RESPONDING IN NEW WAYS: THE HARDY SOCIETY’S SCHOOLS ESSAY COMPETITION

It is some years since the Hardy Society ran a writing competition for students in secondary school. In 2019, to complement the National Trust’s poetry competition for young people, we decided to hold an essay competition. Thanks are due to the English Association, the National Association of Teachers of English, Prof. Angelique Richardson, and many others who helped promote the initiative, and to our two judges, one a teacher of English literature with more than thirty years’ experience of working with students at A-level, the other an early career researcher who has studied various aspects of the intersection of Hardy and education. I’m delighted to share the results.

Honourable Mention Alas that there could only be one winner! The judges awarded Honourable Mention to two essays. The first came from Olivia Eden, a student at St John’s Marlborough in Wiltshire. Olivia’s essay related Hardy’s poem ‘The Ruined Maid’ to debates about women and sexuality in the Victorian period. The judges observed that ‘knowledge of these historical contexts’ was ‘a real strength of this essay’, which made ‘some pleasing links between the form and content of Hardy’s writing’, for instance likening the poem’s rhyme scheme to a friendship. In some ways, commented one of the judges, the ‘seriousness’ of the address meant that ‘the comic and ironic nature of the poem’ did not come across. Nevertheless the essay’s insights - for example, that although sexual experiences were never without consequences for Victorian women, not all women were the same, and not all were devastated by what life threw at them - were valuable. The judges admired the attention to the form and metre of the poem and concluded: ‘this essay’s lively historicist approach shows promise’.

The second Honourable Mention went to Joseph Messenger of King’s College Taunton, whose essay focused on ‘After a Journey’ in relation to the death of Hardy’s first wife, Emma. Although the judges cautioned against too easy an assumption of the relationship between the poem and the author’s biography, they were pleased to read an essay that ‘responds in new ways to a theme that so often intrigues readers of this poem: the division between present feeling and past memory’. One of the judges was particularly struck by the essay’s observation that Hardy was ‘aware of the longevity of objects such as the countryside and coastline, but also the expiration of people and their memories’. The essay demonstrated ‘good knowledge of the wider critical and literary context’, with the views of the literary scholar Tim Armstrong appearing alongside relevant comparisons to other Hardy texts. The judges acknowledged that ‘After a Journey’ is ‘a difficult poem to analyse’, and felt much credit was due for ‘taking it on’. Although ‘close analysis’ proved difficult to sustain for the second half of the poem, the judges found ‘much to enjoy and admire’ in Joe’s essay.

Winner Congratulations to our competition winner, Lucy MacGillivray, also studying at King’s College Taunton, whose essay sought to evaluate the importance of ‘The Voice’ within Hardy’s exploration of high emotion and memory in Poems of 1912-13. While the grounding of these poems in Hardy’s own experience is wisely advanced as a possibility only, not a fact (‘the series [...] may reflect some autobiographical aspects from Hardy’s own life after the death of his first wife’), Lucy nonetheless suggests that the sequence as a whole can be read as ‘Hardy exploring possibilities for controlling his grief’ at the loss of Emma. Lucy argues that ‘The Voice’ tracks the grieving speaker’s transition from ‘confusion to acceptance’ as it ‘restlessly moves between the recent past and present, seeking comfort and reassurance for the future, but more importantly emphasising the depth of emotion’ that has ‘overtaken’ the speaker. Lucy points out how the poem, after a dramatic opening, works to establish the speaker’s ‘credibility’.
through the ‘calmer and more collected perspective’ of the second stanza, which has the effect of ‘reassuring the reader of the security of [the speaker’s] mind’. This makes the presence of the ‘supernatural’ element harder to dismiss. In a phrase highlighted by one of the judges, Lucy observes that ‘the possibility of the supernatural [...] as a method to relive the past and sustain a connection to it’ is a recurring theme in Hardy. The decision to place ‘The Voice’ in the context of Poems of 1912-13 necessitates some critical comment on other poems in the sequence; Lucy’s essay touches on ‘The Going’, ‘After a Journey’, ‘Beeny Cliff’, and ‘At Castle Boterel’.

The judges found that Lucy’s essay ‘maintained a high level of discussion throughout, and offered a controlled, sophisticated and sustained appreciation both of details and of the poem as a whole’. The essay was ‘a thorough and mature reading’ of ‘The Voice’ that showed ‘subtlety in distinguishing between Hardy and the speaker of the poem’. ‘The claim that the supernatural provides a means for the poem to “relive the past and sustain a connection to it” is intriguing and well supported by choice quotations from the text,’ wrote one of the judges. Even where our second judge ‘disagreed with [Lucy’s] phrasing or interpretation’, the disagreement prompted the desire for more ‘dialogue’: ‘Your essay makes us want to discuss all these things further - good!’

The prize for the winning entry is divided between the student and their school library, with £50 going to each. Please watch for details of future competitions on our website, on social media, and in the Journal.

Thank you again to everyone who supported this year’s Schools Essay Competition, and especially to the entrants, who represent the next generation of Hardy scholars! We hope they will stay in touch with the Thomas Hardy Society as they pursue their studies.

Andrew Hewitt (Student Representative, Thomas Hardy Society)

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This volume of Issues in English arises from a workshop on the theme of ‘Teaching Literature about the World Wars and the Holocaust’, held at the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum at the University of Exeter in September 2018. The workshop was part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded Teaching and Learning War Research Network, led by Professor Catriona Pennell (University of Exeter), and co-organised by Pennell.