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**ON THE MANTELPIECE FOR YOU:
LETTERS IN THE NOVELS OF THOMAS HARDY**

by

Morgan Sanford

**Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for graduation with**

UNIVERSITY HONORS

with a major in

**English Teaching
in the Department of English**

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Spring 2018

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Abstract

Even as modern technology continues to introduce new modes of communication, people still write letters. Letters are a primary vehicle for written communication and have played a key role in forming, maintaining, and preserving relationships for centuries. Particularly in Victorian England, letters facilitated communication over a range of space and time, capturing the momentary and immortalizing the impermanent. At the height of the letter's popularity, Thomas Hardy included letters in his novels to further plot, develop characters, and think critically about the function of written communication in society. Hardy's exploration of this medium changed over the course of his career. This essay analyzes the depiction of letters in three key Thomas Hardy novels: *The Return of the Native*, *Tess of the D'urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure*. It also orients each novel within the context of Hardy's career. Hardy's use of letters in these works explores their limitations and indicates his devolving faith in the effectiveness of writing. This disillusionment culminated in his decision to abandon novel writing.

—For Tess, who tried.

Acknowledgments

First of all, a massive thank you to my mentor, Dr. Brian McCuskey. He has a gift for condensing complex ideas into bumper-sticker language, and he pushed me at every point of this process to simplify and clarify. From day one, Dr. McCuskey has taken the time to brainstorm and talk with me, respond to my many emails, read every draft, and kindly point out ways my writing and thinking could improve. He watched me make this journey and offered guidance along the way, for which I am so grateful. Without his help, this project would have been impossible. I hope he will consider teaching a Hardy class sometime in the future.

Another huge thank you to Dr. Jennifer Sinor, whose expertise about letters and ordinary writing has been invaluable throughout this process. Jennifer has been my cheerleader for the past two years and such a huge support in every facet of my life. She never stops telling me that she believes in me, and she relentlessly pushes me to do my best. Jennifer is more than a mentor; she is a friend. She recognized potential in me that I never saw in myself. I will be forever grateful for her love and passion for life, and for her confidence in me.

I feel blessed to have had the opportunity to interact with so many incredible professors in the English Department. I am particularly grateful for Dr. Jessica Rivera-Mueller, Dr. Phebe Jensen, Dr. Shane Graham, and Dr. Jeannie Thomas, who have supported me throughout my time as an English major and have taught me to write well, think critically, and ask questions. I owe everything to these incredible teachers and mentors. The English department is, quite honestly, the best place on campus.

I am grateful to the Undergraduate Research Fellows program, and Dr. Scott Bates, for the encouragement to get involved in research from the very first day of freshman Connections. Every resource that the URF program provides has helped me make meaningful connections

with professors, publish and present my own work, and develop my CV. I want to go to grad school because I've fallen in love with research. Thank you for changing my life.

Finally, I would like to thank the Honors program for their continual support, as well as the wealth of leadership and research opportunities they offer. I never knew, as a senior in high school, that applying for the Honors program would be the best decision I've made. I am especially grateful to Dr. Kristine Miller, the Honors program director, for teaching me how to write. She has supported my growth from freshman year to now, both in Honors and in English. I owe my love of British literature to her.

Thank you to each of these remarkable people and programs for the impact you've made on my life. I have fallen in love with research, with English, and with Utah State. This will always be home for me. Go Aggies.

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On the Mantelpiece For You: Letters in the Novels of Thomas Hardy

Introduction

On December 4, 1882, Thomas Hardy sent a manuscript to his close friend, Edmund Gosse. In the attached letter, Hardy remarks that “I send this particular book in the belief that you will perceive, if nobody else does, what I have aimed at” (*Collected Letters I*, 110). Hardy, a budding novelist, trusts Gosse to comprehend his meaning. And he believes in the written word—in its ability to facilitate effective communication. In fact, he informs Gosse in this letter that “I take care not to lose sight of your writings” because “[your latest book] afforded me food for thought during several days” (*CL I*, 110). For Hardy, Gosse’s writing works to spark his thinking. And this explains his faith in Gosse’s ability to understand his own writing, despite the fact that “the execution is hurried, & far from what I intended” (*CL I*, 110). By the end of his novel-writing career, Hardy will know that he cannot ensure communication, or the correct interpretation of his writing. But here, at the beginning of that career, he has faith. His bright-eyed faith in a reader’s capacity to understand him is evident in his 1882 letter to Edmund Gosse.

Thirteen years later, Thomas Hardy writes another letter to Gosse, in response to his harsh review of *Jude the Obscure*. Hardy addresses him as “My dear Gosse” (*CL II*, 93). He then remarks that the novel “is really sent out to those into whose souls the iron has entered, and has entered deeply, at some time of their lives. *But one cannot choose one’s readers*” (*CL II*, 93, *emph. added*). Having recently published the book that would end his career as a novelist, Hardy acknowledges his inability to control its reception, his readership, or their understanding of the book. He admits that “I must have lamentably failed, as I feel I have, if this requires explanation and is not self evident” (*CL II*, 93). If readers have failed to understand his meaning, he has fallen short as a writer. But Hardy’s use of the word “failed” here also suggests an understanding

that the written word *can* fail—that writing is not infallible, and that somewhere in the transfer from writer to paper to reader, communication can, and likely will, go wrong.

Between 1882 and 1895, Hardy's perception of writing has changed. As evidenced in these letters to Gosse, Hardy expresses faith in 1882, and then a frustrated sense of failure in 1895. He has lost confidence in his ability to communicate effectively through writing. In fact, Hardy remarks in his 1895 letter to Gosse that readers have failed to recognize ideas that were “*meant* to run all through the novel” (*CL II*, 93, *emph. added*). Not only can Hardy no longer trust his readership to understand him, but his intentions—his “*meant to*”s—have failed him. The juxtaposition of Hardy's early confidence and later insecurity suggests a decline in faith in written communication. This decline culminates in his choice to abandon the novel for good.

Not only do letters allow Hardy to express disillusionment, they also function as an autobiographical synecdoche. Hardy writes letters into his novels as a symbol of his belief in writing. This choice is not surprising, given the important role of letters in Victorian society. Letter writing exploded as a result of postal reform, particularly the birth of the Penny Post in 1840. In *Posting It: The Victorian Revolution in Letter Writing*, Catherine Golden describes this boom:

Within one year following the Penny Post, the mailing of letters increased 112.4 percent.

From this enormous surge in 1841, there was a minor slowdown to an annual letter-mailing increase rate of 105.6 percent until 1850, after which the mailing of letters increased by 62.5 percent each year between 1850 and 1860. (154)

By any standard, this postal revolution was extraordinary. And Thomas Hardy, born six months after the “nationwide cheap postage that went into effect on January 10, 1840,” avoided the “inequities” that “abounded in” a “post [that] did not serve all social classes” (Golden 20-21). He

never knew the “postal charges that a poor laborer could not afford to pay,” or the “expensive postage” that “became an intolerable hardship and a communications barrier” for rural communities (Golden 21). Instead, Hardy entered a world in which “the lowering of postage undeniably increased the volume of the post”, and, despite its flaws, the postal system became “a vehicle for intimacy in Victorian culture” (Golden 154, 216). He joined an emerging network of communication. His was the world of the letter.

It is against this backdrop that Hardy writes letters into his novels, exploring their functions and limitations in context of fictional characters and landscapes. In *Letter Writing Among Poets: From William Wordsworth to Elizabeth Bishop*, Jonathan Ellis illustrates the process of communicating through letters. “One person writes a letter,” he explains, and “a second person reads it. They then swap roles. There are crossed letters, lost letters, unread and unsent letters, but the idea of two people writing and reading persists” (Ellis 7). Hardy’s novels contain this type of correspondence, and letters function as a symbol of communication. But letters also provide a place for Hardy to explore and question the effectiveness of writing.

From the beginning to the end of his novel-writing career, Hardy’s belief in written communication dwindles. This shift occurs during a period punctuated by heightened self-consciousness about writing and increasingly unstable postal networks, which “laid [themselves] open to overuse and abuse, misuse and manipulation” (Golden 170). Hardy’s loss of faith in letters and the system is reflected in his novels. Three key novels, written at various points in his career, highlight this transformation: *The Return of the Native* (1878), *Tess of the D’urbervilles* (1892), and *Jude the Obscure* (1895).

To date, there exists little investigation or analysis of Hardy’s depiction of letters in his novels. In her 2016 book *Thomas Hardy and Victorian Communication: Letters, Telegrams and*

Postal Systems, Karin Koehler asserts the need for further research in this area. She suggests that “the representation of written communication and communication technology in Hardy’s works ... remains largely overlooked,” due to the fact that “remarks about written communication in Hardy’s works are for the most part incidental, scattered across discussions of his novels, short stories, and poems” (16). Koehler argues:

We ought to try to understand as fully as possible the reasons for [each letter’s] inclusion, the ways in which they are made to signify, and the effects they produce on internal and external readers. To write them off as manifestations of incompetent, clumsy plotting is simply inadequate, especially when it is considered that the possibilities, risks, and failures of communication are a central theme, if not the central theme, of Hardy’s writing. (16-17)

Hardy’s depiction of letters is intentional, and their placement in his novels raises questions about the effectiveness of written communication, both in Wessex and the Victorian world. Letters serve as symbols of communication, not merely plot devices, and they allow Hardy to explore the successes and limitations of the letter form in facilitating communication. This paper responds to Koehler’s call for further investigation because, as she suggests, “it is time to consider Hardy’s portrayal of written communication ... more fully and for its own sake” (16).

