



Title	Hardy's Last Novel? : An Analysis of the Revision in The Well-Beloved
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Citation	Osaka Literary Review. 2006, 45, p. 69-86
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/25312
rights	
Note	

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Hardy's Last Novel? : An Analysis of the Revision in *The Well-Beloved*

Noriko Asahata

Jude the Obscure (published in November 1895) is generally regarded as Thomas Hardy's last novel; however, strictly speaking, *The Well-Beloved* is actually his 'last' novel, in two senses. In one sense, it is his 'last' published novel. The previous version of *The Well-Beloved* was entitled *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, which was published weekly in serial form from 1 October to 17 December 1892 in the *Illustrated London News*. After being revised greatly, *The Well-Beloved* was newly published in book form by Osgood and McIlvaine on 16 March 1897, which is the definitive text we can read now. This was two years after the first publication of *Jude* in book form: we can, therefore, consider *The Well-Beloved* to be his 'last' novel. In the other sense, it is his 'last' novel-writing as formal work apart from three short stories ("The Grave by the Handpost" 1897, and "The Changed Man" and "Enter a Dragon" 1899. [Purdy 152, 153, 156]).

After he established his position as a serial novelist, Hardy presented his work to the public in two successive ways. First, it appeared in serial installments in a periodical, and then in volume form. And he revised the periodical text for book form during the interval. The period between them was less than a year; however only in this case, about four years went by before he picked up the periodical text again. Anne C. Pilgrim refers to the reason for the unusual interval as follows:

Early in 1892, when Harper and Brothers had already secured the rights to the American serial publication, they conveyed through their London agents Osgood and McIlvaine their readiness both to publish it in book form and to allow Hardy the opportunity to revise it. . . . while agreeing that Harper and Brothers might publish the American edition of the volume form, and even discussing possible terms, he [Hardy] stipulated that "the story being short and slight and written entirely with a view to serial publication, it may be found upon consideration to be inadvisable in the interest of future novels to issue this as a book at all; hence I reserve the right to withhold it in that form either altogether, or until the story can be re-written." (Pilgrim 127)

Then, "in the last months of 1896 he agreed — whether at his own suggestion or that of his publishers is not known — to revise *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* for publication" as the seventeenth volume in the uniform edition by MacIlvaine. It is difficult to identify when Hardy started revising it; however at least, we can find two useful facts to guess the period in his *Collected Letters*. On December 30 1896, he told Florence Henniker: "I too have been pressed in sending off the copy of the Well Beloved to the printers", and on January 24 1897, he again wrote to her: "I have to-day finished the correction of the little sketch or story of *The Well Beloved*." The period he practically worked on revising it, thus, would be defined from late December in 1896 to late January in 1897. And therefore, we can regard the revision of *The Well-Beloved* as his 'last' novel-writing.

Up to the present, many critics have discussed why Hardy abandoned his novel-writing, but there has been a tendency to discuss the problem mainly in *Jude*, and to neglect *The Well-*

Beloved as 'another' last novel or a mere variant of the periodical version. It is probably because Hardy himself said that he would never write his novels, due to the extraordinary misapprehension of *Jude* in postscript which was added to *Jude* in 1912. Here, he clearly declared it in his own words: "Thereupon many uncursed me, and the matter ended, the only effect of it on human conduct that I could discover being its effect on myself — the experience completely curing me of further interest in novel-writing." However, we should not overlook the following account: "curiously enough, a reprint the next year of a fantastic tale that had been published in a family paper some time before, drew down upon my head a continuation of the same sort of invective from several quarters." As we see, he also referred to the case of *The Well-Beloved*.

