An Analysis of the Architectures in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles**

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Born in a family whose last four generations shared master-mason tradition, architect used to be a natural career for Thomas Hardy. Although Hardy chose to devote to literature at last, he was never fully away from this field. The traces could be found in many of his literary works with many evidences, including his masterpiece, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. This paper analyzes the meanings of the architectural elements employed in this novel, which are related to Hardy's own concern over church restoration movement in the Victorian Age, the arrangement of plot and the interaction with the characters.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, architecture

Introduction

Thomas Hardy is one of the greatest novelists in British literature. Although he had shown remarkable talent in writing when he was very young, the first job he chose to do was not a writer but an architect. As the son of a mason in Dorset, the architectural background seemed to enter into his blood and its connection never faded away in his whole lifetime. In order to support the family, from 1856 he was apprenticed to a local architect for six years. Now in Dorset County Museum, the visitors can still find the picture of gothic houses drawn by Hardy for his employers. When the contract expired, he worked as an assistant architect in London. It was also the beginning of Hardy's writing career. Although Hardy finally abandoned his plan to be an architect because of the growing reputation he won in novel-writing, as Michael Millgate (1999) recorded in "Thomas Hardy: the biographical sources", he "always valued his architectural background" (p. 7) and used his professional knowledge to personally design his own house, Max Gate, in Dorset, where he spent most of his late years.

Hardy carefully recorded his experience in both architecture and literature. The autobiography *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, which was published posthumously under his second wife's name, contained details from Hardy's diary regarding his apprentice experience in London. In his personal notebook, Hardy also left records regarding the communication with architectural organization at that time. Claudius Beatty's study *Thomas Hardy: Conservation Architect* contains collection of these letters and comments. It emphasizes Hardy's role as a vehement conservationist and his relationship with the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB).

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Most of the researchers believe that Hardy's architectural experience contributed to his literary writing. Some leading characters are given the identity as an architect. For example Stephen Smith in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, who is the assistant architect from London, and Jude Fawley the stone mason from the countryside, directly derived from Hardy's personal experiences, as well as the impressive descriptions of mansions in the countryside (*The Woodlanders*), ancient tomb laid on Edgong Heath (*The Return of the Native*) and Gothic buildings in Christminster (*Jude the Obscure*). These elements served inconspicuously as the background information and settings in the fictional world. Sometimes they even seemed like redundancies which detoured over the story line. However, with much observation, the readers would be astonished by Hardy's immediate grasp of the details contributed by his early training. As a builder, he walked to and fro in Wessex arranging the structure and decoration. The architectural elements full of ingenuity thus became inseparable from Hardy's literary consideration.

Relying on these textural evidences, many researchers discuss the description of architecture so as to unfold the meanings hidden in Hardy's novels. For example, Joann D. Griffith's essay, "All Men are Builders: Architectural Structures in the Victorian Novel", analyzes the architectural structure used in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Jude the Obscure* to understand the related narrative structure and Hardy's intention. In Griffith's idea, they refer to the two extremes in Hardy's literary works. One is the ghost from the past; the other is the threat of the incoming modernity. This concern about "misplacement" reflected by architectural elements in Hardy's major novels also exists in Hardy's less well-known works. In the highly interdisciplinary study "The Uncanny English House in the English Novel: 1880s to 1930s", Rebecca Brown analyzes the houses shown in *The Woodlanders* in which the boundaries between interior and exterior are transgressed by the spatial dislocations among the city and the countryside. Because of this disturbance in domestic space, the characters become unwilling to stand in the house, which causes destabilization in their condition. It creates the feeling of "homelessness" in Hardy's works. Donald D. Stone thinks that Hardy chose to deprive his characters of the home on purpose since he refused to forge a pretended happiness and satisfaction in the story which was a mainstream in the 19th century British writings he highly opposed to. Louisa Hall finds that this kind of tendency also occurs in Hardy's poetry. Hall indicates that Hardy refused to create a solid frame in *Poems of 1912-1913* which were written to mourn the death of his long-estranged wife, Emma, because he did not want to imprison the spirit of Emma like their indifferent marriage did in her lifetime. Therefore in a loosely-organized structure, he decided to let her find her own freedom.