But unlike Koehler, who simply examines letters as they appear in Hardy’s novels, this paper situates his portrayal of letters in context of his career. To accomplish this, I will weave Hardy’s own correspondence and commentaries on letter writing together with his representation of letters in *The Return of the Native*, *Tess of the D’urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure*. Hardy’s depiction of the letter devolves from *The Return of the Native* to *Tess of the D’urbervilles* to *Jude the Obscure*. *The Return of the Native* depicts letters as reliable, effective, and efficient.

Letters in this novel work, and written correspondence facilitates communication. Letters in *Tess of the D'urbervilles* also work, but only eventually, and only after overcoming significant obstacles. And in *Jude the Obscure*, letters fail. They do not facilitate communication, and they cause misunderstanding. Placing these novels in dialogue with Hardy's own letters sheds light on the way he uses the novel to explore his anxieties about letter writing and written communication.

From a literary and biographical standpoint, the arc from *Native* to *Jude* is significant. It highlights the correlation between Hardy's representation of letters and his own evolution as a novelist. *Jude the Obscure*, the novel in which "the letter killeth," is Hardy's last before abandoning the genre altogether. In the letters that punctuate his novels, Hardy works out his increasing anxieties about writing. But the more those letters fail, the more the relationships they should foster fail to satisfy readers, and the less likely his novels are to get published. Thus, letters in Hardy's novels create a feedback loop that leads to his eventual decision to turn to poetry. He loses faith in letters, and he loses faith in novels. This paper will analyze the depiction and function of letters in three of Hardy's novels. It will orient those depictions within the context of Hardy's career using personal correspondence. Together, these texts will shed light on Hardy's gradual disillusionment with letters—and novel-writing—as a form of communication.

The Return of the Native

Thomas Hardy's 1878 novel *The Return of the Native* illustrates a belief in the power and efficacy of letter writing. In the world of *The Return of the Native*, it is possible for a person in one space to communicate with someone in another. And individuals can use language to bridge the gap between both geographic locations and moments in time. In *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*, David Barton and Nigel Hall explain that "time and space are important" elements of

letter writing “in that spatial distance is often the main reason for the letter’s existence and there is a time lag between the writing and the reading” (6). As a result, “two worlds are invoked: the here and now of the writer and the here and now of the reader” (Barton 6). Letters facilitate communication across and in spite of space and time. The Penny Post makes this type of correspondence possible; in fact, as Catherine Golden explains, “the novelty of long-distance communication ... increased letter-based traffic” (160). A letter’s ability to overcome physical separation inspires a certain degree of faith in the form. This faith is apparent in the increase of Victorian letters post-1840, as well as in *The Return of the Native*. People send letters because they trust the system, and they trust in the letter’s effectiveness.

A letter offers an accessible and reliable form of communication. As Leonie Hannan explains in “Making Space: English Women, Letter-Writing, and the Life of the Mind, c. 1650-1750,” the simple act of “picking up a pen to write a letter” allows “idle musings [to] be transformed into considered sentences, and passively absorbed meanings could be *actively discussed*” (590, *emph. added*). Faith in letter writing arises from a belief that two people can interact through thoughts transcribed on paper and ultimately understand each other. *The Return of the Native* is imbued with such confidence in the efficacy of letters, “upholding the letter as a valuable and potentially reliable source of information” (Koehler 79). When someone needs to communicate, the answer is the letter. In *Letter Writing Among Poets: From William Wordsworth to Elizabeth Bishop*, Jonathan Ellis notes that regardless of the fact that “letter writing represents a very odd form of talk ... we keep returning to letters” (15). Letters articulate information, facilitate reader-writer communication, and produce understanding. Confidence in letters permeates Hardy’s own correspondence at this particular point in his career, and it

permeates *The Return of the Native*. Five key moments throughout *The Return of the Native* illustrate faith in letters.

Successful letters overcome separation, as illustrated in Clym's letter in Book II: Chapter VIII. Hardy states that "Clym Yeobright was not at home," for "he had gone on a few days' visit to a friend about ten miles off" (185). These "ten miles" and "a few days" separate Clym from home (185). His distance necessitates the letter, which, in turn, allows Clym to influence Mrs. Yeobright's and Thomasina's conversation. This influence is clear in Thomasina's admission that "I would marry [Wildeve] under any circumstances since—*since Clym's letter*" (186, *emph. added*). In his letter, Clym claims that such a scandal would be "humiliating," "gross," and "vexing," despite being "jilted on the wedding-day"; to be so jilted would "mortify us" (186). These remarks lead Thomasina to the conclusion that she must marry Wildeve, regardless of the circumstances. Because Clym has access to the letter, he can persuade her. And Thomasina attributes her choice to marry Wildeve to Clym's letter.

But his note does more than simply influence Thomasina's decision. Following her reference to it, Mrs. Yeobright re-reads the letter "for the tenth time that day" (186). It is only after doing so that she agrees to Thomasina's decision to be married "the day after tomorrow, quite privately; at the church of his parish—not at ours" (186). Mrs. Yeobright responds that "if you think you can marry him, do so" (186). The fact that she consents, despite "not [being] friends with [Wildeve]," further underscores the letter's effectiveness (186). Clym communicates his meaning well enough to convince Mrs. Yeobright to support a marriage she opposes. And the fact that she reads his letter before consenting suggests a direct correlation between his letter and her choice. Clym's correspondence reinforces—or assists her in making—her decision. In this way, the letter allows Clym to participate in a distant conversation. In fact, Hardy himself

addresses the letter's ability to overcome distance in an 1881 letter to William Ralston. Hardy opens his letter by stating that "I must regret that a hundred miles and more lie between us, which with other circumstances will prevent my accepting your kind invitation" (*CL I*, 94). Although a significant distance prevents Hardy from "accepting [Ralston's] kind invitation," it does not prevent them from communicating (*CL I*, 94). Rather, Hardy overcomes that separation with a letter to interact with Ralston in a different way. Clym's letter similarly bridges distance, granting him a voice in Mrs. Yeobright and Thomasina's discussion.

Hardy's choice to insert the letter into the text gives Clym presence in their conversation. After indicating that Mrs. Yeobright has "silently read" the letter ten times that day, Hardy inserts an m-dash, followed by the contents of Clym's letter (186). This choice gives Clym space on the page between Thomasina's remarks and Mrs. Yeobright's response. His letter functions as Clym would, asserting his presence and assuming a position relative to both women. This presence is complicated, however, by the distance in time that the letter represents. Clym writes from the past, and because his letter "is the product of a specific time and mood," it "might no longer be a faithful portrait of its writer by the time it reaches its recipient" (Koehler 83). By the time she reads it, "the recipient has changed too" (Ellis 9). Clym occupies space in this scene, but he writes from the past and is read in the future. His imagined addressee has already changed upon receipt of the letter, and so has he. Audience, then, is complicated by time, and the letter's depiction of the reader becomes less accurate as time moves away from the moment of writing. Nevertheless, the letter facilitates communication across time and space. It transmits Clym's voice into a space he does not inhabit and allows him a strange presence in this moment. His letter fulfills its intended purpose. It bridges reader-writer separation to facilitate communication.

Thomasina's letter to Diggory Venn in Book I: Chapter IX performs a similar function. While Clym's letter overcomes the distance of a few days, Thomasina's—at the moment Diggory sits down to re-read it—spans two years (92). Hardy acknowledges that “during the interval” since Venn last saw her, “he had shifted his position even further from hers than it had originally been, by adopting the reddle trade” (94). Venn has changed careers since receiving Thomasina's letter, but her letter continues to be relevant because “the reddleman ... still lov[es] her well” (94). This is interesting, given the letter's contents. In this note, Thomasina attempts to correct misunderstanding. She recognizes the letter as the way to “write[e] plainly”—to communicate thoughts and feelings stated imprecisely the first time (93). Her letter seeks to remedy Diggory's giving “me such a surprise that I am afraid I did not make you exactly understand what I meant” (92). When oral communication fails her, Thomasina turns to letters.

Thomasina recognizes the letter as a more effective form of communication. She acknowledges this when she states that this second attempt will likely “contradict ... what I seemed to say” the first time (93). Although her writing communicates a different message than her speaking did, this second attempt will come closer to the truth. Thomasina's hope that “you will not set your heart against me for writing plainly” manifests her confidence (93). She believes that Diggory will understand her message enough to be hurt by it—that her letter will communicate meaning. In addition, the only way to overcome misunderstanding is to write clearly enough that there can be no misunderstanding. Thomasina's efforts to do this are apparent in her assurance that “I cannot, Diggory, marry you, or think of letting you call me your sweetheart” (93). She also states that, although “I felt you might try to see me ... it is better that we should not meet” (93). If Thomasina writes what she means, Diggory will understand her. It was her inability to “make you understand exactly what I meant” that necessitated a letter in the

first place (93). But the letter offers Thomasina a form in which to express herself fully, and she trusts that Diggory will respond accordingly. In Thomas Hardy's 1877 letter to John Blackwood, he remarks that "I have frequently wished for an opportunity of communicating with you otherwise than as a stranger, but as there seems to be no probability of any such event just yet I write without an introduction" (*CL I*, 47). Like Thomasina, Hardy trusts that when face-to-face communication fails, the letter will succeed. This is apparent in his personal correspondence, as it is in *The Return of the Native*.