Although it was welcomed by reviewers in contrast to the predecessor, only one extremely negative anonymous review, "Thomas Hardy, Humorist" in the London *World*, attacked it on March 24 1897. The reviewer criticized *The Well-Beloved* on the grounds that "Of all forms of sex-mania in fiction we have no hesitation in pronouncing the most unpleasant to be the Wessex-mania of Mr. Thomas Hardy." This remarkable abuse depressed him unexpectedly. According to his *Collected Letters*, Hardy showed the following account of a barrage of hostile critics on *Jude* in his letter to Sir George Douglas: "I have really not been much upset by the missiles heaved at the poor book . . . The truth is that the author's means sh[oul]d be judged by the light of his aim & end" on January 5 1896. On the contrary, on March 29 1897, he confessed the above-mentioned depression to Lady Jeune: "I have been much surprised & distressed by a ferocious attack in The World on my poor little book . . . After such a cruel misrepresentation I feel inclined to say I will never write another line." Later on, on July 3 1897, Hardy replied to

Florence Henniker who asked about his latest novel-writing: "Not only is it untrue that I have a novel ready, but also that I have changed my style, am in doubt about a title, &c. &c. Indeed I have not given a single thought to novels of my own or other peoples since I finished the corrections of the W. B."

After all, did Hardy really get to thinking about resigning novel-writing just after the "matter" of *Jude* as used to be said? It gets to be more doubtful. Or rather, I insist we should inquire why Hardy ceased novel-writing with *The Well-Beloved*. His reason for resigning novel-writing is still ambiguous in his uncertain aim of revising it. The purpose of this paper is to examine what Hardy intends to achieve by correcting *The Well-Beloved*. In the present paper, I would like to develop my discussion by using the comparison of the periodical text and the revised text, since it is the most effective way to trace his artistic effort.

As a beginning, I venture to say that the plot of *The Well-Beloved* is not so far from the predecessor. Indeed it is usually distinguished from *Jude*, since Hardy put them into different categories. When he categorized all his Wessex-Novels into three groups on "General Preface to the Novels and Poems" in 1912, *Jude* was put into the group of "Novels of Character and Environment" which requires "a verisimilitude in general treatment and detail," and *The Well-Beloved* into the group of "Romances and Fantasies" in which "verisimilitude in the sequence of events" is "subordinated to the said aim." However, some critics point out that there are resemblances between *Jude* and *The Well-Beloved* in plot, characters, and so on. Ingham, for instance, says that "*Jude*, while overtly different, shares a common matrix with the other two [*The Well-Beloved* and *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*]" (Ingham 49).

Moreover, I would like to pick up Hardy's recognition of Sue's

character after the publication of *Jude*, which indicates a connection with his next novel: "one of her reasons for fearing the marriage ceremony is that she [Sue] fears it w[oul]d be breaking faith with Jude to withhold herself at pleasure, or altogether, after it . . . This has tended to keep his passion as hot at the end as at the beginning, & helps break his heart. He has never really possessed her as freely as he desired" (*Collected Letters* vol.2-99). Once casting an eye over *The Well-Beloved*, Pierston wishes to keep his passion as hot at the end as at the beginning, and he is also, like Jude, tantalized by his "Visionary Ideal", in other words his "Well-Beloved" that he has "never really possessed". Although the description, such as the degree of verisimilitude, is different from *Jude*, it is true that Hardy would still pursue the struggle between flesh and sprite of Jude Fawley in Pierston's story.

Regarding Sue's fear of marriage ceremony, 'marriage' works as an antagonistic force to create a conflict between flesh and sprit in these three novels. And moreover, both in *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* and in *The Well-Beloved*, it gets to be more complicated matter, since whether to marry or not is closely associated with the cause of their different endings. In the periodical text, Jocelyn Pearston (the protagonists' name in the periodical) married twice; he married Marcia on impulse in youth when he was twenty, and after being estranged from her, he persuaded Avice's granddaughter to accept his proposal because of wealth. Moreover, this second marriage was bigamous because he didn't divorce from his former wife formally. These elements, so-called 'wrong marriage', were excised from *The Well-Beloved*. Jocelyn Pierston (the protagonists' name in the revision) got married to Marcia when he was sixty, and it was the first and only marriage throughout his life. Besides, he decided this marriage on the basis of friendship. As for the ending, then,

originally in the last part of the periodical text, Pearston committed suicide because of his despair when he realized his second marriage would lead to tragic disaster: "His wife's [Avice's granddaughter] corporeal frame was upstairs: where her spiritual part lurked he could not tell" (141). It was the climax of Pearston's story. On the contrary, such vital plot of 'marriage' was removed from Pierston's story, and because of the omission, Pearston's ending as attempted suicide was no more fit for *The Well-Beloved*, thus the later part of *The Well-Beloved*, especially its ending, was greatly revised.

