

Aspects of tragedy: Text overview – Hardy selection

What follows is an explanation of some of the ways Hardy's poetry can be considered in relation to the genre of tragedy. This document is intended to provide a starting point for teachers in their thinking and planning in that it gives an introductory overview of how the text can be considered through the lens of tragedy. There are some brief comments on how some aspects of the genre can be linked to the poems, although teachers and students may well think of other relevant ideas. Not all of the individual poems contain every aspect of the genre and this is reflected in the commentary. We hope the commentary will provide a useful starting point and a springboard for thinking about the text in more detail. It is important to note that the Hardy poetry selection is an examination set text for AS students only, though Hardy can be studied by A-level students for the Non-exam assessment (NEA).

Overview

There are 17 poems in this selection of Hardy's poetry for students to study for the genre of tragedy. The poems offer snapshots of tragic experiences. It is important that all poems are studied since it is together they will offer a comprehensive understanding of the tragic genre. An extract from any poem can also be chosen for the AS questions so all poems need to have been analysed during the course in terms of tragedy. Some poems contain more than one aspect of tragedy, especially the ballads, *A Sunday Morning Tragedy* and *The Trampwoman's Tragedy*, which tell stories of love and death, but students will also find evidence of different tragic aspects in the poetry selection, for example: pride, the fall from happiness into misery, tragic mistakes, accidents, belatedness, the joy of the past compared to the present, the vagaries of fortune, uncaring deities, tragic realisation, death and living death, ghosts, suffering and grief, silence and reticence, and optimistic and despairing resolutions. The tragic experiences are told through a range of contrasting voices. In studying the poems, it is possible students will see that the attitudes towards these tragic experiences are therefore conflicting and contradictory.

Some of the poems in the selection are personal, written after the death of Hardy's wife Emma. While it is likely these elegiac poems are expressions of personal grief and consolation, students need to remember that much is conjecture and their application could be universal. Although it is convenient to refer to Emma and Hardy as the protagonists of these poems, it has to be

remembered that Hardy has constructed the voices, artistically representing himself and his deceased wife.

Context

Between 1898 and 1928, when Hardy died, he published over one thousand poems. Some of the poems were written much earlier. The contexts in which he wrote are significant to the tragic aspects which are expressed. He was influenced by social changes in the Victorian and Edwardian worlds he witnessed and also by events in his personal life, specifically Emma's death in 1912. Hardy wrote and published his poems at a time when ideas ignited by Darwin's *Origin of Species* were beginning to take hold. Many people including his readers and reviewers still believed that the world was created by an all-powerful and all loving God, although there were some dissenters. Scientific and technological changes were also affecting the world, as were Freud's studies in psychology. Victorian and Edwardian England was dominated by ideas about social class; the gradations of society were rigid, including the position of women. Hardy himself was a mason's son trying to succeed in London's literary society. Although he was not from a farm labouring background, his proximity to it made him aware of the poverty experienced by those at the bottom of the social scale. Hardy lived in a time when capital punishment was part of the judicial system and those who were the least advantaged socially suffered the severest punishments. He actually witnessed the hanging of Martha Browne for the murder of her husband and was appalled by what he saw. He also watched (through a telescope) the hanging of a local man and was equally disturbed by that experience.

These contexts inform the tragic experiences about which Hardy writes in his poems. Significantly, his own fatalistic temperament also shaped his ideas, as did his disillusionment with marriage and the intense love he felt for Emma after her death. The words he wrote on her wreath 'From her Lonely Husband, with the Old Affection' reveal much about the tragic aspects which can be seen in the poems written after Emma's death.

Tragic settings

The settings for Hardy's stories are often isolated and solitary, for example Pydale Vale, a remote area in Dorset for *A Sunday Morning Tragedy* against which the death of an unnamed girl is played out, and the dairy setting for Tess's memories in *Tess's Lament* where she tells of a past which is infinitely better than the present. There is also the lonely setting of the rain soaked graveyard for *Rain on a Grave* in which Hardy reflects on the indifference of nature to human suffering and mortality. The specific location of Boscastle is used for *At Castle Boterel* which Hardy revisited after Emma's death to connect with a happier time where a significant undisclosed personal conversation took place. Some settings are indoors, seemingly Hardy's home, like the settings of *The Frozen Greenhouse* where Emma was saddened after the greenhouse plants died as a result of her neglect of forgetting to light the stove, and of *Lament* where

Hardy imagines a party that Emma would like to have attended if she had not been forever shut in 'her tiny cell'.

