

“ah, are you digging  
on my grave?”

[Literature](#), [Poetry](#)



12/7/10 “ Ah, Are You Digging On My Grave? ” “ Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave? ” was first published in the Saturday Review on September 27, 1913, then in Thomas Hardy’s 1914 collection, satires of Circumstance: Lyrics and Reveries with Miscellaneous Pieces. The poem reflects Hardy’s interest in death and events beyond everyday reality, but these subjects are presented humorously, with a strong dose of irony and satire. This treatment is somewhat unusual for Hardy, who also produced a number of more serious poems concerning death. In “ Ah, Are You Digging On My Grave? ” a deceased woman carries on a dialogue with an individual who is disturbing her grave site. The identity of this figure, the “ digger” of the woman’s grave is unknown through the first half of the poem (Ruby 1). As the woman attempts to guess who the digger is, she reveals her desire to be remembered by various figures she was acquainted with when she was alive. In a series of ironic turns, the responses of the digger show that the woman’s acquaintances a loved one, family relatives, and a despised enemy have all forsaken her memory. Finally it is revealed that the digger is the woman’s dog, but the canine too, is unconcerned with his former mistress and is digging only so it can bury a bone. Though the poem contains a humorous tone, the picture Hardy paints is bleak. The dead are almost completely eliminated from the memory of the living and do not enjoy any form of contentment This somber outlook is typical of Hardy’s verse, which often presented a skeptical and negative view of the human condition (Ruby 1). Hardy was born in 1840 and raised in the region of Dorsetshire, England, the basis for the Wessex countryside that would later appear in his fiction and poetry. He attended a local school until he was sixteen, when his mother

paid a lot of money for him to be apprenticed to an architect in Dorchester. In 1862 he moved to London, where he worked as an architect, remaining there for a period of five years. Between 1865 and 1867 Hardy wrote many poems, none of which were published. In 1867 he returned to Dorchester and, while continuing to work in architecture, began to write novels in his spare time. Hardy became convinced that if he was to make a living writing, he would have to do so as a novelist (Ruby 2). Drawing on the way of life he absorbed in Dorsetshire as a youth and the wide range of English writers with which he was familiar, Hardy spent nearly thirty years as a novelist before devoting himself to poetry. In 1874 Hardy married Emma Lavinia Gifford, who would become subject of many of his poems. They spent several years in happiness until the 1880s, when marital troubles began to shake the closeness of their union. Hardy's first book of verse was published in 1898, when he was fifty-eight years old and had achieved a large degree of success as a novelist. Although his verse was not nearly as successful as his novels, Hardy continued to focus on his poetry and published seven more books of verse before his death, developing his confidence (Ruby2). With the composition of the *Dynasts: A Drama of the Napoleonic Wars* (1904-08) an epic historical drama written in verse, Hardy was hailed as a major poet. He was praised as a master of his craft, and his writing was admired for its great emotional force and technical skill. Hardy continued to write until just before his death in 1928. Despite his wish to be buried with his family, influential sentiment for his burial in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey instigated a severe compromise: the removal of his heart, which was buried in Dorchester, and the cremation of his body, which was interred in the Abbey

(Ruby 2). The structure of “ Ah, Are You Digging On My Grave? ” is a familiar one, although not one commonly associated with poetry: the joke. A situation is established and briefly developed, then the punch line turns everything on its head. In Hardy’s bitter joke a dead woman has high- flown expectations of the living: her loved one will remain forever faithful to her; her family will continue to look after her exactly as they did in life: and even her enemy’s hatred will not wane. The poem’s punch line deflates her hopes and reveals them as vain and ridiculous. Hardy sets up his joke carefully, with a poet’s attention to the language he uses (Ruby 4). The atmosphere is set in the first two lines. A sigh from the grave seems to signal profound meditation on morality and love. The phrasing of the two lines is almost self- consciously “ poetic. ” Such language is maintained throughout the first three stanzas. Expressions like “ planting rue, ” “ Death’s gin. ” “ The Gate that shuts on all flesh” portray feeling that is heightened, more sensitive and authentic than every day, emotion (Ruby 4). They awaken a sense of tragedy and compassion in the reader, But Hardy is merely setting us up for the punch line. The tone of the poem’s language begins begins to change in the fourth stanza. One hardly notices it, so great is the reader’s surprise that it was a little dog that was poeticizing all along. The first seeds of doubt have been planted: this poem may not be exactly what it at first seemed. The dead woman recognizes the dog’s voice and utters the article of faith she feels most deeply: a dog’s love outshines anything human (Ruby 4). But when the dog replies, the reader realizes that Hardy is up to something else. The “ poetry” and sentimentality have vanished. The dog’s voice is as ordinary and plainspoken as that of the Wessex country folk. He deflates her

last hope so offhandedly and without pretense that its effect is brutal. At the same time the dead woman's expectations about her lover, her family and enemy are portrayed as products of the same ridiculous sentimental outlook (Hardy 4). “ After coming to the end of ‘ Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?’ the reader realizes that the title would have been more accurate even if less interesting if called, “ Oh No One Is Digging on My Grave.’ ” (Ruby 10). Works Cited 1. David Kelly, in an essay for Poetry for Students, Gale, 1998. 2. Ruby. Mary K., ed. “ Ah, Are you Digging on my grave? ” Poetry for Students. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1999. 1-13. Print. “ 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.”