The omission of two immoral marriages from the periodical text undoubtedly reflects Hardy's experience of hostile critics, since 'marriage' was its most controversial issue. Pilgrim describes it as "Hardy's scheme of purifying *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*" (Pilgrim 133). Ingham also refers to such difference between them: "during the revision for book publication more was changed than the plot. The alterations to that already removed much sexual reference along with Pearston's two marriages" (Ingham 17). However, I doubt if the purpose of Hardy in making some alterations to the periodical text was to meet critical demands. In my opinion, the omission would indicate not his self-censorship but his art. Indeed Hardy treated marriage system in *Jude*; however, we should notice that he used it objectively as a factor to make "a deadly war waged between flesh and spirit". The "story of Jude", he wrote to Edward Clodd on 10 November 1895, "makes only an objective use of marriage & its superstitions as one, & only one, of the antagonistic forces in the tragedy." He also gave his personal opinion to Sir George Douglas: "I feel that a bad marriage is one of the direst things on earth, & one of the cruellest things, but beyond that my opinions on the subject are vague enough" on November 20. Therefore, we may say that Hardy uses its unfortunate aspect as

an antagonistic force in his plots. Also, if he learned it was an extremely offensive subject for the reader, and therefore *Jude* wasn't judged "by the light of his aim & end", he would seek more appropriate antagonistic force instead of marriage, since what he treated in *Jude* was not the "marriage system" itself but to describe the grappling with the reality between flesh and spirit.

For that point of view, let us then consider how *The Well-Beloved* is changed by the omission of the marriage plot. The story is constructed of three parts: the first part "A young man of twenty," the second part "A young man of forty," and the final part "A young man turned sixty," which was entitled "A young man of fifty-nine" in the periodical. These three parts are naturally constructed where each episode corresponds to each love affair of three Avices (Avice the first, her daughter and her granddaughter). Then, in the periodical text, the first part ends with the funeral ceremony of the original Avice. It seems to naturally correspond to the end of the original love affair; however, Hardy moved this ending into an earlier chapter at the revision. The first part of 1892 ends at chapter XII, "She Becomes an Inaccessible Ghost", whereas *The Well-Beloved* at chapter IX, "Familiar Phenomena in the Distance", and the funeral of Avice recedes into the second part. As regards the symmetry of three parts, such reconstruction of the story seems to be unnecessary for Pierston's story. Why does Hardy need to move the end of the first part into the earlier chapter? Answering this question may give us a clue to understand what Hardy chooses as an appropriate antagonistic force instead of a marriage plot.

In *The Well-Beloved*, Pierston explains Somers the agony to be fascinated with a Visional Ideal at the end of the first part: "As flesh she [The Well-Beloved] dies daily, like the Apostle's

corporeal self; because when I grapple with the reality she's no longer in it, so that I cannot stick to one incarnation if I would" (213). Somers, who is one of his friends among his artistic society, takes it less seriously and answers "Wait till you are older". It is the last sentence of chapter IX. Until the end of the first part, Pierston believed "As flesh she dies daily" and it was "Familiar Phenomena" in his fantasy; however, when Avice, who had been his mature friend and expected betrothed, died, her eternal "absence of the corporeal matter" converts his prior fantasy. His optimistic belief in the Well-Beloved that he showed at the end of chapter IX is completely broken, and he realized the "truth" when he got older as if Somers predicted it. Avice who turns out to be his definitive "Well-Beloved," could never be revived in his future.