Thomasina's letter nevertheless alludes to limitations of the letter form. She admits that "there are so many reasons why we cannot be married that I can hardly name them all in a letter" (93). Similarly, in a letter to Havelock Ellis dated April 29, 1883, Hardy opens by stating that "I have read with great interest your article in the *Westminster*, & can inadequately express by letter my sense of your generous treatment of the subject" (*CL I*, 117). Hardy acknowledges that "by letter" he will be unable to express himself adequately, but he still uses the letter to try (*CL I*, 117, *emph. added*). This suggests Hardy's continuing faith in the form. His "inadequate" expression mirrors Thomasina's assertion that "there are [too] many reasons" to name in one letter (93). Both suggest that sheer volume of information could challenge the letter's efficacy. But despite her inability to write every reason, Thomasina does succeed in naming "the great reason": her lack of romantic feelings toward Diggory (93). She also identifies "another reason": her aunt, whose interruption necessitates the letter in the first place (93). Thomasina selects and articulates sufficient evidence to support her claim. She navigates the letter's limitations to, ultimately, express herself. And Hardy states that "since the arrival of that letter, on a certain autumn morning long ago, the reddleman and Thomasin had not met till today" (94). Thomasina

effectively communicated her meaning, and Diggory did not try to see her again. She, like Hardy, trusts that letters work.

Diggory's tinted letter acts as evidence of its own effectiveness. Even after two years, Venn still carries it in a "brown paper packet," inside a "leather pouch" (92). Hardy notes that "to judge from the hinge-like character of its worn folds," the letter "seemed to have been carefully opened and closed a good many times" (92). Whether or not this is the first time Venn sits down to re-read it, he engages with it now. The letter, in this moment, is relevant. Hardy also observes that "the writing had originally been traced on white paper, but the letter had now assumed a pale red tinge from the accident of its situation" (92). The letter, like its owner, has been "stamp[ed] unmistakably" by redde, which "spreads its lively hues over everything it lights on" (90). The red tint and worn folds attest to the impact of Thomasina's correspondence on Venn. It was in response to her letter that "he had ... adopt[ed] the redde trade" (94). And in addition to pursuing a new career, in a moment of "tender sadness," he remembers and reads it again (92). The well-worn letter will become problematic in *Jude the Obscure*, but at this moment, it is not. Although Diggory is, to some extent, interested in the materiality of communication, his actions are not strange. Rather, they illustrate the effectiveness of the letter. They prove that letters work.

Clym's letter to Eustacia in Book V: Chapter VI further underscores this faith in letters. In an effort to end "the[ir] wretched separation," Clym writes to his estranged wife (414). He pleads with her to "come back to me ... and the past shall never be mentioned" (414). After writing the letter, he goes to bed, resolving that "if she does not come before tomorrow night I will send it to her" (415). Clym's resolution suggests that if Eustacia does not come back on her own, his letter will convince her. Clym knows from past experience that letters do what the

writer intends them to. Thomasina married Wildeve. The only possible impediment to this outcome would be the letter's failure to arrive. Hardy knows this. In an 1878 letter to Harper & Brothers regarding his *Return of the Native* manuscript, he informs the publisher that "I have received no communication from you relative to the story of which I have sent duplicate proofs month by month" (*CL I*, 54). He then asserts that "as your system of payment is probably the usual one there is just a possibility that a letter from you may have miscarried" (*CL I*, 54). Hardy believes that the only reason he would not receive payment is because their letter never arrived. When letters reach their destination, they do what they are intended to. This assumption informs Hardy's narration, in Book V: Chapter VII, of the journey of Clym's letter through various hands. The letter passes first from Clym to Fairway, then from Fairway to the servant girl, then to the captain, who "placed the letter on the mantelpiece to give it to [Eustacia] in the morning" (420). Hardy highlights this process to underscore the effectiveness of letters. In this case, the letter's couriers go out of their way to ensure its safe arrival.

Clym's letter alters each courier's course, which suggests that unread letters also affect their surroundings. None of those entrusted with Clym's letter read it, so its *contents* do not affect them, but its effects are still clear in their choices. Clym's letter incites Fairway, who was "hasping [his] gate before going to bed" to "run back with it at once" (420). Fairway forgoes his bedtime to return to the Vye home, where he entrusts the letter to the servant girl. She "brought it to the captain," who "took it upstairs" so Eustacia could "have it at once" (420). Each of these individuals recognize the charge entrusted to them: to ensure the letter's safe and speedy delivery. This responsibility is hefty because if couriers ensure the letter's delivery, they will have, indirectly, facilitated communication. Ultimately, upon finding "no light within" Eustacia's room, Vye places Clym's letter "on the mantelpiece to give it to [Eustacia] in the morning"

(420). The mantelpiece is merely a temporary resting place; the Captain plans to give the letter to Eustacia. He assumes responsibility for its delivery. And letters arrive successfully in Hardy's correspondence, too. He writes in 1884 to Isabelle Oppenheim that "your letter has followed me here from Dorchester ... & I hasten to assure you that I am very far from having forgotten your existence" (*CL I*, 125). Despite Hardy's change in location, Oppenheim's letter finds its addressee. Dedicated couriers make it possible for her letter to "follow" Hardy.

In fact, letters are so effective that they communicate meaning even without being opened. Hardy illustrates this concept in Book V Chapter II. Clym interrogates Eustacia to discover the identity of the man "who was with you on the afternoon of the thirty-first of August," demanding, "How often does he write you? Where does he put his letters?" (389, 391). When Clym asserts that he will "find it myself," he "seize[s] the desk and dashe[s] it to the floor" (391). It is the "number of letters [that] tumbled out" that offer Clym the information he seeks (391). Hardy observes that "by no stretch of meaning could any but a harmless construction be placed upon a single one of the letters themselves," but "the solitary exception was [the] empty envelope" marked by Wildeve's hand (391-92). This is significant, first, because "Clym's first intuition is to look for letters as the most likely evidence for infidelity" confirms "the conceptual link between letter writing and illicit sexual activity" (Koehler 55). But the fact that Clym can extract so much information from a letter's appearance, determining at a glance which letters are harmless and which are not, is further proof of their efficacy. It is "the empty envelope directed to her," bearing Wildeve's handwriting, that reveals the identity of Eustacia's lover (392). Catherine Golden remarks that "a poorly addressed letter or one with indecipherable handwriting ... typically ended up in the ... Dead Letter Office" (160). Whether the result of "carelessness, haste, or ignorance," this "illegible penmanship or slapdash addressing of letters"

resulted in a letter's death (Golden 160). Appearance plays a significant role in a letter's reaching its destination—and, ultimately, in its effectiveness. Clym need not read Wildeve's letter to know that it incriminates his wife. Neither must he read the "harmless" letters to know that they are harmless. Whether or not Clym's assumptions are correct, he makes them, and he relies on visual cues that letters provide. Letters communicate information, even at a glance, and even when unread.

Eustacia's tragic death proves the effects of unread letters. When into the stream "Venn vanished," he "came up with an armful of wet drapery enclosing a woman's cold form, which was all that remained of the desperate Eustacia" (445). Her drowning results from a grave miscommunication. Hardy suggests that "having resolved on flight ... the only event that could really change her position was the appearance of Clym" (419). Her husband alone can convince her to change her mind. Thus Clym's plea for Eustacia to remember "the vows we have made" and "pass the remainder of our lives in trying to keep them" may have had a similar effect on Eustacia as his earlier letter did on Thomasina (414). Karen Koehler explicitly excludes this letter from her book, but Clym's note is essential to understanding the effects of unread letters. His written "appearance" may have changed Eustacia's mind (414). But rather than come downstairs as the Captain imagined she would, "Eustacia had lighted her candle, put on some warm outer wrappings, taken her bag in hand, and ... descended the staircase" (422). As a result, Clym's letter remains on the mantelpiece. His letter goes unread, and its failed delivery—and the fatal consequences—emphasizes yet again the efficacy of letters.

The tragedy of *The Return of the Native* is the letter on the mantelpiece, unread and undelivered. This particular unread letter is tragic because letters work. It fails not because of the writer, nor because of any inherent shortcomings in the form, but because it never reaches its

destination. On April 14, 1889, Hardy writes to John Addington Symonds and comments that “I have often thought that I should like to write a line to you,” so “your letter is a greater pleasure to me than you may imagine. Since receiving it I have spread out the map of Switzerland, the better to realize where you are, & it lies before me while I write” (*CL I*, 190). Not only does Symonds’ letter have a greater effect on Hardy than Symonds “may imagine,” but Hardy writes back with a map spread out before him (*CL I*, 190). Visualizing its destination, Hardy trusts that his letter will overcome distance, and that, if it does, Symonds will read it.

In similar fashion, *The Return of the Native* perpetuates and reinforces a faith in letters. The letter is so effective, so certain, that the only thing that could disrupt its ability to communicate is a failure to reach its destination. Thomasina and Clym place their faith in the letter. Thomasina, Mrs. Yeobright, and Diggory illustrate that the reader will understand the writer’s ideas. And Eustacia proves that the effect of an undelivered letter can be fatal: both in a literal sense, and a figurative one. The undelivered letter killeth.

Tess of the D’urbervilles

Thomas Hardy’s 1891 novel *Tess of the D’urbervilles*, published a decade later, complicates the *Return of the Native* letter. Hardy accomplishes this, in part, by shifting his focus from the educated middle class on Egdon Heath to the rural working class. In *Tess* education is no longer a given, and access to the letter is limited. The fact that Tess can write a letter, despite her limited education and low social status, grants her some measure of autonomy. But this consideration of social class to determine who can and should be writing complicates the letters depicted in *The Return of the Native*. No longer does a letter’s efficacy depend solely on delivery; now, its effectiveness depends on the writer’s ability to write in the first place. It depends on the addressee’s capacity to interpret its contents. And suddenly the letter becomes

less simple and straightforward than it was at the beginning of Hardy's career. It is in *Tess of the D'urbervilles*—which, due to a “string of rejections ... did not appear in print for almost two years” (Pite 304)—that Thomas Hardy rethinks and complicates the commentary he makes about letters in *The Return of the Native*. Perhaps they are not as simple and straightforward as he suggested, and perhaps they do not always work. Through Tess's experiences, Hardy illustrates the multitude of ways in which a letter—and its promise of communication—can be frustrated.

