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

Morgan Sanford, Utah State University
Some Context: Penny Post 101

- Prior to the Penny Post:
  - Poor laborers could not afford to pay postage
  - Postage paid on receipt
  - Communications barrier for rural communities

- The birth of the Penny Post: January 10, 1840

- “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”
  

- Post-Penny Post:
  - Lowering of postage increased volume of letters
  - “A vehicle for intimacy in Victorian culture” (Golden 216)
Why Letters? Why Hardy?

  - “The representation of written communication and communication technology in Hardy’s works ... remains largely overlooked”
  - “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)
  - “The possibilities, risks, and failures of communication are a central theme, if not the central theme, of Hardy’s writing” (16-17)

“It is time to consider Hardy’s portrayal of written communication ... more fully and for its own sake” (16)
Letters in Hardy

- *The Return of the Native* (1878), *Tess of the D’urbervilles* (1892), *Jude the Obscure* (1895)

- This research seeks to:
  - “Analyze the function of letters in the novels”
  - “Orient Hardy’s depictions of the letter within the context of his career”
  - “Shed light on Hardy’s perception of—and gradual disillusionment with—writing as a form of communication”
The Return of the Native (1878)
Jude the Obscure (1895)
Thank You