We shall discuss this point in detail. Indeed the death of Avice is the most important event in both stories because the "agony" of his fantastic temperament, which is explained in an earlier chapter in his words, "Each shape, or embodiment, has been a temporary residence only, which she [The Well-Beloved] has entered, lived in a while, and made her exit from, leaving the substance, so far as I have been concerned, a corpse, worse luck!" (200), is actually realized in Avice's corpse. Until Pierston heard the news of her death, he has always followed his imaginative goddess which has perfect beauty. His passion to follow the Well-Beloved, thus, can be called an idealizing passion to admire the impossible perfection. After death, however, Pierston changes his mode; he turns to pursuit of the image of dead Avice, and then he loves her daughter at the second part, and next twenty years later her granddaughter also: "The soul of Avice — the only woman he had *never* loved of those who had loved him — surrounded him like a firmament. Art drew near to him in the person of one of the most distinguished of portrait

painters; but there was only one painter for Jocelyn — his own memory" (230). After her death, he tends to show a passion not merely to idealize the impossible perfection but to unify the image under his idealized memory. He persistently admires the original Avice when she was nineteen, and in his loving, both his self-image and her image would never age: "In his heart, he was not a day older than when he had wooed the mother at the daughter's present age. His record moved on with the years, his sentiments stood still" (245). His later pursuit of the Well-Beloved, therefore, can be regarded as a passion to idealize his memory, or the fixed time.

Here, we get nearer to the point to understand why Hardy removes the end of the first part to chapter IX. "A Sketch of a Temperament" is the subtitle which is attached to both stories; however, how Hardy sketches a "Temperament" is greatly changed. At the revision, Hardy focuses on the death of Avice rather than the fantastic idea itself, and it means changing how he sketched "Temperament", since it got to be more subjective matter which is connected with not only his innate temperament but also his own memory. Without understanding the change of Pierston's "Temperament", it can't be fully understood why Hardy brings the end of the first part into chapter IX.

The funeral of Avice originates the moment he loves her: "He instinctively knew that it was none other than Avice whom he was seeing interred; *his* Avice, as he now began presumptuously to call her" (234). The meaning of the event or its importance, however, is fairly changed between both plots as I mentioned above. This scene is merely a familiar phenomenon for Pearston; on the other hand, it is the decisive event which he had never seen before for Pierston, and it affects his definitive "Temperament". Hence, it may be assumed that Hardy has to

reflect this change of mode on the funeral scene.

There is evidence to support the assumption. Indeed the description of the event, especially in Pierston's eyes seeing the coffin, is greatly changed in its mode. We can see the change in comparing the two funeral scenes (all the underlines mine):

[1892]: Among the graves moved the form of the man clad in a white sheet, which the wind blew aside every now and then, revealing dark trousers under. Near him moved six men bearing a long box, and two or three persons in black followed. The coffin, with its twelve legs, looked like a large insect crawling across the isle, under whose belly the flashing lights from the sea and school of mackerel were reflected; a fishing-boat, far out in the Channel, being momentarily discernible through the opening. (60)

[1897]: Among the graves moved the form of the man clothed in a white sheet, which the wind blew and flapped sadly every now and then. Near him moved six men bearing a long box, and two or three persons in black followed. The coffin, with its twelve legs, crawled across the isle, while around and beneath it the flashing lights from the sea and the school of mackerel were reflected; a fishing-boat, far out in the Channel, being momentarily discernible under the coffin also. (234)

They are apparently different between the eyes of Pearston and of Pierston. The difference is that Pierston sees the coffin with respect to her death and Pearston doesn't. In this scene, Pearston/Pierston sees the funeral ceremony in the distance. His fantasy, "she . . . made her exit from, leaving the substance, so far as I have been concerned, a corpse", is realized then.

Pearston, on the one hand, sees her coffin as mere substance which has already lost its dignity. He compares her coffin carried

by six men to "a large insect." The legs of the bearers, "dark trousers" under the coffin, also correspond to the legs of the creature. In his eyes, the funeral of Avice is no less than "a racking spectacle", since it seems to him that Avice degrades herself into "a large insect". Pierston, on the other hand, doesn't compare her coffin to such creature; or rather, under his gaze, the contrast between a white sheet and the followers in black is getting fused into the surrounding fantastic spectacle, "the flashing lights from the sea and the school of mackerel", behind the coffin. In his sight, the coffin of Avice is bathed in full of flashing light, and it seems to construct a fantastic spectacle as a whole. To sum up, while Pearston sees the moment that the Well-Beloved made her exit from Avice's body, Pierston feels that the Well-Beloved is now incarnated in Avice's corpse.