At the beginning of *Tess of the D'urbervilles*, Hardy's heroine believes in the *Return of the Native* letter: the one that succeeds when oral communication fails. It is for this reason that she comes to the conclusion that “declare the past to [Angel] by word of mouth she could not, but there was another way” (215). Tess is confident that a letter will help her communicate. As a result, Hardy narrates that “she sat down and wrote on the four pages of a note-sheet a succinct narrative of those events of three or four years ago, put it into an envelope, and directed it to Clare” (215). Tess trusts the letter to do what she cannot. She uses the form to her advantage; though she feels she cannot speak, she can write. Hardy's observation that “lest the flesh should again be weak, she crept upstairs without any shoes and slipped the note under his door” underscores Tess's confidence in letters (215). Letters in *The Return of the Native* succeed as long as they are delivered, and, by this definition, Tess has done everything necessary to ensure successful communication. She writes the letter and delivers it. She tries to overcome the flesh by slipping her note under the door—in other words, delivering the letter—because at that point, the deed is effectually done. By September 9, 1889, Hardy had written half of *Tess*—then titled “Too Late Beloved—and sent the manuscript to Tillotson & Son with a note reading: “Please let me know that it has reached you safely” (*CL I*, 200). In this letter, Hardy acknowledges the reality that his correspondence may not arrive. He asks for proof of its receipt. But Tess, like

Hardy, trusts that her letter will do what she intends it to, as long as it reaches its destination.

Tess's letter allows her to communicate the truth about herself to Angel.

Tess makes the choice to confess in a letter, which further suggests her faith in the form. Perhaps letters are a more effective, controlled means of communicating than face-to-face conversation, but they also reduce risk. Inherent in every confession is the possibility of a negative response. Tess experiences such a response when she eventually confesses in person: Angel's face "withered," the news causing him to "treadle ... fitfully on the floor," until he "suddenly broke into horrible laughter—as unnatural and ghastly as a laugh in hell" (234-35). Tess's shriek—"Don't—don't! It kills me quite, that!"—reveals the pain she might have avoided had Angel simply read her letter (235). He would have received the same information—and may still have chosen to leave—but she would not have had to see his face. The act of writing becomes an act of self-protection as much as an effort to produce communication. In slipping the letter under the door, Tess hides from Angel's first reaction. She then seeks him out in the morning—presumably *after* he has read her note—expecting that by then his response will be better-developed, more thought-out, and more rational. With that reasoning, the letter is certainly safer, at least for Tess. What "kills" her is Angel's uncensored, unfiltered reaction (235). This culminates in Tess sliding "down upon her knees beside his foot" and "crouch[ing] in a heap" as "he looked upon her as a species of impostor" (235-36). She sinks to the floor, powerless to protect herself from Angel's spontaneous response. And although Tess tries to avoid this moment by writing, her letter goes undelivered. Without the page, Tess cannot shield herself.

Letters reduce risk; however, they also create a permanent record that can be used against her. To distance herself from Angel's reaction, Tess uses "a medium ... that removes the possibility of revising or retracting one's" words to create an enduring document (Koehler 89).

She trades the momentary discomfort of face-to-face confession for longer-lasting trouble, should Angel misuse or abuse the letter's contents. "Four pages of a note-sheet" contain "a succinct narrative of those events of three or four years ago" (215). Tess entrusts her past to him. Similarly, following the publication of *Tess of the D'urbervilles*, various "wives with a past like that of Tess" contacted Hardy "asking for his counsel under the burden of their concealment" (*The Later Years* 5). According to *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy*, Hardy "used to say that the singular thing was that they should have put themselves in the power of a stranger by these revelations" (5). Here Hardy acknowledges that letters simultaneously preserve information and surrender it to the recipient. It is interesting, though, that Hardy adds that "they did themselves no harm ... for though he was unable to advise them, he carefully destroyed their letters, and never mentioned their names ... to a living soul. He owed them that much" (*The Later Years* 5). Hardy's response to these letters, written in good faith, was to destroy them. In destroying the document, he eliminates the evidence, suggesting that the letter's materiality makes it dangerous. In fact, Mirella Billi, in her article "Victorian Letters: Bad, Mad, and Dangerous to Read," paints Victorian "letters, as dangerous, betraying secrets and crimes, ruining reputations, exposing people," and argues that they "are burned, buried, silenced, destroyed, and just simply thrown away and removed" because they so often "result in personal catastrophes and punishments" (15). But Tess writes one, too; her fear of confessing in person creates an object that endures—one that she, too, must destroy (217).

Here Hardy's depiction of the letter begins to complicate that of *The Return of the Native*. Letters in *The Return of the Native* are straightforward and simple. A letter makes a request. Thomasina writes Diggory to tell him that "I cannot, Diggory, marry you, or think of letting you call me your sweetheart" (93). Diggory honors her wishes; he does not try to see her again. Clym

writes to express mortification at Thomasina's failed wedding (186). Thomasina responds by marrying Wildeve, as Clym suggests she should. And Clym writes Eustacia to beg her to come back. Because she does not read the letter, she does not return. Had she read it, she might have. In *The Return of the Native*, harm is done only when a letter is not delivered; if it is, requests are granted. Tess, on the other hand, never makes an explicit request in her letter. She does not ask or assume that Angel will forgive her—she merely hopes that he will (215). Instead, she writes the “succinct narrative,” communicates the facts, and waits for his response (215). Though Tess's letter is as honest and straightforward as any in *The Return of the Native*, Hardy's depiction of it suggests that the stakes here are higher. Upon finding the letter tucked beneath the carpet, Tess realizes that “the mountain had not yet been removed” (217). Tess has so little social power, and she is so easily victimized, that the contents of her letter become more than a letter—they become a mountain. The disparity between Tess and Angel suddenly appears as enormous as it is. And unlike the writers on Egdon Heath, these lovers are not on level ground. In the end, Tess's confession causes Angel to leave her first for the night, then “for ever” (254). With a mountain at stake in *Tess*, so much more can go wrong than in *The Return of the Native*.

Tess's “broken” night after writing suggests her awareness of everything that could fail, but it also hints at continued confidence in the letter. She “listen[s] for the first faint noise overhead” and meets Angel at the bottom of the stairs to receive his reply (214). Perhaps Tess risks more writing than Clym or Thomasina, but in much the same way she trusts in letter's ability to produce understanding. Like Thomasina, Tess is confident that if she writes, Angel will understand her message and react accordingly. And this confidence is evident in that fact that she is surprised—indicated by the exclamation mark at the end of the sentence—when “he [meets] her at the bottom of the stairs and kisse[s] her ... as warmly as ever!” (215). Angel's reaction

does not correspond with her expectations, which leads Tess to wonder: “Could he have had it?” (215). She knows that once she has written the letter and delivered it, the message is all but communicated. The only thing that could go wrong, according to *The Return of the Native*, is for the letter to go undelivered.

But it is in this very exclamation that Tess’s *Return of the Native* hope starts to fail. Hardy notes that “unless [Angel] began the subject, [Tess] felt that she could say nothing” (215). Until Angel validates her writing, Tess feels powerless to start a conversation or attempt to communicate in any other way. She does not know for certain whether the letter has been delivered, but “glanc[ing] into his room” and “see[ing] nothing of it” suggests that it has. That is, enough to suggest to Tess that “it might be that he forgave her” (215). In a September 14, 1889, letter to J. M. Barrie, Hardy mentions that “your note has been forwarded to me here” (*CL I*, 200). In Victorian England, letters, even when marked with the wrong address, can still reach their addressee. Setbacks do not have to prevent communication or understanding from taking place. So Angel, despite her expectations, could read Tess’s letter and still want her. This hope—her faith in the letter’s arrival and effectiveness—fills Tess with questions:

Could it be that her doubts were childish? That he forgave her? That he loved her for what she was, just as she was, and smiled at her disquiet as at a foolish nightmare? Had he really received her note? (215)

But here Tess’s outlook shifts. Hardy states that “*even if he had not received it,*” Tess experiences “a sudden enthusiastic trust that he surely would forgive her” (215, *emph. added*). The phrase “even if” calls into question the *Return of the Native* belief that anyone who needs to say something should write a letter. Letters facilitate communication across distance, and though Tess and Angel are not physically distant from each other, Tess’s secret creates a divide she

cannot cross on her own. To overcome that distance, she writes a letter. But if Angel could forgive her *without* receiving the letter—which Tess’s “sudden enthusiastic trust” suggests—perhaps letters are not the only way to facilitate communication (215). Perhaps *The Return of the Native*’s solution—the letter—is not the only solution. Tess’s inkling leads her to wonder whether a letter is necessary in the first place.