In China, according to Nie Zhenzhao's *Thomas Hardy: A Study of the History of Thomas Hardy Studies*, the studies based on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* outnumber the researches regarding the rest of Hardy's works. Previous researches mainly focused on the topics of pessimism, ethics, feminism, religion, and local colorism. In recent years, the architectural element have been gradually given heed to. Qiao Xiaoyan, Zhang Xuan and Yang Qin-en mention the churches depicted in Hardy's works in order to prove that the Christian religion is never far from Hardy's concentration. Some of them manage to find the connection with Chinese culture. In "Classic Architecture and Thomas Hardy's Novels", Yang concludes that the common view shared by Western and Chinese classic architecture is that they both emphasized harmony and symmetry. In "On Binary Opposition in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*", Xu Xin argues that the characters' different dwelling places reflect their diverse personalities and values affecting the decision they made later on. Although scholars have paid attention to the

special meaning of architecture in Hardy's writings, there is no study devoted specifically to the architectural elements used in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

As the most well-known masterpiece written by Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* also involves the description of architectures with well-designed meanings, which surpasses the bound of background. Speechlessly, they reflect Hardy's idea about the preservation of historical architectures. Behind the bricks and thatches, the readers can dig out hidden messages. Moreover, in a world where the characters are always in dismal, they provide precious shelter to their bodies and comfort to broken hearts. However, these have been mostly ignored by many critics and readers. This paper aims to analyze the architectural elements used in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Inspired by British folk custom concerning necessities a bride should wear at wedding for good luck, "something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue", the content will involve the analysis of the related architectures in the text, with the hope of encouraging fresh review to this already well-discussed novel (Joseph, 1898, p. 128).

Something Old: Time's Memory

According to the interpretation of *Folklore* published by Folklore Society of Great Britain, the old item will provide protection from the ancestors to the new couple. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the common analysis usually regards the "old thing" as one of the main reasons leading to Tess's tragedy. At the beginning of the story, inspired by the casual conversation with a parson, Tess's father believed that they were the offspring of a glorious family possessing knighthood and long history. Unfortunately this hallucination about faded glory left nothing but misfortune to them. However, it is not the only function of these remains. The old architectures also keep the memory of individual experience and genealogical history. Any extensive treatment lacking flexibility may lead to irretrievable consequence. Since "the loss of physical structures is a loss of association and connection with previous generations" (Griffith, 2015, p. 28).

In the essay "Memories of Church Restoration", Hardy criticized the destruction of the old buildings caused by the so-called restoration in Victorian era. He noted that "[t]he protection of an ancient edifice...is...even more of a social—I may say a humane—duty than an aesthetic one. It is the preservation of memories, history, fellowships, fraternities" (quoted in Millgate, 1999, p. 251). Compared with the aesthetic value, Hardy emphasized the protection of social association carved on the ancient buildings since they were the witnesses of human history.

In Tess's parents' view, old architectures were the legacies left by their ancestors, which implied family history and glory. Therefore after hearing the parson's assumption, John bluffed to the boy:

Never you mind the place, boy, that's not the question before us. Under the church of that there parish lie my ancestors—hundreds of 'em—in coats of mail and jewels, in gr't lead coffins weighing tons and tons. There's not a man in the county o' South-Wessex that's got grander and nobler skillentons in his family than I. (Hardy, 2003, p. 4)

As Anna Kruse suggests, "[t]he captured memory of the estate and its continuity become twin halves that support the estate, preserving its past while ever preparing to carry it forward from the present generation to the next" (Kruse, 2009, p. 30). The bloodline connection contained in the old mansion constantly called resonance with the offspring. Although when Tess visited her ancestral mansion for the first time, she did not like it, when

