Joyce Waldren — College English I

'TIL DEATH DO US PART

Professor Hoffman

Topic: Write a formal critical essay on *Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?* by Thomas Hardy.

One of the most widely read and respected English novelists, Thomas Hardy created an important artistic bridge between the 19th and 20th centuries. Rejecting the pompous words of earlier verse, Hardy wrote on subjects chosen from ordinary life using the real language of ordinary people. Although Hardy was a major English novelist of Victorian literature in the late 19th century, he decided to write no more fiction and returned to his first artistic love, poetry. In the last 30 years of his life, he published about 900 poems, including *Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?* The essential human confrontation with indifference and irony was presented in Hardy's poetry in a wide variety of dramatic forms.

No technical analysis of *Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?* would be complete without focus on three things. First, Hardy wrote this particular poem entirely in the form of a dialogue, which uses the conversation between two characters to actually create the work. The first two lines of most stanzas are the voice of the dead character; the rest of the stanza is the answer of the second party. It is easy to distinguish which character is speaking, and the fast back-and-forth conversation holds the reader's attention. Intriguingly, the identity of the second character is not revealed until the end of the poem. Second, this poem is a good illustration of Hardy's rather dark sense of humor. The dialogue between the characters is humorous because, of course, dead women and dogs do not talk. Hardy wrote the hopeful words of the dead woman in a way that makes her seem almost giddy. She, even after death, hopes that she is still the center of focus of old friends and enemies. Although it is not written, it is implied that the dead woman is disappointed each time the second character tells her, almost apologetically, that she has not guessed his identity correctly. Even after it is known that the digger is her little dog, the dog tells her, "I dug upon your grave/ To bury a bone, in case/ I should be hungry . . . but I quite forgot/ It was your resting place." Third, *Ah, Are you Digging on My Grave?* displays Hardy's tendency to uncover romantic or idealistic illusions about love, life, and death. The dead woman's illusion is that her "loved one," her "dearest kin," and even her "enemy" remember her and miss her and visit her grave. In reality, all of those people have gone on with their lives, not bothering to visit the grave.
The meaning of the poem becomes clear at the end. A woman lying in her grave hears digging above and tries to guess who is the visitor. After guessing her loved one, her dearest kin, and her enemy, she learns that it is only her little dog. When she praises the dog's true heart, the dog tells her that he is only burying a bone in case he gets hungry. Hardy meant to dispel the illusion that we will remain immortal in the hearts and minds of our friends and colleagues even after death. Sadly, he reminds us that most people are not remembered beyond a generation or two.

Hardy's paradoxical way of illustrating his point is delightful yet effective. Even though this is a light-hearted poem, upon closer inspection it yields a valuable lesson of timeless proportions. Hardy obviously believed that it is vain to assume that any of us will make more than a relatively fleeting impact upon the great scheme of the universe. Hardy's words in *Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?* transcend the boundaries of country or culture, as every human being will eventually die and will be forgotten. Moreover, the significance of this work is timeless. This idea applies today even as it did to Hardy in the early 1900's and as it always will.