Hardy’s own correspondence while writing *Tess* reflects a similar shift in thinking. On November 13, 1889, Thomas Hardy writes to Arthur Locker in response to Locker’s inquiry regarding a letter from Hardy that never arrived. Hardy says that “the missing letter (if I recollect rightly) was a mere line to the effect that if you wished I would substitute a serial story for the short one” (*CL I*, 201). Here, Hardy compensates for a failure in the system by attempting to remember and recreate his message. Although he does this in a letter the second time, too, he also acknowledges his “missing” letter’s failure to function. Two years later, however, Hardy writes to his wife to say that “I telegraphed at lunch time to tell you I was not coming till Monday. I hope you have received the message—otherwise you may be alarmed” (*CL I*, 227). Hardy’s doubts warrant a letter—a second attempt to relay information—with which he increases the likelihood that his wife will receive his message. This letter simultaneously communicates doubt in the Postal System and Hardy’s continuing faith in that system. Hardy relies again on the letter to relay information to his wife. He is torn between an awareness of the potential shortcomings—and possible failures—of letter writing, and his faith in its *Return of the Native* effectiveness.

Tess also takes steps toward understanding the complexity of letters. She is torn between her *Return of the Native* faith and a budding belief in her ability to communicate independently. Tess, barely removed from illiterate society, is experiencing an access denied to most of her

class. Unlike for Angel, independent communication was never possible for her before. And even Mrs. D'urberville, who wrote to request Tess's services on her poultry farm, wrote to Tess's mother, not to Tess (41). Nevertheless, Tess writes now. Her faith in the letter is unmistakable in her "perception that Angel's bearing towards her still remained in no whit altered by her own communication," which causes her to feel "guiltily doubtful if he could have received it" (217). This reaction suggests that if nothing has changed, the letter must not yet have reached its destination. On the other hand, upon finding the undelivered letter beneath "the edge of the carpet," Tess is motivated by "a feeling of faintness" to "destroy" it (217). Tess's choice to destroy the letter *before* Angel reads it indicates an awareness that it may not be her only option. Hardy remarks that "the incident of the misplaced letter she had jumped at as if it prevented a confession, but she knew in her conscience that it need not; *there was still time*" (217, *emph. added*). Tess knows deep down that, even with no letter, she has not run out of chances. "Even if he [does] not receive" her written confession, Angel may still forgive her (215). Faith and disillusionment—or rather, the realization that a letter is not her only option—come to a head in Tess's face-to-face confession. Angel's reaction is violent, but it proves he understands her attempt to communicate. Letter writing is no longer the only way.

This liberation is interesting, given that the departing Angel attempts to silence Tess by denying her access to letters. His injunction complicates *The Return of the Native*, which suggests that everyone can write—that the letter is the solution for everyone. Clare responds to Tess's inquiry, "May I write to you?" by asserting that he hopes she will never be "ill, or want anything at all ... so that it may happen that I write first to you" (261). Angel reserves the right to write for himself, limiting communication again to class. In so doing so, he robs Tess of her access to the letter, the seemingly ideal form of communication. But Tess's transformation has

already begun. From this injunction arises yet another shift in Tess's perception of the letter. She asserts that "I agree to the conditions, Angel; because you know best" (262). But in the following examples, Tess transforms Angel's denial into a more productive space. She refuses to be limited by his commandment not to write, having recognized that communication is not limited to the letter. Tess instead begins to explore the myriad ways a letter can be manipulated—and can remain on the mantelpiece.

Tess responds to Angel's request not to write by writing anyway, and she complicates this *Return of the Native* understanding of letters. On the first occasion, Tess "began impetuously writing a letter to Clare. But falling into doubt she could not finish it" (304). Tess's doubts—not misplacement or miscarry—prevent his reception of the letter. She never sends, or even finishes, the letter at all. In this instance, however, the contents of her letter are less important than Tess's reaction to it. Hardy notes that "afterwards she took the ring from the ribbon on which she wore it next to her heart, and retained it on her finger all night, as if to fortify herself" (304). Rather than allowing Tess to overcome her fears, writing makes her susceptible to "falling into doubt" (304). This act of letter writing does not grant Tess increased control over her situation, as it did for Thomasina, or an increased sense of autonomy. Rather, it leaves her clinging to her wedding ring all night and interrogating herself about letters: "how could she write entreaties to him, or show that she cared for him any more?" This particular clarifying letter does not grant her the strength or power that Thomasina's did in *The Return of the Native*. Thomasina writes to Diggory, and he understands. But "the self a writer creates in letters is vulnerable" and "always in danger of being ... reconstructed according to the subjectivity of the reader" (Koehler 80). Tess realizes that writing may allow the reader to understand her in a way she does not want to be understood.

This realization continues to evolve with each letter she writes. When Tess again “began an appealing letter to Clare,” the remembrance that “he had asked Izz to go with him” again seized her, and she “again ... did not finish her effusion” (330). Tess’s fear of being misunderstood—or being understood correctly, as *The Return of the Native* would suggest—prevents her from completing her letter. This time, however, Tess “put the letter in her box, and wondered if it would ever reach Angel’s hands” (330). She does not have to hold her wedding ring to fortify herself (304). She merely stops writing, puts the letter away, and wonders if Angel will ever read it. Tess is, again, the force that stops her own letter reaching Angel. This is interesting, however, given Hardy’s commentary that “any one who had been in a position to *read between the lines* would have seen that at the back of her great love was some monstrous fear—almost a desperation—as to some secret contingencies which were not disclosed” (330, *emph. added*). Tess does not use the letter as a space to express her “fear” or “desperation”; instead, she “conceal[s] from him her hardships,” and simply “assures him of her undying affection” (330). Afraid that Angel will interpret the letter in a way she does not want him to, she does not finish writing. Tess’s letter is not a clarifying one. It conceals the truth rather than exposes it. In a letter written November 3, 1891, to W. M. Colles, Hardy opens by stating: “I am sorry I mis-read your letter as a general inquiry merely, or I would have answered immediately” (*CL I*, 246). Here, Hardy admits that he has misread Colles’s letter and apologizes. Having mistaken a letter worthy of immediate response for a “general inquiry merely,” Hardy failed to understand the letter’s import (*CL I*, 246). The reader fails. The letter fails. Hardy’s heroine too begins to doubt the infallibility of letters; even after writing to conceal her true feelings—attempting to manipulate the letter’s reading—she chooses not to send it. Tess suspects that writers cannot control their readers’s perception or be understood the way they want.

This suspicion prompts Tess to use letters as a space for self-discovery, rather than a means of relaying information. Tess begins her letters with Angel in mind—she “writ[es] a letter to Clare” and “beg[ins] an appealing letter to Clare”—but Tess’s consistent failure to mail them sheds doubt on her intention to do so (304, 330). Rather, letter writing becomes a mode of self-exploration. She writes to express “fear,” “desperation,” “worry,” and “grief,” processing a spectrum of emotions on the page (330, 350). In the first letter she mails to Angel, Tess grieves, “Ah, if I could only make your dear heart ache one little minute of each day as mine does every day and all day long” (349). This comment articulates Tess’s purpose in writing: to make Angel’s heart ache. But her use of the phrase “if only” suggests that this would be impossible. Once Tess mails her letters, she forfeits control over its reception. Tess cannot guarantee that Angel will feel the things she needs him to, or understand her meaning. So she writes for herself, turning inward and using the form to her advantage. Letter writing becomes as much a political act as an existential one. This is interesting, given that in *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy*, Hardy discusses a “reply he wrote ... to” the article of “some unknown critic” about *Tess* (4). His “reply was written down but (it is believed), as in so many cases with him, never posted” (*The Later Years* 4). Here, Hardy acknowledges a letter he did not mail—one among “so many cases”—and cites the “rough draft” as proof of his perspective (4). Jonathan Ellis suggests that letters are “not just about communicating with the world,” stating that “they can also be a form of self-portrait” (2), and Hannan argues that “the processes and practice of letter-writing [can] be understood as a dynamic component in the development of ideas” (590). For both Tess and Hardy, letters offer a space for musing and self-exploration. Even unsent letters are productive.

But Tess has not transformed completely since *The Return of the Native*. Letters in *Tess of the D’urbervilles* move internally and grow increasingly complicated. Their sole purpose is no

longer to communicate information or convince another person. They are no longer written with confidence that they will. It is no longer certain that a letter will even be mailed. Rather, Tess explores their function, tests their limits and limitations, and uses them in ways Egdon Heath never does. Ultimately, however, letters still succeed for Tess. Hardy's remarks that Tess's "appeal *duly* found its way to the [Clare's] breakfast-table" (350). The letter arrives "duly"—as expected—and Mr. Clare, "when he had read the envelope," remarks that "this may hasten [Angel's] plans" (350-51). Mr. Clare believes in the *Return of the Native* letter—in its ability to change the course of others, to convince, to communicate. And Angel, upon returning, validates this view:

Has any letter come for me lately? ... I received the last you sent on by the merest chance, and after considerable delay through being inland; or I might have come sooner. (382-83)

Once Tess's letter arrives in his hands, Angel returns. She begins so many letters she never finishes or sends. She explores and manipulates the letter as a form of communication. But, in the end, the first letter she mails brings Angel home. He asserts that although that letter barely arrived, and was "considerabl[y] delay[ed]," it was the reason he chose to return (382).

In *Tess of the D'urbervilles*, letters still have the power to do what they are intended to do—after significant complications. Though the process and results differ from the simplicity and straightforwardness of *The Return of the Native*, Tess's letter still succeeds. This occurs despite the degeneration of her faith, although a little too late. In Hardy's biography, Ralph Pite narrates that "by 1889, Hardy was no longer accustomed to his books' being refused by publishers," but "when Tillotson's read what Hardy sent them they were horrified and rejected the book almost at once, cancelling the contract" (304). After the "equally rapid rejection" of

Murray's Magazine, Hardy “turned to Macmillan,” who “turned it down as well” (Pite 304). Ultimately, according to Pite, “*Tess* did not appear in print for almost two years” (304). Once it did, however, “it became Hardy’s greatest success to date” (Pite 304). This novel about letters and setbacks—letters that succeed after overcoming obstacles—succeeded in much the same way. Tess moves inward and challenges *The Return of the Native*. Letters in *Tess* are messy. There exists a chance of misarticulation and misinterpretation, wasted time and unnecessary delay, and sometimes the writer gets in his or her own way. But, in the end, a letter sent and delivered—however delayed—will succeed.