It follows from what has been seen that the deciding factor of death in Avice results from the revision. Basically, she is one of these who Pierston could never have possessed, since "She had been another man's wife almost the whole time since he was estranged from her, and now she was a corpse" (231). There are two barriers opposing his passion for her: One is that she is married, and the other is that she is dead. At first, in terms of the barrier of marriage, Pierston describes his experience admiring a matron as his Well-Beloved that "she [The Well-Beloved] had chosen this tantalizing situation of an inaccessible matron's form" (202). And also, another "absurdity", that is, Avice's death, works as the factor to keep his passion hot: "the absurdity did not make his grief the less: and the consciousness of the intrinsic, almost radiant, purity of this new-sprung affection for a flown spirit forbade him to check it. The flesh was absent altogether; it was love rarefied and refined to its highest attar. He had felt nothing before" (231). Hence, both "death" and "marriage" work as the antagonistic forces to keep his passion as hot

at the end as at the beginning. But we must not forget that the plots of "marriage" couldn't be expected fully in Pierston's story; therefore, we may see that Hardy would take notice of the function of "death" in the original Avice at the revision.

Her death becomes the vital point for constructing "an irresistibly fascinating combination of tangible flesh and intangible sprite" in his loving. As J. Hillis Miller points out in his *Distance and Desire*, it is "the power of death to renew love," which is also "one of the most pervasive motifs in the lyrics, for example in the poems Hardy wrote about his first wife after her death" (Miller 169). "The theme of repetition in *The Well-Beloved*", Miller says, "is the fullest exploration of that law of mediated desire in Hardy's work which dictates that love will be inflamed by whatever separates the lover from his goal while at the same time providing him indirect access to her" (Miller 175). This bound of death, however, seems to be alternative to the bound of marriage to provide Pierston indirect access to Avice. What has to be noticed, as we saw at the beginning of this paper, is that Hardy had no alternative but to choose the antagonistic force of death in the revision of *The Well-Beloved*, and also it is a more complicated situation that other revisions do not offer.

Having made this distinction, we may further inquire what the difference between "an inaccessible matron" and "an inaccessible ghost" is. At first, I would like to regard the following recollection of the experience that Pierston abandoned in order to commit suicide when he failed in love:

I went away to the edge of the harbour, intending to put an end to myself there and then. But I had been told that the crabs had been found clinging to the dead faces of persons who had fallen in thereabout, leisurely eating them, and the

idea of such unpleasant contingency deterred me. I should state that the marriage of my Beloved concerned me little; it was her departure that broke my heart. (201-2)

As we see, it is not the force of marriage but the force of death in his imagination which changes his decision. Later, when he hears of Aivce's death by letter, his sentiment is described as follows:

All that was eminent in European surgery addressed him in the person of that harmless and unassuming fogey whose hands had been inside the bodies of hundreds of living men; but the lily-white corpse of an obscure country-girl [Avice] chilled the interest of discourse with such a king of operators. (230)

Above all, I would like to emphasize that the bound of death works only in his imagination in each case, and Avice's corpse can achieve any sensations beyond the bound of death only in his imagination.

The force of death in his recollection is linked with something previously mentioned. We noted a little earlier that Hardy focuses on the death of Avice, and also on Pierston's later pursuit of the Well-Beloved, which can be called a passion to idealize his memory of Avice. It would be better to say that Pierston will love Avice forever because of her death, and therefore he struggles with the reality between her "corpse" in the present and his "memory" in the past. Consequently, there is a gap between his physical passion in the present and his ideal memory of the past. In the ghost form of Avice, then, there is a gap. More precisely, in the physical sense, there is an absent element in her "corpse" to feel warmth. The element to stir up his sensation, as we saw above, can only exist in his recollection. If he had no certain

memories of her "tangible flesh" in life, it required more "imaginative feeling", in Hardy's words "the genuine artistic temperament", to revive her warmth in his recollection. The difference between "an inaccessible matron" and "an inaccessible ghost", thus, strengthens his imagination to bridge the gap between his physical passion in the present and his ideal memory of the past, since a matron can belong to part of the material order, but a ghost can not.