John was dead and the Durbeyfields lost the estate, their family vault found them a roof and provided the only shelter they could have. The marks of habitation were still left in the old buildings and murmured the history silently:

Over the tester of the bedstead was a beautiful traceried window, of many lights, its date being the fifteenth century. It was called the d'Urberville Window, and in the upper part could be discerned heraldic emblems like those on Durbeyfield's old seal and spoon. (Hardy, 2003, p. 333)

These memories containing unique association with the people who once inhabited here would not reappear in any copies. For Tess, her ancestors obviously could not resurrect from death to become the "guardian angels" protecting her from all misfortunes, but the old buildings they left behind provided cherished memories which contained the comfort of history.

Something New: Hidden Messages

In Victorian Age, the great changes in the society evoked unsafety to human mind. In the field of architecture, in the restoration movement, people tended to use new materials to replace the old structures which have existed for centuries. Unfortunately, the renewed buildings were usually unable to provide reliability. Their radiance seemed inflated with overconfidence. This uneasiness foreshadowed the anxiety in massive production of artifact. In Walter Benjamin's consideration "[t]he presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity" (Benjamin, 2007, p. 220). Fierce restoration movement brutally compromises this kind of authenticity and thus damages social loyalty. In Hardy's view, the rough replacement which erased every trace of the past lives, interrupted architectural continuity and caused enormous loss. This kind of doubt and uncertainty to destructive refurbishment could also be found in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

In common eyes, the new thing with refreshed surface is the sign of advantage and vitality. In British wedding custom, "something new" commonly presents best wishes to the new couple's future, but it was totally different in Tess's story. The refreshed architectures always hide secrets under their beautiful cover.

The descendants of these bygone owners felt it almost as a slight to their family when the house which had so much of their affection, had cost so much of their forefathers' money, and had been in their possession for several generations before the d'Urbervilles came and built here, was indifferently turned into a fowl-house by Mrs Stoke-d'Urberville as soon as the property fell into hand according to law...

The rooms wherein dozens of infants had wailed at their nursing now resounded with the tapping of nascent chicks. Distracted hens in coops occupied spots where formerly stood chairs supporting sedate agriculturists. The chimney-corner and once-blazing hearth was now filled with inverted beehives, in which the hens laid their eggs; while out of doors the plots that each succeeding householder had carefully shaped with his spade were torn by the cocks in wildest fashion. (Hardy, 2003, p. 48)

The Slopes, a residence among the poor thatches cottages, presented first impression to the readers about the d'Urbervilles. However, the d'Urbervilles had no connection with Tess's family since they just bought the fake name to gain reputation. The d'Urbervilles did not only buy the name to frame a decent surface, but also lived in the house which did not belong to their ancestors. The former decoration, layout, structure and every trace of the original hosts had been wiped out by the new owners with no hesitation. They would do anything they want to support their needs without thinking about what would happen to others. It gave a glimpse of the true face of Alec

d'Urberville. Under the gilded outside there were cruelty, arrogance and hypocrisy. This masked crisis also implied the upcoming tragedy.

The d'Urbervilles were not the only family to restore their house, since the Durbeyfields also did likewise. Compared with deliberate whitewash carried out by the former, Tess's family's behavior, even negligible, also exposed deep meaning.

As soon as she could discern the outline of the house— newly thatched with her money— it had all its old effect upon Tess's imagination. Part of her body and life it ever seemed to be; the slope of its dormers, the finish of its gables, the broken courses of brick which topped the chimney, all had something in common with her personal character. A stupefaction had come into these features, to her regard; it meant the illness of her mother. (Hardy, 2003, p. 317)

This scene happened after Clare left. Instead of relying on her cold-blooded husband's money, Tess chose to work independently to support her family. With her effort, they finally changed the old thatch roof. On the way back home, Tess could see the light from her house after a whole day's hard work. Every part of this architecture including the restored thatch implied Tess's strength and personality. Beneath the sufferings lies a woman's unyielding spirit. Like a mirror, the condition of this cottage reflected the reality of this family and journey of the character. Through the comparison between the two restorations carried out by two families, the readers could get their perception about the truth beneath the ostensible properties.