Jude the Obscure

The epigraph of Thomas Hardy’s 1895 novel *Jude the Obscure* reads: “The letter killeth.” This text marks the end of his 30-year novel-writing career. Hardy, in *The Later Years*, claims that “the clamour” of this period “is not worth reviving in detail at this distance of a time” (qtd. in Pite 356). He attempts to suggest that “his impatience with novel writing had been building up for some time,” and that his switch to poetry was natural and intentional from the beginning (Pite 357-58). But Margaret Oliphant, who wrote a scathing review of *Jude* post-publication, “saw that, far from wishing to give up novels, Hardy was trying to dominate the form — to revolutionize it and redefine its terms” (Pite 358). In *Thomas Hardy: The Guarded Life*, Ralph Pite proposes that *Tess*’s “success produced in [Hardy] a wish to elude his readership, by disappointing their expectations, and at the same time a desire to overwhelm them” (347). This desire to elude, disappoint, and overwhelm readers seems to commence in *Tess*, where Hardy’s heroine challenges the act of writing and questions its effectiveness. But Pite suggests that “these impulses do not fully account for the extreme bleakness and rage of *Jude*” (347). Pite is right to

argue that a desire to overwhelm readers may not account for Hardy's final novel. But a disillusionment with writing, especially as a means of facilitating communication, *does* account for it. Hardy's depiction of letters in *Jude the Obscure* illustrates his loss of faith in written communication.

In Hardy's final novel, letters fall apart and fail. No longer are they the straightforward, dependable tool of *The Return of the Native*, or even the complicated mess of *Tess of the D'urbervilles*. In *Jude the Obscure*, letters facilitate a string of "mis"es: miscommunication, misinterpretation, misunderstanding, misuse. Letters complicate and undermine communication rather than facilitating it. And, suddenly, a failure to communicate stems from a larger problem than a letter not arriving or being sent. Perhaps the letter is delivered to the wrong person. Perhaps it isn't written by the right person. Or perhaps it is never written at all. In *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy undermines the *Return of the Native* faith in letters, and challenges even Tess's devolving faith. Not only do letters not *always* work, they do not even *sometimes* work. Hardy questions the letter's ability to function as intended, and four key moments illustrate his skepticism of the letter's efficacy. These moments prove, quite simply, that letters do not work. Not in *Jude*, or in the context of Hardy's career, and maybe not at all.

This exploration begins near the end of *Tess of the D'urbervilles*, when Alec D'urberville re-reads a letter "signed by Parson Clare" (322). D'urberville withdraws the letter, "worn and soiled, as from much re-reading," and "dated several months before this time," from his pocket (322). Clare's correspondence expresses hope in Alec's conversion and potential for missionary service. Hardy notes that the letter is "worn and soiled" (322). Like in *The Return of the Native*, this letter's appearance suggests frequent reading. But this re-reading is not as straightforward as Diggory's re-reading of Thomasina's letter. Alec's actions here are stranger. Hardy narrates that

Alec, in response to Tess's reappearance, "drew from his pocket a small book, between the leaves of which was folded a letter" (322). Like Diggory, Alec is prompted by the reappearance of a lover to re-read a note; Diggory re-reads Thomasina's, and Alec, the Parson's. For both men, the women who prompt their re-readings do not reciprocate romantic feelings. For Alec, however, this encounter is less innocent than Diggory's with Thomasina. He meets Tess and commands her, "to lessen my fear, put your hand upon that stone hand, and swear that you will never tempt me" (322). Because Alec considers Tess a temptation, it is the Parson's letter that he "read and re-read" until "his face assumed a calm, and apparently the image of Tess no longer troubled his mind" (323). Alec's use of Clare's correspondence is not as innocent as Diggory's engagement with Thomasina's. Diggory, "still loving her well, was excited by this accidental service to her" and his "love was generous" (94). On the other hand, Alec transforms Clare's letter into a talisman, and he uses it to ward off and protect himself from evil. The letter reinforces him in weakness; he reads until he can drive Tess from his mind. Thus, in *Tess of the D'urbervilles*, Alec D'urberville uses the letter to overpower lust.

Richard Phillotson in *Jude the Obscure* engages with letters in a similar way, but, unlike Alec, he misuses letters to satisfy sexual desire. Phillotson, a "middle-aged man," sits "dreaming a dream of great beauty concerning the writer of [a] letter" (193). Hardy slows time in this scene to show Phillotson's engagement with the "carefully tied bundle of letters in his drawer" (194). Phillotson has handled those letters with care, preserving each "in its envelope just as it had arrived" (194). Hardy observes that the letters are "very few, as correspondence counts nowadays," and Phillotson "unfolded them one by one and read them musingly" (195). He shares an intimate moment with Sue's letters, and it is here that he enacts his first misuse. Phillotson attempts to connect Sue by "por[ing]" over her "phrases" (195). Hardy observes that Sue's letters

are “just such ones as would be written during short absences, with no other thought than their speedy destruction” and offer little to be interpreted. But Phillotson’s desperate need to find deeper meaning “occupied him, distracted him,” and he attempts to assign it anyway (195). In addition, the fact that Phillotson struggles to understand Sue indicates that her letters are not as communicative as *The Return of the Native* would suggest. Whether Sue has failed to articulate herself completely, or Phillotson simply fails to understand “what precise shade of satisfaction was to be gathered from a woman’s gratitude that the man who loved her had not been often to see her,” the disconnect between writer and reader is clear (195). Sue’s correspondence drives Phillotson to distraction. He cannot understand her. In the most basic sense, her letters have failed.

Phillotson misuses Sue’s letters to conjure her into his room. Despite their being “forgotten doubtless by the writer with the passing of the day of their inditing,” Phillotson saves each of Sue’s notes (195). He removes them at will from the desk drawer, holds them in his hand, and re-reads them. In fact, Hardy feminizes Sue’s handwriting when he describes it as being “of ... womanly character” (194). In personifying her handwriting, he objectifies Sue. And because she does not write him often enough, Phillotson re-reads the letters she *has* sent to assuage his need to hear from her. But conjuring Sue through letters is not enough. Drawing “a photograph of Sue as a child” and “another of her as a young woman” from a different envelope, he summons her further into his room (195). Although Koehler argues that her “trivial communications are treasured as substitutes for the absent Sue, as traces of her refreshing youthful presence in [his] sombre study,” Phillotson’s interaction with Sue’s correspondence is much stranger than that (96). Phillotson, holding this second photograph—like her letters—in his hands, “brought it half-way to his lips ... ultimately kissing the dead pasteboard with all the

passionateness, and more than all of the devotion, of a young man of eighteen” (195). Phillotson kisses the photograph the way he cannot kiss its subject. He takes unfair advantage of her correspondence—misuses it. Unlike D’urberville, who uses the letter to protect himself from temptation, Phillotson manipulates Sue’s letters to satisfy lust.

Sue’s letters do not engender communication because Phillotson fetishizes them. Her correspondence surrenders her to Phillotson. He can summon her at will, ogle her, kiss her, and manipulate her words until Sue becomes an object, too. And this violation is not isolated to this moment. Hardy states that “such silent proceedings as those of this evening were repeated many and oft times” (196). The fact that they always occur “when he was not under the eye of the boys” suggests Phillotson’s awareness that he handles these objects unfairly (196). In *Tess of the D’urbervilles*, Tess begins to realize that she forfeits control of a letter—and its reception—when she sends it. Phillotson reinforces that idea. Sue gives her letters “no other thought than their speedy destruction,” but Phillotson keeps them, kisses them, becomes “distracted” by them (195). He does not use them the way they were intended; rather, he assigns them more value and meaning than Sue does. She has surrendered control over their reception. If, as Clym’s letter does in *The Return of the Native*, a letter projects the writer into a distant space, Sue’s letters allow her to be violated and taken advantage of. Koehler suggests that Sue “appears to be a willing accomplice in the construction of ideal illusions,” but this objectification cannot be consensual (107). These letters do not facilitate communication. Sue’s letters do not work.

Phillotson offers one example of a letter gone awry. It reaches its destination and is read by its recipient, but Phillotson so clearly misunderstands Sue’s meaning. To quench his longing to see her, he reads and re-reads expressions of her gratitude that he has “not been often to see her” (195). Communication does not characterize their correspondence. In her book *Postal*

Pleasures: Sex, Scandal, and Victorian Letters, Kate Thomas remarks that “epistolary fiction ... gave way to postal plots,” which “found excitement in the distance, separation, delays, and precipitous deliveries that could skew the trajectory of communication, or reveal how skewed any communicative trajectory always is” (2). Phillotson’s misuse of Sue’s letters is not exciting, but it does transform letters into fetishized objects, which underscores the “skewed ... trajectory of communication” between these two individuals (Thomas 2). Their difficulty communicating parallels Hardy’s relationship with his readers. In an 1896 letter to Jeannette Gilder, Hardy claims that “the way in which my books are interpreted [does] not much interest me” (*CL II*, 126). But this seems unlikely, given that “the critical condemnation *Jude* received left Hardy ... bewildered and alarmed” (Pite 358). Nevertheless, Hardy continues by stating that “those readers who, like yourself, could not see that ‘Jude’ ... makes for morality more than any other book I have written, are not likely to be made to do so by a newspaper article” (*CL II*, 126). Hardy recognizes that many readers will fail to understand him, Gilder among them. His certainty that *Jude* will be misread and misunderstood defines the novel.

