

## Poems by Thomas Hardy

### Questions by Dr. Boos

#### “Channel Firing”

1. Why does Hardy set this poem in a churchyard? What is the point of using such expressions as “the glebe cow” and “Christes sake”?
2. From whose point of view is the poem told? What is the effect of making “God” a character in the poem?
3. What is the effect of the stanza form and rhythm?
4. What do you make of God’s use of colloquial expression?
5. What dead human being receives the last word, and why is he chosen?
6. Are there droll or humorous aspects to the poem? Even if so, is the poem ultimately lighthearted?
7. What is the meaning of the poem? What is added by the final allusions to “Stourton Tower, / And Camelot, and starlit Stonehenge”?

#### “The Oxen”

1. To what legend does the poem refer? Why do you think Hardy chose the legend of the kneeling oxen to represent Christmas rather than, say, legends of angels or Santa Claus?
2. What are features of the poem’s stanza form, rhythms, and rhymes? Are they appropriate for the topic? Is the poem too short?
3. How is dialogue and direct address used in the poem? What effect do these have?
4. What characterizes Hardy’s word choice? Would his audience have used words such as “barton” and “coomb”?
5. What does Hardy think of the truth of this legend? Why does he say that “I feel” I would go with a messenger reporting this event?
6. What are some implications of the final line? Are there beliefs beyond the legend of kneeling oxen in which the poet can have no faith? Or is the final line indeterminate?
7. What is the poem’s dominant emotion?
8. What do you think of this as a Christmas poem? Of a poem reflecting changing attitudes and beliefs at the turn of the twentieth century?

#### “The Convergence of the Twain”

1. What do you make of the poem’s form, meter and rhymes? How are these appropriate to the topic?
2. What seems to be the poem’s tone? Is it one you might expect from a poem grieving the loss of life in shipwreck (and which was published in a volume to solicit money for the families of victims)?
3. What are some expressions and word uses which contribute to the sense of mystery and irony?

4. Who are permitted to witness the scene, and what is their reaction? (stanza V)
5. What entity is postulated as responsible for the event? What is implied by describing him/her/it as “The Imminent Will” and “Spinner of the Years”?
6. What causes a sense of intensity and climax?
7. What is the effect of the use of “consummation” in the final line?
8. What seems to be Hardy’s reaction to the sinking of the Titanic? Would this have been a common reaction? Might it be seen as moralistic or offensive?

### “The Darkling Thrush”

1. Does the term “darkling” suggest any literary echoes? What does it mean? What relationship do the poem’s rhythms bear to its content?
2. When was the poem written? (in historical time) What season is indicated in the poem, and how is this symbolic?
3. What is the relationship between the speaker and the bird? Why was the bird’s song chosen to embody the speaker’s concerns?
4. How does the choice of words emphasize the poet’s point? What does the presence of the observer add to the poem?
5. What is the tone of the poem’s ending? How certain is it that the bird knows of a “blessed Hope”? Even if he did, would the speaker have access to this hope?
6. Is it significant that the poem’s appeal is to “hope,” not “faith”? Toward what would this hope be directed?
7. What is added to the poem by the use of conditional tenses at the conclusion? Is the final emotion one of hope, doubt, or uncertainty?
8. Is this an effective poem?

### “When I Set Out for Lyonesse”

1. What is the progression of ideas and images in the three stanzas? What does the third stanza add to the first two?
2. What images evoke the speaker’s mood?
3. Why does Hardy choose the place name Lyonesse, rather than, say, Cornwall? What is served by the use of the roundel form? Is it appropriate for this subject? What are some special features of the poem’s diction and repetition?

### “Wessex Heights”

1. What is this poem’s rhythm? What purpose is served by its regularities? Its irregularities?
2. What is added to the poem by references to specific places? To biblical ideals? Why has the speaker sought the heights for contemplation? What has been his relationship with his fellow men and women? With society and his social self?
3. Why cannot he frequent “the great grey Plain” or the “tall-spired town”? Or “Yell-ham Bottom” and “Froom-side Vale”? Or the “railway train”? What do we learn about the speaker from these avoidances?
4. What lament does he express toward the “rare fair woman”? What does he claim is

his attitude toward her memory?

5. What relative comfort is granted him at the poem's end? What would you say is the poem's overall tone?
6. What is the speaker's final mental state?
7. What meanings are evoked by the poem?

### **“The Blinded Bird”**

1. What is the poem's meter and rhyme pattern? What is the situation of the bird and the speaker?
2. What is added to this poem by the knowledge that it is part of a tradition of romantic bird poems, such as Shelley's "To a Skylark" and Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale"?
3. Can you compare/contrast this poem with Hopkins's bird poems, such as "The Windhover"? With Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush"?
4. What final quotation shapes the final stanza? What is the speaker's final point? Is this a happy one?
5. What is added to the poem by the presence of a speaker? By his observations at the end of each stanza?