Tragedy of love and marriage

Many of Hardy's tragic narratives focus on love, courtship and marriage. Invariably death is the outcome of relationships which sour or in which there are problems. In the Emma poems, death happens by chance and yet it results in tragic experiences for the grief stricken mourner. In *A Sunday Morning's Tragedy* a pregnant unmarried girl dies because her mother, seeking to avert a scandal, gives her a shepherd's 'remedy' to effect abortion, an action which leads to the girl's premature death. Her death is especially cruel since her lover has all the time planned to marry her, but his announcement comes too late. *A Trampwoman's Tragedy* is similarly darkly tragic. It is a tale of love and jealousy, and leads to murder and execution, but at the centre is the terrible irony that the jealousy was founded on a joke, an act of teasing in which the speaker pretended to her lover that the child she was carrying belonged to 'jeering Johnny'. In *Tess's Lament* Hardy contrasts a happy courtship and blissful wedding day with the husband's abandonment of Tess. Hardy is very sparing with details in this poem but there seems to be an expectation that her story is known from *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. *At an Inn* is seemingly based on a personal experience Hardy had with his married friend Florence Henniker at the George Hotel in Winchester. Here there is perhaps some wish fulfilment on Hardy's part given that she did not want to pursue anything more than friendship, but the poem suggests that love is thwarted by ill timing and lost opportunities. Though the other guests think that the pair are lovers, Hardy says the kisses 'came not' and 'Love lingered numb'. A further ironic and tragic dimension is suggested at the end of the poem when the narrator suggests that now there is the desire for the pair to be lovers but no opportunity. He rails against the sea and land and the laws of men which divide lovers. *The Forbidden Banns* is a ballad which tells a disturbing story of marriage, death, suicide and murder. The father of the male protagonist tries to prevent his son's wedding because there is 'madness' in the blood of his son's intended wife. As the father tries to forbid the banns, he suddenly dies - a horrible prognostic of what is to come. After the marriage, time passes; the wife has a child, 'an idiot child', and then she has another. The protagonist realises now why his father tried to prevent the marriage. He takes a gun and later two corpses are found. The poem has much to say about Victorian attitudes to madness and the lack of compassion for children with mental disabilities. The narrator throughout is detached which would be an interesting point to discuss from a twenty first century perspective.

Tragic innocence and gender representation

The Mock Wife offers another angle on the tragedy of love and marriage. Although there is some ambiguity in the supposed crime of the wife in poisoning her husband, the tragic aspect that is explored is the innocence of the male victim. As he lies dying and barely conscious, he desires a last kiss from his wife

whom he does not suspect of his murder and who is herself awaiting execution. His friends and neighbours use disguise here for a good purpose. A local woman who looks like his wife is taken to his death bed so that his final request can be fulfilled; the deception is seen as justifiable (the watchers who effected the deception 'make no question that the cheat was justified').

The Newcomer's Wife also focuses on a male as a tragic victim. Here the man is a newcomer who marries a local who has a reputation as the 'Hack of the Parade' about which he is ignorant. His joy at his marriage is soon ruined when he overhears gossip of his wife's past. No details are offered of the story – whether he confronts his wife or not. The poem simply ends starkly with his suicide: he is found over a slimy harbour wall 'with crabs upon his face'. It is important to think about how Hardy represents gender and sexuality and where the various narrators' sympathies lie. Although Hardy challenges some ideas about the ways women and men are defined by culture, the fact that he writes from a male perspective means that many of society's ideas are endorsed even when they seem to be challenged. Women in Hardy are predominantly weak and men much stronger. When women do challenge the authority of men they are invariably demonised as in *The Newcomer's Wife*. In *The Trampwoman's Tragedy* there is little criticism of the woman's lover who murders John. While it is certainly possible to sympathise with the murderer who feels shame and agony after the woman foolishly lies that she has been unfaithful, there is no condemnation of the lover's excessive and violent reaction. Elsewhere, women are often the victims of love and of society, for example Tess who has been abandoned in *Tess's Lament* and does not blame her husband.

Death and ghosts

The tragic aspect of death is presented in a variety of ways in Hardy's poetry. Sometimes there is a refusal to believe that death has happened since the dead are resurrected in the shape of ghostly figures. *After a Journey* is about the effects of death (presumably Emma's) on the narrator (presumably Hardy). The speaker is in denial that nothing remains of his dead wife. Thus she is reincarnated, in a sense, as the voiceless ghost who draws him back to a variety of places they visited together in the happier days of their courtship and marriage. However, despite the positivity of the speaker's sentiments and the overwhelming force of memory, there is much negative language in the poem which suggests absence. Whatever the speaker says, nothing can reverse the loss: the voice is 'hollow', the ghost 'thin' that he follows 'frailly' and the stars will ultimately 'close their shutters'. The title of *Lament* suggests the speaker's loss at the finality of death. Emma is firmly shut from friendship 'In the jailing shell / Of her tiny cell'. Though the speaker might imagine how happy she would have been on the party day, he knows the tragic truth that he who does not care for 'those junketings' is the one alive while she is shut from the cheer of them. *Your Last Drive* focuses on the end of Emma's life and her halting 'everlastingly'. Death brings separation from which there is no recovery. When Hardy recreates the voice of Emma to speak to him she says: 'You may miss me then. But I shall