In Part Third: At Melchester, Chapter VII, Hardy examines Sue’s letter to Jude to consider this likelihood of misreading. Hardy focuses on Jude’s first engagement with Sue’s letter. Before he ever reads her “tidings,” which “passed across Jude like a withering blast,” Jude notices Sue’s signature at the end of the letter (205). Hardy suggests that Jude “was led to suspect that its contents were of a somewhat serious kind by catching sight of the signature” (205). Jude’s act resembles skipping to the final page of a novel to see how it ends. Jude bypasses Sue’s message—in a way, violating it—to read her signature. This allows him to make inferences about her message. And Sue’s full name, something “never used in her correspondence with him since her first note,” alerts Jude to the unpleasant contents of her letter

(205). Koehler writes that “no matter how insistently Hardy demonstrates that the material aspects of a written message inform its meaning, he also remains sensitive to the ways in which these aspects may obstruct, obscure, or prevent successful communication” (94) With the foreknowledge Sue’s signature affords him, Jude prepares himself for bad news. He meets the letter predisposed and with an unfair advantage. In this sense, he misreads it. The materiality of the letter has obstructed communication.

But Jude’s reaction to the letter suggests additional misreading. After processing Susanna Florence Mary Bridehead’s announcement of her marriage, “Jude staggered” (205). He “could eat no breakfast; and kept on drinking tea because his mouth was so dry” (205). Sue’s news upsets Jude so much as to affect his physical state. He loses his appetite, and his mouth gets dry. These physical responses allude to the emotional impact of her letter. According to Hardy, Jude “felt worse than shedding tears” (205). Furthermore, when “presently he went back to his work,” he “laughed the usual bitter laugh of a man so confronted,” for “everything seemed turned to satire” (205). Both Jude’s physical and emotional state are altered by Sue’s letter; as a result, he sees the world differently. Nevertheless, Sue has once again failed to communicate the way she intended to. In her letter, she states that “I have something to tell you that perhaps you will not be surprised to hear” (205). Sue wrongly expects Jude to be nonplussed by her news. And, at the end of her letter, she requests that he “Wish me joy. Remember I say you are to, and you mustn’t refuse!” (205). The *Return of the Native* reader responds to the writer’s appeals, reacting as directed, and interpreting the message the way the writer intends. In *Jude*, however, Sue forfeits control over the receipt of her letter, and, despite cues in the letter itself, Jude misreads it. Her letter does not communicate information the way she intended. Letters in *Jude* are not infallible.

Not only are letters fallible, they are less desirable than other modes of communication. Hardy uses Arabella's letter in Part Fourth: At Shaston, Chapters II-III, to explore the limitations of letters. Unlike Thomasina in *The Return of the Native*, who uses the letter to clarify—or Tess, who doubts the letter's singularity—Arabella laments its constraints. She writes that she “should much have liked to let you know it by word of mouth, as I could have explained better than by letter” (332). In *Tess of the D'urbervilles*, Tess begins to question whether or not letters are the best way to communicate, but Arabella's statement suggests they are secondary to speaking. She feels unable to express herself in writing as well as she would like to—as well as she could have “by word of mouth” (332). The letter fails Arabella before she begins. On June 10, 1893, Hardy writes to long-time confidant Florence Henniker. He closes his letter requesting that she “Forgive this disjointed epistle” (*CL II*, 14). Hardy is aware, after writing, that his letter has been “disjointed”—not straightforward or effective—enough to warrant an apology. Like Arabella, Hardy is aware, even while writing it, that his letter will not do him justice. During this period, Hardy writes a string of letters, addressed primarily to Florence, that comment on their own “uninteresting” content (*CL II*, 141). Hardy, like Arabella, appears less than confident in his ability to communicate in a straightforward and engaging way.

Arabella's letter also fails her when she cannot control her readers. Upon her first visit to Aldbrickham, Arabella responds to Jude's not being “at home” or “able to see her” by asserting that “she would [rather] wait” than give Sue her message (318). Thus, her decision to “write about ... that private affair I wanted to speak to you on when I came down to Aldbrickham” is motivated by the fact that “I couldn't very well tell it to your lady friend” (332). Circumstance necessitates the letter, but speaking would have been preferable. As it is, Arabella uses a letter to direct her disclosure to Jude. The *Return of the Native* letter promises control over its readership.

The recipient respects the name in the greeting. But Jude disregards Arabella's mention that "I couldn't very well tell it to your lady friend" by sharing the letter with Sue anyway (332). He betrays the trust inherent in the letter form. And, not only does Jude allow Sue to intrude on private communication, he asks for her counsel in responding. This act breaches the trust established between himself and Arabella when she wrote the greeting: "Dear Jude" (332). In betraying her confidence, Jude mishandles Arabella's letter. Her letter fails her a second time.

Jude the Obscure functions similarly for Hardy. Despite the fact that Hardy "thought he had been moving in quite a fashionable direction" (Pite 358), the book met negative reviews, including being burned by the Bishop of Wakefield. Hardy acknowledges to Jeannette Gilder that "I am aware that the outcry against it in America was only an echo of its misrepresentation here" (*CL II*, 126). Public opinion did not support this scandalous story. But lack of support seems to bother Hardy less than misinterpretation. In a letter to Edmund Gosse, Hardy remarks:

It is curious that some of the papers should look upon the novel as a manifesto on "the marriage question" ... seeing that it is concerned first with the labors of a poor student to get a University degree, & secondly with the tragic issues of two bad marriages, owing in main to a doom or curse of hereditary temperament peculiar to the family of the parties.

The only remarks which can be said to bear on the *general* marriage question occur in dialogue, & comprise no more than half a dozen pages in a book of five hundred. (93)

Hardy finds the failure of *Jude's* readers to understand his writing "curious." Their misreading extracts the "marriage question" as the novel's predominant theme while Hardy—at least, according to this letter—did not intend that. In Hardy's biography, Pite states that "for the present, there seemed no way of recovering ... the sense of intimacy with his audience"—or mutual understanding—"that *Tess* ... had brought him. The reviewers blocked his path, and,

under their influence ... the public was abandoning him” (365). In response, and in the wake of misunderstanding, Hardy abandons the novel. It has, for the last time, failed to facilitate writer-reader communication.

Jude’s request that Arabella “write to Sue” on his behalf casts similar doubt on the effectiveness of written communication. This moment occurs in Part Sixth: At Christminster Again, Chapter VII. Here, Hardy explores the way letters facilitate miscommunication and misinterpretation. Jude counters Arabella’s claim that such a request “insult[s] a lawful wife” by arguing that “it is just in order not to insult you that I ask you” (469). Letters, sealed and private, suggest an intimacy between two people that is not appropriate for Jude and Sue. Similar correspondence damages Clym and Eustacia’s marriage in *The Return of the Native*; he finds her letters from Wildeve and knows she has been unfaithful. Jude, however, “wish[es] to be quite above-board with [Arabella], and with [Sue’s] husband” (469). He argues that a letter sent through Arabella would be “free from any odour of intrigue” (469). Jude does not wish to communicate with Sue in private because he recognizes that a letter can—and likely will—be misinterpreted. In Jude’s experience, as in Hardy’s, letters fail.

This choice, however, forfeits Jude’s control over the note’s construction and reception. Jude requests that Arabella write on his behalf—or, in his words, “execute a commission for him”—which allows her to use Jude’s name to do so (468). This defers responsibility for the letter back to him. But Jude can merely summarize the desired content of the message—that Sue “come to see me, because I’m ill, and should like to see her”—and hope it reflects that (469). Unlike Tess, who recognizes that despite her best efforts, her letters may be misinterpreted, Jude surrenders control over his writing. This trust is especially dangerous given Arabella’s negative regard for Sue, whom she labels a “rat” and a “strumpet” (469). Thus, Jude’s “considerable

hesitation” in asking Arabella to write for him suggests a recognition of possible failure (468). But Jude is confident that if he writes on his own, the letter *will* fail. Regardless of its contents, any note from him will arrive doused in an “odour of intrigue” (469). Thus, Jude, the person who *should* write the letter—the one who dictates it—does not. Arabella writes it. And Jude gives her power to sabotage his communication. On both counts, Jude’s letter fails him before it begins.

Jude’s request also suggests that the way a letter is sent is as meaningful as its contents. Hardy illustrates this first in *The Return of the Native*, narrating the path of Clym’s letter from Fairway to the mantelpiece. Focusing on this journey prompts the reader to consider how a letter reaches its destination. A letter’s path from writer to reader in *The Return of the Native* emphasizes the importance of that journey. But this process falls apart in *Jude the Obscure*. In *Jude*, the path undermines the letter’s effectiveness. Jude states that “I could find a dozen ways of sending a letter to her without your knowledge” (469). His reference to “a dozen ways” suggests a myriad modes of communication. It also evokes images of roses, another means of expressing affection. Had Jude chosen to send Sue roses, the package would have communicated a specific message. But Jude does not choose any of these “dozen ways.” He chooses the letter, and he asks Arabella to write on his behalf. This request suggests that form may be more important than content. If this is the case, then the letter fails again. Jude could write the letter on his own and ask Arabella to post it, but he does not. He removes himself from the creation process as much as possible, and removes himself from the letter’s path from writer to reader. Jude recognizes his dependence on the letter to communicate—evident in his choice to write Sue at all—but his request bypasses and undermines that dependence. Jude knows that his communication with Sue will likely be misinterpreted or misused. So if freedom from “any odour of intrigue” is more important than the letter’s content, and its content communicates less

than its appearance, then the letter facilitates a different type of communication (469). It does not work as intended. Jude knows that his letter will fail.