### **“The Pity of It”**

1. What is the form of the poem? Does this seem appropriate for the subject matter? What is added to the poem by its sounds and choice of words?
2. What linguistic relationship does the speaker find between rural English dialect and German? Is he correct? What implications does he draw from the common origins of these languages?
3. What does the octave claim to have been the causes of the war?
4. What allegorical figure speaks the poem's judgment of the war? What does she proclaim? Does this provide a satisfactory resolution, in your view?
5. Does any of Hardy's language in this poem remind you of that of Hopkins? (whom Hardy could have read in the 1912 edition)

### **“In Time of ‘The Breaking of Nations’”**

1. What is the reference of the title? Why did Hardy not instead title his poem, "In Wartime"?
2. What are some of the formal features of this poem?
3. In what sequence are the images presented? How are they chosen?
4. In what can human beings take comfort in the midst of disruption? Are there any possible counterarguments to this sense of comfort?
5. What seems Hardy's attitude toward war? What things does he believe to be most important?

### **“A New Year's Eve in Wartime”**

1. What is the significance of the poem's setting? What is added by its rhythms? Its

images?

2. Is the poet's placement in his own poem effective?
3. What are some allegorical elements in the poem? What fate is associated with the image of the rider on horseback?
4. What is the poem's final tone? To what extent is it one of certainty? What role does nature play in this response?
5. What are some associations of the name "Hodge"? Why do you think Hardy chose a drummer boy as his representative dead soldier?

### **"Drummer Hodge"**

1. In what conflict was Drummer Hodge killed?
2. What is gained by the use of a three stanza (tripartite) structure? What is the poem's progression?
3. What is the effect of the use of South African terms such as "kopje" and "Karoo"? Why are the constellations above his head "strange stars"? What does he not
4. understand about their meaning?
5. What kind of burial does Drummer Hodge receive? To what extent will Hodge be assimilated into his new surroundings?
6. What are some values which underlie this poem? What unnatural or ironic circumstances does it present?

### **"An August Midnight"**

1. What is this poem's meter and rhyme scheme? What purpose do the variations serve? Which lines are given most emphasis?
2. What are some quaint aspects to the poet's descriptions? Are some of them indirect?
3. How does he describe his "guests"? Are there other ways in which the descriptions assimilate insects to humans?
4. What are some gently humorous aspects of the poem? What is the point of its final reversal?

### **"In Tenebris"**

1. What is added to the poem by the use of long lines? By the meter and aabb rhymes?
2. What does the title mean?
3. To what does the poet refer when he speaks of "the shouts of the many and strong/That things are all as they best may be, save a few to be right ere long"? What evidence does the poet adduce in favor of their views?
4. What do they seem to have objected to in him? What word usages imply skepticism? ("it seems," "they cry")
5. What effect is created by words such as "crookedness," "awry," or "blot"?
6. What does the poet believe is a better way of seeking human improvement? Why do you think he capitalizes First and Worst?
7. What are remaining human problems? ("crookedness, custom, and fear")
8. Does the poet have any hope that his melancholia will be accepted? What presumably will be his final fate?

### **“The Ruined Maid”**

1. What are some comic or ironic features of this poem?
2. What attitude toward the “ruined” young woman’s new condition does her former co-worker take?
3. How has the “ruined maid’s” life and health changed since her “fall”? How has her speech altered?
4. How is the poem altered by the fact that the now-changed woman feels no regrets? Why does she continue to use the word “ruined”? Is her usage ignorant, ironic, or anti-conventionally assertive?
5. What seem to have been the motives for her occupation? In actual cases, might there have been others which the poet ignores?
6. What response is evoked from the reader by this situation—e. g., laughter, scorn, pity, or disgust?
7. If the innocent country girl had expressed blame and/or the “ruined maid” had exhibited grief and regret, how would the poem’s tone and message have been altered?
8. What fate would the middle-class Victorian reader have expected for the kept woman/prostitute speaker? Do we expect she will be happily “ruined” for long?
9. How do the poem’s diction, rhythm and rhyme scheme contribute to its meaning?

### **“Heiress and Architect”**

1. Hardy was himself an architect and dedicated this poem to his former employer, an architect. What may have prompted him to write a poem about an architect who refuses to build a building?
2. What is the poem’s stanza form, and how does this add to the tone? What special use is made of the final dimeter lines?
3. What are implications of the house as metaphor? What other novels/poems center on this theme?
4. What does the reader think the architect may mean by his promise to do all that is desired consistent with “the law of stable things”?
5. How are the architect’s credentials described? What seems to be his character?
6. How do the descriptions of the architect change during the poem? Does he seem to have metaphorical significance?
7. By contrast, what are the preferences and desires of his would-be patron? What forms of friendship, social life and love does she desire?
8. How do the architect’s responses build on one another? How do the patron’s requirements shrink?