Something Borrowed: Comfort in Necessity

As the old saying goes, if a bride could carry an item borrowed from another happy couple, she would share the blessing of their marriage. It represents benediction from the others, which is another necessity to achieve happiness. When people cannot attain satisfaction from the familiar stuffs, they prefer to use other's power to supplement their deficiencies. Putting faith on something outside the ownership, people can gain a feeling of affiliation from something borrowed, especially in need, like an outsider searching for support in an alien environment. To someone in misery, the simplest help can provide great relief. As is described in the novel,

The stage of mental comfort to which they had arrived at this hour was one wherein their souls expanded beyond their skins, and spread their personalities warmly through the room. In this process the chamber and its furniture grew more and more dignified and luxurious; the shawl hanging at the window took upon itself the richness of tapestry; the brass handles of the chest of drawers were as golden knockers; and the carved bedposts seemed to have some kinship with the magnificent pillars of Solomon's temple. (Hardy, 2003, p. 18)

In a simple house without luxurious decoration or exquisite cuisine, the country folks could still have delight in this crude liquor inn. "[I]t was better to drink with Rolliver in a corner of the housetop than with the other landlord in a wide house" (Hardy, 2003, p. 18). It depicted a vivid picture in the countryside inn. A group of peasants gathered under a humble roof to chat and drink with no gap. Even the royal banquet full of material prosperity would be outshone by their delight. To the customers, this place was a sanctuary. Like the Holy Temple, they could obtain spiritual satisfaction here. In this well-known tragic story, light color there would also relieve the readers. Turning to the main characters' plot, we could also find this cherished comfort set in a strange environment.

The dairy-house, so humble, so insignificant, so purely to him a place of constrained sojourn that he had never hitherto deemed it of sufficient importance to be reconnoitered as an object of any quality whatever in the landscape; what

was it now? The aged and lichened brick gables breathed forth "Stay!" The windows smiled, the door coaxed and beckoned, the creeper blushed confederacy. A personality within it was so far-reaching in her influence as to spread into and make the bricks, mortar, and whole overhanging sky throb with a burning sensibility. Whose was this mighty personality? A milkmaid's. (Hardy, 2003, p. 140)

This insignificant milk-house witnessed Clare and Tess's romantic story. Starting from this simple house, two young strangers gradually fall into love with each other. From that moment, the former humble place became meaningful in the eyes of lovers. Hardy employed personification in this part and made the milk-house a living witness to the characters' delight. If this excerpt is the icing on the cake, the content below should be treated as timely help in desperation.

At the entrance to the village was a cottage whose gable jutted into the road, and before applying for a lodging she stood under its shelter, and watched the evening close in.

"Who would think I was Mrs Angel Clare!" she said.

The wall felt warm to her back and shoulders, and she found that immediately within the gable was the cottage fireplace, the heat of which came through the bricks. She warmed her hands upon them, and also put her cheek—red and moist with the drizzle— against their comforting surface. The wall seemed to be the only friend she had. She had so little wish to leave it that she could have stayed there all night. (Hardy, 2003, p. 258)

Abandoned by her beloved, bullied by her employer, tortured by social injustice, the only relief Tess could get in this scene was a borrowed warm gable from others. This gable remained for Tess the spark of comfort and provided her support in deep darkness. Like a life-saving straw, Tess grasped this tightly in cold nights and finally regained her hope for tomorrow. Therefore, when situation got a little bit better she "continued to live at the cottage with the warm gable that cheered any lonely pedestrian who paused beside it, awoke in the night, and heard above the thatch noises which seemed to signify that the roof had turned itself into a gymnasium of all the winds" (Hardy, 2003, p. 264).

Something Blue: Bless in Doom

On occasion of the wedding ceremony, blue accessories will be the ward against misfortune and evil. In this part, "blue" does not refer to the color but the architectures with shattered structure and gloomy impression. However, these haunted places in the novel not merely foreshadowed characters' doomed destiny but also presented something opposite.