In the end, the lengths that Jude goes to to avoid misunderstanding circle right back into Phillotson, alone in his room, re-reading Sue's old letters. Once the letter leaves their hands, writers surrender control. Phillotson misuses Sue's letters, Jude misuses Arabella's, and Arabella, "although she had written it ... [,] never posted" Jude's letter (470). The letter fails all three, and each person, in turn, fails the letter. It is in Sue and Jude's final encounter—resulting from Jude's failure to write and Arabella's failure to send—that Jude exclaims: "Sue, Sue! We are acting by the letter; and 'the letter killeth'!" (472). Written communication falls open to interpretation and misinterpretation. The risk of misunderstanding and misuse is inherent in the process. And in *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy illustrates those risks. Language has limits. It will always be misused, because it is handled by imperfect people who lack the capacity to know or understand completely. The letter fails. It kills communication. So by the end of *Jude the Obscure*—as well as Hardy's career—miscommunication has become the most human form of communication.

Conclusion

This paper has traced Thomas Hardy's development as an author from 1882 to 1895, examining three specific novels and exploring the novelist's loss of faith in his chosen form. Soon after the publication of *Jude the Obscure* and the intensely negative reviews it received, Hardy abandoned the novel and turned to poetry. He claims in *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy* that the resulting criticism "turned out ultimately to be the best thing that could have happened" because it "well-nigh compelled him ... if he wished to retain any shadow of self-

respect, to abandon at once a form of literary art he had long intended to abandon at some indefinite time” (309). Hardy attempts to make his transition logical by suggesting that “the novel was ... gradually losing artistic form ... and becoming a spasmodic inventory of items, which has nothing to do with art” (309). But this claim seems questionable, given Hardy’s often “manic relentlessness about his work” up until that point (Pite 250), and his desperate need for validation from his readers. I argue, like Ralph Pite, that “these ... broad lines of the account Hardy gives in the *Life*” are “nothing like the full picture” (433). As is apparent as early as *Tess of the D’urbervilles*, Hardy was becoming disillusioned with the novel as a form of communication. With *Jude*, he realized he could no longer fulfill the “course” he outlines for himself in an 1879 letter to Mrs. Frank Hill: “to go on trying to please ... appreciative readers” (CL I, 65). With few remaining “appreciative” readers, and frustrated with communication, Hardy turns to poetry.

Poetry offers a logical alternative to the novel. It is inherently less straightforward and appeals to the abstract. It lacks the “beginning, middle, and end” that, according to the *Life*, makes the novel less “artistic” or attractive (309). Poetry provides a space in which Hardy can converse with himself. Less concerned with facilitating communication with an audience, he reduces the likelihood of misunderstanding. Koehler comments on Hardy’s anxieties about this, remarking that “Hardy, so intent upon retaining control over his private identity and public image, took great care to deprive future readers and biographers of epistolary records, hoping to thus protect himself against the risks of misinterpretation” (81). Perturbed by the possibility of misrepresentation, and disillusioned with letters, Hardy destroys his correspondence and abandons the novel. Hardy himself offers insight into this transformation in 1899:

No man's poetry can be truly judged till its last line is written. What is the last line? The death of the poet. And hence there is this quaint consolation to the writer of verse—that it may be imperishable for all that anybody can tell him to the contrary. (qtd. in *Thomas Hardy: a critical biography* 309-310, *emph. add*)

Thomas Hardy finds solace in a form that cannot be misunderstood. And the letter, as illustrated in *The Return of the Native*, *Tess of the D'urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure*, is the key to understanding Hardy's choice to turn to poetry.

Word Count: 13,477

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Reflection

The letter as a form of communication fascinates me. It simultaneously overcomes distance and perpetuates it. Letters offer a space for the writer to muse and meditate, ideal for private thought, but also a space that the reader can witness and participate in. The tension between distance and intimacy inherent in this form have been the focus of my research for the past two years. In addition, I have long-since been interested in the novels of Thomas Hardy. His strong heroines and resistance of societal norms caught my attention in high school, but I never had the opportunity to study his writing as an undergraduate. I wanted to use my capstone to do that work. In the culminating project of my undergraduate education, the two topics I am most interested in intersect: Thomas Hardy, and letters.

I was nervous approaching this project because I had never written such a large paper or conducted an extensive literary criticism project before. I didn't know how or where to begin, only had an idea that I was excited about. Dr. Brian McCuskey enthusiastically agreed to help me, and he has supported me throughout the entire process. I am grateful for his guidance and expertise. Dr. McCuskey not only had high expectations for me from the beginning—demanding my best in crafting arguments and writing them—but he expressed confidence in my ability to think critically and rise to meet the challenge. I never doubted that he believed I could do this, and he never let me produce anything less than my best. I admired Dr. McCuskey in the classroom as a teacher, but the chance to work with him outside the classroom has been invaluable. I have learned so much about conducting literary research, and my writing has continued to improve. I am grateful for the opportunity to work closely with him on this project.

This project was also formative for me because I had never done “English research” before. As an Undergraduate Research Fellow, I began helping professors with research projects

as a freshman. I assisted with and completed research projects about English and Spanish teaching, but I didn't do research in the English department until junior year, when I completed a creative nonfiction writing project with Dr. Sinor. While working on that project, I realized that English research is my passion. I wanted to write a literary analysis paper for my capstone. This project has pushed me to think critically about multiple texts, make connections with the world beyond those texts, and consider why those texts—and the questions they raise—are still relevant today. Engaging in this process has prepared me to teach English in a high school classroom during my student teaching. It has also helped me raise my expectations for other writers and think more deeply about the importance of writing thoughtfully and concisely in every context.

Although my capstone project focuses primarily literary analysis, its findings are relevant across disciplines. One key question I considered while completing this project was how letters both facilitate and impede, prevent, or disrupt communication. I am fascinated by the concept of communication, and while the letter overcomes certain obstacles to communication (such as distance and time), it creates others. Because of these considerations—and investigation about the role and evolution of the Penny Post in Victorian society—my research spills over into disciplines such as communications, sociology, and history. This project also informs my performance as a teacher in the English classroom as I recognize the potential for misunderstanding inherent—and almost inevitable—in writing.

Upon completing this project, I had the opportunity to present my findings twice: first at NCUR and then at Utah State's annual Student Research Symposium. In both settings, I shared my research about Thomas Hardy and the ways my analysis sheds light on his decision to abandon the novel. While presenting, I realized how few people have heard of or are thinking about Thomas Hardy. For a moment, it felt as though my research wasn't relevant, since no

heads shot up when I introduced my topic, and my presentation didn't draw a crowd at NCUR. I realized, however, that communication is still as much of an issue now as it was in the late 19th century. Social media and texting continue to introduce different difficulties. But anxieties today about technology's failure to facilitate communication mirror Victorian anxieties. That is why Hardy's writing, especially through the lens of letters, is still relevant. English research is not obsolete or "only for English majors." The questions that literature has been grappling with for centuries are the questions that people still think about. For this reason, I believe that my thesis makes an important contribution to a larger community.

In addition, not much research exists about letters in Hardy's novels. Only one scholar, Karin Koehler, has studied this topic, and her book *Thomas Hardy and Victorian Communication: Letters, Telegrams, and Postal Systems* was published as recently as 2016. Koehler calls for additional investigation about Hardy's depiction of letters, and I had analyzed his novels and generated this topic on my own before stumbling into her writing. It was gratifying to realize that I was contributing to a larger conversation, one that is lacking and in need of further research. So, ultimately, I feel I have considered questions that continue to resonate within our society. I have also engaged in a conversation with critics and scholars and contributed unique ideas to that conversation. Realizing that I too can have interesting ideas and something to say has changed my perspective on research. I want to continue participating in that conversation.

Working on this project has solidified my desire to pursue a graduate degree. Engaging in the large-scale research-writing process helped me prepare for and feel more comfortable with the type of research I would do as a graduate student. I have also come to realize my passion for literary analysis. It is so fulfilling to make discoveries about literature and transform those ideas

into a text that others can read, think about, and respond to. I want to continue asking questions, researching, and writing for the rest of my life. This document will be the writing sample that I use in my graduate school applications and it is, quite honestly, the reason I decided to go. I feel much more prepared for grad school than I would have had it not been for Dr. McCuskey's support and the opportunity to complete a capstone project about a topic I'm interested in pursuing further in the future.

Word Count: 1,093

Author Bio

Morgan Sanford will graduate Summa cum Laude with a major in English and a minor in Spanish Teaching in December 2018. She was the 2017-2018 Undergraduate Researcher of the Year for the English Department and the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. She has presented research at SCOLAS, NCUR, UCUR, Research on Capitol Hill, various departmental and university-wide symposiums at Utah State, and the annual Sigma Tau Delta Convention. She is an Undergraduate Research Fellow and has worked as a Writing Fellow and Honors Undergraduate Teaching Fellow. Morgan served as president of the Rho Tau Chapter of Sigma Tau Delta, the International English Honors Society, during the 2017-2018 school year. She also served on the Honors Student Advisory Board and the English Teaching Advisory Board. She has received funding from the CHaSS Faculty-Student Summer Mentorship Grant to visit the Pablo Neruda Foundation in Chile and conduct archival research during Summer 2018. Her research interests include nineteenth- and twentieth-century British literature, creative nonfiction writing, and Latin-American literature. She plans to pursue a graduate degree in English Literature following her graduation.