### **“Neutral Tones”**

1. Why are the poem’s tones neutral—as opposed to what?
2. What images of the landscape are associated with the speaker’s remembered encounter?
3. What is the poem’s form? Is there a significance to the extra line? What is the sequence of images and thought?
4. What traditional associations with the sonnet seem to be ironized by the poem’s content?
5. What do we learn about the formerly loved one? (dying smile, grin of bitterness) What seems to have been her character?
6. What visual image does the speaker retain of their unhappy meeting? Are the details Pre-Raphaelite? Is it appropriate that the poem’s last words are of “grayish leaves”?

### **“The Well-Beloved”**

1. What is ironic about the poem’s title?
2. What is its form, and how is this suitable for the subject matter? (supernatural aspect to ballad)
3. What is significant about the time and place in which the action takes place? Is it important that the future bridegroom passes a pagan temple?
4. Who do you think may be the deity worshipped there? Had any earlier works of literature portrayed the evil effects of an encounter with this deity?
5. What is the speaker’s stated opinion of the woman he is about to marry? What characterizes the “shape” who joins him as he walks? What surmise does he make regarding her origins?
6. What does the Shape claim for herself? (“thou dost love but me”). Is she in fact correct?
7. Does the speaker accept the Shape as a substitute for his fiancée? How are the Shape and his bride differentiated?
8. Can the speaker marry the Shape instead? What has been her past history?
9. What happens to the Shape? What new detail is added regarding the place of her disappearance?
10. When he arrives at the wedding place, what has happened to his bride? Who/what is responsible for this change?
11. Can the speaker’s experience be generalized?
12. If you have read *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (or other Hardy novels), can you recognize similar plot themes in this novel?

### **“A Trampwoman’s Tragedy”**

1. What is added by the inclusion of a specific date for the poem’s events?
2. How do this poem’s form, shifting line lengths and meter contribute to its message? What is added by the use of the first person? What sad tale does it relate? What cues indicate that the speaker’s story will end badly?
3. What is added by the descriptors “fancy-man” and “jeering John”? By the use of rural dialect?
4. What are some of the effects of the repetition of phrases?
5. What motive does the speaker give for lying to her “fancy-man”? In what setting do they have their fatal falling out?
6. Who is “Mother Lee,” and what part does she play in all this?
7. Under what circumstances is the speaker and condemned man’s child born? What is the speaker’s future fate?
8. Why does the hanged man’s ghost appear? Is the speaker able to offer him and herself some comfort?
9. What is added to the poem by the fact that it is spoken by a homeless woman? How might the speaker’s social status have affected the reader’s response to the poem?
10. Does the poem play on stereotypes? Folk beliefs?
11. Is the reader expected to feel pity or condemnation for the speaker and her jealous menfolk? Does the poem fulfill the characteristic of a classic dramatic monologue in evoking a balance of sympathy and judgment?

### **“The God-Forgotten”**

1. Do the poem’s stanza form, meter and rhyme scheme reinforce its meaning?
2. What is added to the poem by the use of a question and answer form? What are some unexpected features of this imaginary dialogue?
3. What are some doctrinally unorthodox features of the God presented? (not omniscient, limited of recall, somewhat remote)
4. According to him, what had been “God’s” relationship to the human race? Why had he lost interest in the denizens of earth? Why does he no longer hear any messages from earth?
5. By contrast, what is his relationship to other planets/habitations? What does he find arrogant about the claims of this “tainted ball”?
6. What does “God” claim to be his response to all life? (“Not to Mend/ For Me could mean but Not to Know”) What help does he allegedly send to earth?
7. What new revelations occur in the final stanza? Does the speaker expect a Messenger to appear?
8. How would you describe the poem’s tone? Its view of religious belief?

### **“The Self-Unseeing”**

1. What does the poem seem to describe? Whose were the “dead feet,” and who had played the violin by the fire?
2. What is emphasized in the description of the “ancient floor,” “foreworn and hollowed and thin,” and “former door”?
3. What effect is created by the speaker’s oblique description of himself and his parents? What do we know about the speaker’s childhood?
4. What is added to/subtracted from the poem by its final line? Does it change retrospectively our reading of the earlier scene? How do you interpret the fact that all three of the scene’s participants were “looking away”?
5. What is noticeable about the poem’s stanza form, meter and rhymes? What do these contribute to its final meaning?

### **“His Immortality”**

1. How do the stanza form and meter contribute to the poem’s meaning?
2. Who is the speaker, and what progression/regression does he observe? What is his response to these changes?
3. What significant repetitions help provide the poem’s structure?
4. What physical imagery is used to describe the diminution of the dead man’s memory? The aging of the speaker?
5. Where does the speaker feel the last memories of the dead one survives? Is this a comforting thought or an ominous one?
6. Of the poems “I looked up from my writing,” “I Was the Midmost,” “Hap,” “Afterwards,” “Snow in the Suburbs,” “In a Wood,” choose as many as you can for group discussion. For each, please discuss its formal features and their appropriateness; its relation to beliefs and intellectual currents of the time; its meaning, including ironies and ambiguities; and its effectiveness as a poem.