentializing tendency in a creative artist. Hardy’s honesty was to focus on occasions of meaning loss and give highly plausible literary shapes to such experiences, while, simultaneously, pointing readers in the direction of a love for the particular. This would mean accepting individuals as the specific consequences of their sometimes shocking histories. So I’m drawn to the manuscript text of ‘At Waking’ with its reference to the flaws in a woman’s writing, and believe the passages describing Angel Clare’s responses to Tess’s revelation of her ‘rape or seduction’ to be among Hardy’s most challenging scenes. He is asking that we accept the violated among us for what they truly are.

**Notes**

1 Citations of poems by Thomas Hardy are from *The Variorum Edition of the Collected Poems*, ed. J. Gibson (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979), to which page nos. in parentheses refer.


6 *Lear* I.i.158 and *Hamlet* I.i.153.

Thrush'.


9 Ibid., ll. 131-2.


12 Ibid., ll. 114-5.


14 Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 120. See also the footnote on this page.


16 Millgate, *Thomas Hardy*, 307; and long footnote about this issue.


18 *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, I. ii. 115-6 (for the novel’s epigraph) and V.iv. 55-60.

19 Adrian Poole, *Shakespeare and the Victorians* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2004), 150.

20 Hardy called it a ‘seduction’ in his letter of 29 Oct 1891 to Thomas MacQuoid: ‘Clare’s character suffers owing to a mock marriage having been substituted for the seduction pure & simple of the original MS. —’ in *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, 7 vols., ed. R. L. Purdy and M. Millgate (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978-88), i, 246. However, the novel’s description on p. 77 suggests an enforced sexual act, and Hardy’s words ‘pure & simple’ in the letter, if taken in the light of his title page use of the word ‘pure’ are anything but elucidatory.

21 Poole, *Shakespeare and the Victorians*, 150.


23 Ibid., 96.


