“Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave,” Thomas Hardy Critical Analysis

“Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave,” is a poem written by Thomas Hardy. The central theme of this poem is death, which is also seen in several different forms throughout the works of Thomas Hardy. There is a great deal of disappointment expressed in this poem. The Oxford Reader’s Companion to Hardy deems it, “a satire of circumstance” (Page 378). Thus, death and the afterlife are things of tragedy in this particular work. The point that Hardy makes is that no love or hate outlasts death.

An important aspect to the poem’s structure is that it is written sequentially in order to prepare the reader for an unsettling ending. Hardy takes us on a downward spiral through, as The Pattern of Hardy’s Poetry puts it, a “series of steps from appearance to reality” (Hynes 53). The dead woman believes that someone she loved is there at her grave. This, however, she finds out is untrue through a devastating sequence of disappointments. The woman originally suspects that the person at her grave is her husband, but sadly it is not. In reality, her husband is off with his new love, and feels that since she is dead it, “cannot hurt her now” (p.48; l.15). Consequently, the woman guesses again, thinking this time it is her closest of kin. She is, yet again, disappointed. She finds out that they do not care to think of her anymore. This feeling of neglect is seen in the line, “What good will planting flowers produce?” (p.48; l.10). In other words, the family of the woman would rather not think of her than hurt themselves by doing so. Their reason for not going to see her is that nothing can bring her back from, “Death’s gin” (p.48; l.12). At this point, Hardy has still not revealed the digger’s identity. He continues to do this, according to A Critical Introduction to the Poems of Thomas Hardy, to show that, “the eager hopefulness of the dead woman is mercilessly quenched” (Johnson 138).

Next, we come upon a slightly different subject. In the third stanza, the woman sees now that not only has she been forgotten by her most beloved, but also by her worst enemy. She is told that her enemy, “cares not where you lie” (p.48; l.18). Similarly, as with her loved ones, her enemy simply thinks the woman no more worth her time to worry about. In the next stanza, the woman has exhausted all of the possibilities, so she gives up and asks who is there. She now finds out that it is her dog. Hardy himself loved animals and it is not a surprise that he would use a dog as the digger. As seen in Victorian Poetry, Hardy, “always championed kindness to animals” (9: 465). He, however, creates a surprising twist, at the end of the poem. Earlier on, in the fifth stanza, the woman praises the noble dog, stating how no human can rival, “A dog’s fidelity” (p.49; l.12). In the last stanza of this rather depressing poem, comes the final blow to the woman. The dog has not remembered her either and has, in fact, mistakenly trodden upon her grave. In the words of The Pattern of Hardy’s Poetry, the dog believes that her grave is, “a place to bury bones, not affections” (Hynes 53). So, even her faithful dog does not care to remember her. “Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave,” is a very tragic and sad poem. It is written in Victorian Studies that, “Hardy recognized that personal relations provide no sure refuge from tragic experience” (36: 176). This plainly means that, as far as death is concerned, few are truly remembered, if any, after they are dead and gone. The most important parts of the woman’s life were, indeed, the people that she knew. From her husband and her
kin, to her worst enemy and loyal animal friend, the woman finds out little by little that none of them care enough to come to her grave. The dog does, however, come to her grave but only by mistake. It seems as though the woman has not lived on in their memories, rather, everything that she was to them was sealed, like herself, in the grave.