Round and round she goes, where she stops, nobody knows. Death is inevitable and the when, where, and why can plague us till the end. As if that is not enough to consider, we are faced with yet another puzzle: What happens after we die? It is an age-old question that no person alive can truly answer. Does one just cease to exist completely or do they remain in spirit? Authors Thomas Hardy and William Wordsworth attempt to answer this question through their use of poetry. Both men have contrasting views on the topic. Thomas Hardy views death as a final end, while William Wordsworth sees death as a continuance. Hardy’s *Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?* and Wordsworth’s *We Are Seven* display opposing viewpoints on death and remembrance. Both authors also use symbolism, where Hardy’s dog does not care about death and Wordworth’s little girl views death as continuous, as a way to convey each author’s inner feelings on death.

Hardy’s dual understanding of time as preserver and destroyer through his idea of time as continuity, integral to the concept of time as a preserver (Osborne 643). In Hardy’s opinion, time is inescapable and it will conquer all; time always wins because it does not stop for anyone. This helps explain why he takes the “cold shoulder” approach when speaking of death in *Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?*; there is no point in being sad and remembering the past because time will pass and we will all move on. There have also been suggestions that Hardy’s finest novels were the result of a tragic vision caused in part by an age which depressed him, explaining why
he refuses to remember and dwell on the past. Hardy was faced with his own mortality at birth. In fact, had it not been for common sense of the estimable woman who attended as monthly nurse, he might never have walked the earth, as everyone thought Hardy had died at birth (Hardy, 15). Death seems to linger over him and one can tell he has inner struggles concerning death itself, specifically through *Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave*.

In Thomas Hardy’s *Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave*, death is viewed as a final end. The first stanza of the poem has the narrator asking if his “loved one” is digging on his grave, to which he gets a response of “no” (Hardy L.2,3). The “loved one” in this portion of the poem suggests that this person’s identity is the narrator’s widowed husband. The woman gets the response that he has simply went on to remarry another woman. The husband seems to have no feelings left for his late wife, as he has moved on and found a new woman; his life goes on and he does not dwell on the past.

The second stanza refers to a family member of “nearest and dearest kin” (l. 8). Though we are not told which family member the narrator is referring to, we can deduct that this person meant a great deal to the narrator when she was alive. Apparently the feeling was not mutual, because she gets the response of “What use! What good will planting flowers produce? No tendance of her mound can loose her spirit from Death’s gin” (l. 9-12). Flowers are pretty when they are alive and tended to; however, there is really no need to plant them when they will just die in a few days. The flowers are a symbol for life, as they grow, blossom by reaching peak, and slowly die. Once a flower is dead, no one feels sadness because another will soon replace it. This is similar for humans. We grow and die also, and when we die, there will be a replacement of someone new in the world.
The third stanza has the narrator asking if her enemy is digging on her grave. At this point, the narrator seems to be desperate for attention and remembrance, as she is asking if her enemy has come to visit her gravesite. She gets the response: “She thought you no more worth her hate, and cares not where you lie” (l. 17-18). In this stanza, we get a truthful answer as to why no one is visiting this poor woman. The answer is simple: no one is digging upon her grave because no one really cares for her anymore. The approach taken in this stanza is one of *out of sight, out of mind*. The enemy has obviously lost all feelings toward this woman because her (the enemy’s) problem has been taken care of, so of course the enemy is going to continue her life without looking back.

The identity of what’s digging on the grave is revealed in the fourth stanza. We learn the dog is the culprit of the digging, which makes sense because if a spouse is not visiting, flowers are not being planted, or the enemy is not appearing, then it must be some sort of animal. The fifth stanza shows the woman rejoicing that her dog has come to visit, but the reader can sense her desperation within the lines of the poem. Anything or anybody could be digging on her grave and she would be happy because all she desires is proof that something or somebody still cares about her. In the final stanza, the reader learns that the dog has not come to visit his owner, but that he dug upon her grave “to bury a bone, in case I should be hungry near this spot… I am sorry, but I quite forgot it was your resting-place” (l. 32-33, 35-36). The dog proves to be most honest in this poem, as he bluntly says that he forgot where his owner was buried. The dog is somewhat representative of the whole; he is not visiting the grave to meet with the person in it, instead, he is solely using the grave to be beneficial to him.

The dog is a symbol for Thomas Hardy, himself in *An, Are You Digging on My Grave?*. Thomas Hardy views death as finality in this poem. We can see this through the mentioning of
the husband, kin, enemy, and dog. None of these have come to dig upon the grave because each is busy living their own lives. The theme of the poem is to live life, as each of these people, and the dog, demonstrate. They are not pausing life to visit with the dead. Hardy is very similar to the dog in that he, too, also views death the same way: it is no big deal because death is a final end and it happens regardless. The dead have no more importance in this life because they no longer exist and there is no reason to dwell on something that is no longer real. In the poem, the dog serves as a constant reminder that nobody cares about the dead, which reiterates Hardy’s point.