not know...and I shall not care'. *The Going* is the first of the Emma poems and here the tragedy is felt in the anger of the mourner who did not get a chance to say goodbye. There is a terrible sense of loneliness as the speaker knows that death has taken the poem's subject, where he 'cannot follow'. The speaker is so unhappy he believes he sees the ghost; he asks her why she makes him leave the house and 'think for a breath' it is her he sees. In *The Haunter* Hardy creates the voice of a loving Emma to narrate events, imagining how she might feel as she haunts him 'whither his fancy sets him wandering'. It could be that in creating this cheerful ghostly voice that Hardy moves beyond despair and finds some consolation. It is certainly an endorsement of love beyond the grave: she is faithful and does 'All that love can do'. In *Rain on a Grave* the focus is on the last resting place of Emma. Here the scene is melancholic. Rain arrows down on the grave, coldly and unfeelingly. The speaker reflects on how Emma felt wounded by rain when she was alive and this sharpens his pain, so much so that he wishes he too were dead and beside her 'folded away there/Exposed to one weather'.

Loss and the passing of time

Loss is a key aspect of tragedy and loss is apparent in many of Hardy's poems. Loss results from many causes - death in the Emma poems, but also the loss of love as in *Tess's Lament*, simply and painfully realised through the repetition of 'And now he is gone'. In *The Going* Hardy combines both senses of loss. In an immediate sense he feels acutely the loss of the woman who has died and gave no hint of her departure. He knows that where she has gone he cannot follow or 'gain one glimpse of [her] ever anon'. But embedded in the narrative is the sense that the person who has died was already dead to the speaker through their estrangement and that her going was somehow an extension of their separation in life. She does not bid him goodbye or lip him 'the softest call' and as a result he is like a 'dead man held on end' so great is his double loss.

In *Under the Waterfall* there is an expression of the tragic feelings that result from the passing of time. As the female speaker reflects on her past when she and her lover lost a drinking glass in a waterfall while having a romantic picnic, she gives a sense in the subtext that the glass represents a love which has been lost through the passage of time. Now, in the narrative present, she can only sense the fugitive day 'fetched back from its thickening shroud of gray' but memories are painful and beauty is displaced.

The past being better than the present

Another typical tragic aspect is the pastoral lamentation that the past is preferable to the present. In *Tess's Lament* the speaker looks back nostalgically to a time when she was happy, blissfully working at the dairy with her lover who whispered to her words of love. This contrasts to her loneliness and misery now that she has been abandoned and is wracked with guilt and grief.

At Castle Boterel offers a comparison between two visits to a place that Hardy loved. After Emma's death he returns to a hill in Boscastle where they shared a special moment; it was a 'time of such quality' as the speaker wonders if there was ever a moment before or since in the hill's story. In comparison, the speaker in the present becomes increasingly aware of his own mortality, his 'sand is sinking' and he will 'traverse old love's domain never again'.

Tragic mistakes

Tragic errors are central to tragedies and are usually made by tragic protagonists. In *A Sunday Morning Tragedy*, there are several tragic mistakes. It could be argued that the girl makes a mistake in loving too well and having sex outside of marriage. This is all the more telling because of the fierce and judgemental social attitudes that would make her a social outcast. It is because of the social stigma attached to children born out of wedlock that the girl's mother seeks a solution thereby making a more fatal error. Her error is bound up with the seemingly minor error of the girl's lover who makes a flippant joke to keep his intentions to marry the girl a secret, done as a 'fond surprise' but he reveals his surprise too late. His joke misfires and has tragic consequences because the girl's mother, thinking that there will be no marriage and that her pregnant daughter will be shamed, seeks her own resolution procuring the herb from a shepherd to rid the girl of the child but in so doing brings about her daughter's death.

A mistake of a different sort is made in *The Frozen Greenhouse*. Here the mistake is of no earth shattering consequence though Hardy makes much of it. During Emma's life one frosty night she forgot to light the stove in her greenhouse and as a result the greenhouse plants were frozen dead. The young Emma clearly experienced sadness and guilt and Hardy describes her face as 'the very symbol of tragedy'. For the speaker of the poem the memory is particularly poignant as Emma has now herself died and like her frozen plants is 'cold, iced, forgot'.

Belatedness, chance and accidents

Bad luck and ill timings inform the tragic outcomes of *A Sunday Morning's Tragedy*, *A Tramp Woman's Tragedy* and *The Forbidden Banns*. In *A Sunday Morning's Tragedy* the lover comes too late to tell of his love and intention to marry. Already the mother has administered the fatal brew to procure abortion and inadvertently bring about her daughter's death. The tragedy is heightened by the contrast of the mother's despair at what she has done and the cheerful expectations of the would-be groom who looks forward to his wedding: 'Where is my bird?' he asks '...I've felt for her, and righted all'.