Here they were within a plantation which formed the Abbey grounds, and taking a new hold of her he went onward a few steps till they reached the ruined choir of the Abbey-church. Against the north wall was the empty stone coffin of an abbot, in which every tourist with a turn for grim humour was accustomed to stretch himself. In this Clare carefully laid Tess. Having kissed her lips a second time he breathed deeply, as if a greatly desired end were attained. (Hardy, 2003, pp. 227-228)

After hearing Tess's confession, Clare refused to forgive his wife's "mistake". The wedding night lost the sweet scene it was supposed to be. There was no kiss or satisfaction to either part of them. However, when they fell into sleep, Clare carried Tess to a ruined church in his sleepwalking. He put his wife into the stone coffin and gave the kiss they were supposed to have on the wedding night. A half-broken, shattered and ominous architecture provided him a chance to unleash his true feeling to Tess without being manipulated by social

discrimination. In the most improper place, where the regulating law no longer existed, Tess heard the voice of forgiveness from her husband who was too afraid to speak it out in light. The similar situation also occurred in the final part of the novel when Tess arrived at Stonehenge.

Owing to the action of the sun during the preceding day, the stone was warm and dry, in comforting contrast to the rough and chill grass around, which had damped her skirts and shoes.

...

"So now I am at home."

...

"I like very much to be here,"... "It is so solemn and lonely— after my great happiness— with nothing but the sky above my face..." (Hardy, 2003, p. 362)

In order to escape from being arrested, Clare and Tess left the revealed refuge under the cover of the night. Finally they stopped at Stonehenge. In Clare's view, it was a "monstrous place" (Hardy, 2003, p. 361), "a very Temple of the Winds" (Hardy, 2003, p. 362). Tired for running from predicted fate, Tess chose to take a rest there and the couple exchanged a peaceful conversation. Instead of being swamped by fear, Tess perceived peace under this roofless architecture, which was used to provide sacrifices to God in prehistorical time. The stone under her body still kept the warmth of the sun warmth. After taking her revenge and being reunited with her beloved husband, Stonehenge provided her with the final chance of freedom which seemed that it could remove all the pain from her life. In a place of giving up everything, she got her deserved redemption. This arrangement may recall the memory about Little Father Time and Henchard's ending, "that one's only secure anchorage is in the grave" (Stone, 1984, p. 300). However, differentiating with the stuffiness in facing the inevitable death in a gloomy cottage, Tess voluntarily and boldly made her decision in a stage of airiness and freedom. Similar to the decision Hardy made in composing the elegy to mourn his dead wife in a dismantling poetic structure, it created "unhoused, permeable vessels in which the woman asserts a freedom, beyond him, as a part of ungraspable elements like wind and water" (Hall, 2012, p. 213). Tess, being caged for long, now could finally achieve her freedom. Donald Henson mentioned a theory in *Archaeology Hotspot Great Britain: Unearthing the Past for Armchair Archaeologists*, that is, "Stonehenge [was] a site of healing where the religious power of the stones or their provision of access to the gods or spirit world would enable healing of the sick" (Henson, 2015, p. 170). Hardy named the finale of this novel as "fulfillment". Under the protection of Stonehenge, Tess's pain was eased and her spirit no longer was caged. All her wishes had been fulfilled and the doomed destination would not cause any misery to her anymore.

Conclusion

Born in a family with architectural background, architectural elements inevitably left marks in Thomas Hardy's writing career. Coincidentally, like his controversial reputation in literature, his idea about architectural issue also sparked off debate. One thing for sure, in the literary world he created, diverse architectures play beyond the role as lifeless background. Just like in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, if you read with awareness, you can find the memories left by the time since the buildings witnessed the stories of their owners. They will expose

hidden messages and tell you the secrets covered by the surface. Sometimes they show more humanity than people alive in a cold world and provide the suffered spirit with final mercy.

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