Though death is also a focal point in William Wordsworth’s *We Are Seven*, it provides a contrasting view on the idea death itself. While Thomas Hardy approaches death as absolute and final, William Wordsworth takes a more gentle and eternal route in the form of a “little Cottage girl” (Wordsworth, L 5). The little girl in the poem could perhaps be symbolizing Wordsworth himself, by representing his view of death and life after death. Similar to the little girl, Wordsworth, too, experienced death at a young age. His mother died when he was eight, and he and his brothers were separated from their sister to be reared by grandparents. Wordsworth’s father died when William was thirteen (McGhee 2009).

Ironically, Wordsworth experienced his first familial death at the same age as the little girl from *We Are Seven*. It was from this time on that possibly, William truly learned about loneliness and how to make this loneliness useful for him. When he was alone he was free to imagine and feel things that others didn’t. And he, too, learned that he was never really alone when he had nature around him (l.iu 5). Since Wordsworth was young when he experienced tragedy, he is possibly using the little girl from the poem to express his inner feelings about death and how death does not necessarily signify it is the end.
The first stanza tells us that the girl “feels its life in every limb”, meaning she is full of life and energy and that she enjoys every bit of her life (Wordsworth, L 3). The second stanza introduces us to more detail, saying “she was eight years old...her hair was thick with many a curl”, telling us she is very young and innocent, perhaps lending to why she considers her dead siblings to be living (l. 6-7). Both of these stanzas provide descriptions which could be representative of Wordsworth.

The next stanza adds to the girl’s physical appearance and intensifies the girl’s innocence as “she was wildly clad: her eyes were fair, and very fair” (l. 10-11). When one is “wildly clad”, we can imagine mismatched clothing, holes, rips, or dirtiness. All of these lend to the idea this girl is young and carefree. This could also be used to describe Wordsworth as a boy who liked to be carefree. In the fourth stanza, the narrator asks “sisters and brothers, little Maid, how many may you be?” (l. 13-14). This opens as the bread and butter of the poem, as it creates a seemingly never ending conversation, similar to “Who’s On First?”. The girl replies “seven in all” and the conversation proceeds in an attempt to reveal the girl’s logic (l. 15).

We learn in stanza six that two of them “in the church yard lie”, so she is fully aware that two of her siblings are dead (l. 21). Without the two dead siblings, there are actually only five children left. The girl refuses to omit her two dead siblings, as she still considers them a part of the family, even though they are not tangibly present, thus representing the idea that death is continuous. She even visits with them, saying, “there upon the ground I sit to sing a song to them” (l. 43-44). She visits their graves whenever she wants, which is on a regular basis because they lie only “twelve steps or more” from her mother’s door (l. 39). This could also be why she still considers them to be a part of the family: their resting places are so close, it is almost as if they are not even gone at all. So naturally, it is hard for the young girl to understand that her
siblings are gone when they literally remain so very close to her. Through this stanza, we learn that she is aware that her siblings are dead, but she still loves them and continues to have a connection with them.

For this little girl, death is not seen as the end of the world; she sees it as a continuance. In her mind, the only part missing is a physical existence. Wordsworth presents the suggestion that death is not the end and we should remember people always, even after they die. We must celebrate the dead and never forget them because they are with us always.

Both Thomas Hardy and William Wordsworth have backgrounds that lend to their beliefs on death. They use symbolism in their poems to display their own feelings on the topic. For example, in *Ah, Are You Digging on My Grave?*, Hardy expresses his view of death in the form of a dog. A dog is regarded as man’s best friend, yet the dog chooses a bone instead of a visit with his owner. The bone can be representative of life. The dog is able to move past death by getting sidetracked by this bone. Hardy is able to move past death because he gets sidetracked by life; he wants to live life instead of revisit the past. Wordsworth uses symbolism in the form of a young, eight year old girl in *We Are Seven*. We know that Wordsworth experienced the death of his mother at age eight, providing a more personal connection to the poem. He was young and likely unable to comprehend that death is the end of a person; people cannot physically return from death. On the opposite side, perhaps the girl is aware of the consequences death brings and she chooses to rise above the sorrow, remain strong, and allow memories and spirits to join her life’s journey. No matter which standpoint the authors make, it is important to mourn in a way that is comfortable for us. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. We cannot judge others’ situations, unless of course, we have walked a mile in their shoes…or so those “they” people say.
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