The protagonist narrator who tells her story in *A Trampwoman's Tragedy* continues with her joke against her lover too many times. Believing that she has been unfaithful he kills his rival and is then hanged. She only tells her lover the

truth when he returns as a ghost. Too late she tells him she had kept from all men since they 'joined lips and swore' their love.

In *The Forbidden Banns* the father dies at the point when he tries to forbid his son's marriage. It is an accident, a terrible act of chance that contributes to the ruining of the marriage. The son blames the death on himself and then blames his wife.

Tragedy as politically challenging

Tragedy is often seen as politically challenging. As a genre it questions the laws of men as Hardy does in *At an Inn* where the narrator bemoans the social laws which will not let the lovers, who are now aching, be together.

In *The Mock Wife* there is a sense that the wife who is accused of murder might not have committed the crime. As such the reader must surely think that her execution is wrong. Although it is not explicitly stated, the detached tone of the narrator in which he graphically describes her punishment (To see her strangled and burnt to dust) makes it clear that because there is doubt (a few hold her innocent) that capital punishment should be challenged.

In *Tess's Lament* the speaker is uncritical of human laws and of male power but her naïve acceptance of her own guilt is surely not to be taken as that of the writer. If Hardy expects his readers to know Tess's story from his novel, then there is an implied criticism of the world which has made Tess feel that her husband's abandoning of her is her fault.

A challenge to social laws is made explicitly in *A Sunday Morning Tragedy* when the mother asks why children born out of wedlock should be termed 'ill-motherings'.

God, the gods, the indifference of the universe, fate

Hardy himself said he wanted 'to cry out ...that...the Supreme Mover or Movers, the prime Force or Forces, must be either limited in power, unknowing, or cruel'. His tragic verse, offers plenty of evidence of an uncaring universe. The speaker in *A Sunday Morning Tragedy* cries out against the wanton workings of Fortune and Tess feels her fate is written for her and that she has no free will. It could also be argued that in the Emma poems the cruelty of the gods is apparent in that only when Emma is dead can Hardy feel his love for her and then it is too late. In *Rain on a Grave*, Nature – or the gods – seem vindictive. The clouds spout upon the grave in 'ruthless disdain' and at the end Hardy suggests that there is an indifference to human life.

The Flower's Tragedy offers an unusual take on fate. The flower had been in a vase and had been neglected because of the death of its human owner. It 'withered for lack of watering'. The narrator of the poem acknowledges that it is not much that the flower died, but the withered flower takes him to think of the joint fates of she who perished and the flower that withered: 'she never had known / of the flower's fate; nor it of her own'.

Resolution

The resolutions of Hardy's individual narratives are varied: some are immeasurably sad, some despairing and some offer hope. In *Your Last Drive* the ending is discomfiting. The husband and wife who were estranged in life are further separated in death; there is no hope of reconciliation. Even though the speaker wants a connection he knows that his wife is beyond his influence: 'past love, praise, indifference, blame'. The ending is stark and numbing. A similar feeling of emptiness is felt in the resolution of *The Going*. The speaker has attempted to come to terms with his anger, grief and regret at the death of his wife who left him so indifferently, but again there is no consolation. At the end there is anguish and a weary resignation: 'O you could not know/ that such swift fleeing/ No soul foreseeing - / not even I - would undo me so!' In this poem, Hardy suggests that death is final and that human beings cannot anticipate the effects that death will have. The ending is dark and tortured with a terrible sense of pessimism.

The resolution of *The Haunter* is slightly less bleak. Although there is a heaviness in the rhyming suggesting sadness and although Hardy acknowledges a lack of communication in his marriage with Emma, her imagined voice asserts love and as the poem progresses there is a move towards positivity. In the final stanza she declares her faithfulness and love: '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.' There may be silence at the end but there is unspoken communication suggesting that in some tragedies positives emerge.

After a Journey can also be seen as offering some consolation to its speaker in its resolution. The speaker of the poem seems to be Hardy who is revisiting places he loved to be with Emma. He sees her ghost which is guiding him forwards and backwards in time 'to the spots [they] knew when [they] haunted together'. At the end he says that he is just the same as when he experienced joy with her in the past, when they both appreciated nature. However, this ending can be seen as ironic: the speaker is of course not the same and the reconciliation has only taken place in his imagination.

In some stories there are ambivalent resolutions. The ending of *At Castle Boterel* is on one level negative. The speaker is focusing on his own mortality (his 'sand is sinking'), yet the place allows the memory of a happier time to be preserved. Human actions are recorded in colour and cast by the primeval rocks. Life may be transitory but the rocks record 'that we two passed'.