Keeping this in mind, let us consider the following revision. It is one of the most noticeable scenes to note a bridge between sensation and recollection. After the funeral, Pierston is drawn into sleep for a while leaning over the wall of the church. In his drowsy mind, he loses "count of time and consciousness of realities." And when he senses somebody standing beside the grave of Avice, he gets confused as if dead Avice herself stood there. Immediately, Pierston realized that this was impossible, and actually it was the figure of her daughter who visited her grave (all the underlines mine):

[1892]: "I must have been asleep!" he said. / The outline of the grave was as distinct as before he had dozed, but nobody stood there. Yet she had seemed so real. Pearston resolutely dismissed the strange impression, arguing that even if the information sent him of Avice's death should have been false — a thing incredible — that sweet friend of his youth, despite the transfiguring effects of moonlight, would not have looked the same as she had appeared nineteen or twenty years ago. (65)

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The first thing that one notices is that there is a decisive difference in the consciousness of reality. Clearly, Pearston tries to recover his actual perception by confirming the distinction of the "outline of the grave", but Pierston doesn't. Then, the confusion of feeling that "she had seemed so real" leads Pearston / Pierston to "the strange impression" that Avice was not dead; however, he dismisses this because if so her appearance would have aged. The important point to notice next is the difference between their reasons; while Pearston "resolutely" dismisses such an impression, Pierston "however" dismisses it. For Pearston, it means seeing the aged Avice who would be about forty, same age as Pearston. On the other hand, for Pierston, it means to feel her as vivid as his idealized memory as if he saw an illusion with his present perception.

Here, we notice that the question arises as to what is reality; is it to keep the causality in the physical world, or is it to feel the vividness through sensory perception? Following the above-mentioned revision, it is the fact it happens in the 'physical' world for Pearston. Likewise, it is vividness in the 'present' for Pierston.

It is noteworthy that, on January 27 1897, Hardy wrote the following account in his diary: "Today has length, breadth, thickness, colour, smell, voice. As soon as it becomes *yesterday* it is a thin layer among many layers, without substance, colour, or articulate sound." The date is only three days after Hardy has "finished the correction" on January 24 1897. As we see, at the revision of *The Well-Beloved*, the matter of physical sense was getting closer to the sense of time for Hardy. The struggle

between flesh and spirit that he described in *The Well-Beloved*, then, becomes a more complex subject, since it is not a simple conflict between the physical world and the metaphysical world, but a grappling with both a practical and an abstract notion of 'time'.

We can now propose an answer to the question that we posed at the beginning; why did Hardy give up his novel-writing after the revision of *The Well-Beloved*? In this paper, I examined Hardy's artistic effort to push the envelope in his novel-writing, and compared the revision with the original. This is the exchange of the marriage plot for the death plot, and also the reconstruction of the relation between sensation and recollection in Pierston's story. In my conclusion, I insist that this is the reason for making a sudden anti-climax in *The Well-Beloved* as in the following abandonment of Hardy's novel-writing. As Gillian Beer points out, "The gap between sensation and recall was the problem and the poignancy of narrative for Hardy. . . . His writing seeks the palpable. It is in the present moment that human knowledge is realized and human happiness is experienced. The present is part of the material order as the past can no longer be" (Beer 227). The "palpable" object is vital to provide "the poignancy of narrative" throughout his novel-writing, but it is necessary to follow the material order because of its causality. Therefore, without the causality of "palpable" object, Hardy didn't know how he should stop his novel-writing. I emphasize the importance of *The Well-Beloved* because it is not only his 'last' novel but also a 'unique' novel in which Hardy offered a modernistic sense of 'time'.

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