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Author(s)	Yoshinaka, Takashi
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# A Tabby Kitten in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*

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Takashi Yoshinaka

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It is well known that the Hardys kept cats, and that Hardy loved them so much that one episode in his biographies shows him 'answering the door in stocking feet because young kittens were underfoot'. His first wife Emma regarded the 'Egyptian Pet' as a 'superior animal' and not only did they have a special pet cemetery at Max Gate but Hardy also composed several elegiac poems to his beloved animal companions.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the frequent and casual appearance of cats in Hardy's novels may not be surprising. His treatment of a cat in *Jude the Obscure* (1895), however, is not unintentional. When the protagonist's son, whose birth and existence were suddenly and shockingly disclosed by Arabella, has arrived at the station on his own, the narrator describes him and the inside of the compartment as follows:

His eyes remained mostly fixed on the back of the seat opposite, and never turned to the window even when a station was reached and called. On the other seat were two or three passengers, one of them a working woman who held a basket on her lap, in which was a tabby kitten. The woman opened the cover now and then, whereupon the kitten would put out its head, and indulge in playful antics. At these the fellow-passengers laughed, except the solitary boy bearing the key and ticket, who, regarding the kitten with his saucer eyes, seemed mutely to say: 'All laughing comes from misapprehension. Rightly looked at there is no laughing thing under the sun.'<sup>2</sup>

No one, to the best of my knowledge, has ever noted, let alone sought to demonstrate, that this 'tabby kitten' could be related to the 'little Tabby' in

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<sup>1</sup> Anna West, *Thomas Hardy and Animals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 14, 166, 180-181.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, ed. Dennis Taylor (1895; London: Penguin, 1998), p. 276. All quotations are taken from this edition.

Wordsworth's poem 'The Kitten and the Falling Leaves'.

Bernard Jones has shown that from about 1865 Hardy had been a close reader of Wordsworth's poetry, and Peter Casagrande, arguing that as late as 1922 Hardy 'continued to wish to be seen as a descendant of Wordsworth', has listed over 60 explicit allusions to this Romantic poet in Hardy's novels and other prose writings.<sup>3</sup> According to Casagrande, Hardy's much-marked personal copy of an 1864 edition of Wordsworth's poems, preserved in the Thomas Hardy Memorial Library at the Dorset County Museum, shows the fact that Hardy carefully read 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality'. Accordingly, Casagrande lists Wordsworth's words 'the glory and the dream' in line 57 of this ode as the only reference in *Jude the Obscure*, where Jude's early dream of study at Christminster is reminisced about ('the gleam and glory', p. 78).<sup>4</sup> And Dennis Taylor has noted Hardy's other, more interesting, allusion to the same ode in Part 1, Chapter 4 of *Jude the Obscure*.<sup>5</sup> Expecting and waiting in vain for the quack physician Vilbert to bring 'the grammars' of Latin and Greek for him, the aspiring boy Jude

smiled with that singularly beautiful irradiation which is seen to spread on young faces at the inception of some glorious idea, as if a supernatural lamp were inside their transparent natures, giving rise to the flattering fancy that heaven lies about them then. (p. 28)

Here, referring to Wordsworth's idea that 'Heaven lies about us in our infancy' ('Ode', line 66) as 'the flattering fancy', Hardy seems to satirize and reverse the Romantic discourse of childhood. From Hardy's point of view, the relationship between the child's interiority and the outside world, which Wordsworth asserts is based upon harmony, congruity, and reciprocity, is seriously impaired and ironically regarded as having been produced by immature misunderstanding

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<sup>3</sup> Bernard Jones, '1798–1898: Wordsworth, Hardy, and "The Real Language of Men": A Centenary Note', *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature* 80, 6 (1999), p. 509 [509–517]. Peter Casagrande, 'Hardy's Wordsworth: A Record and a Commentary', *English Literature in Transition 1880–1920*, 20, 4 (1977), p. 226 [210–237].

<sup>4</sup> Casagrande, p. 219. Hardy's words also echo Wordsworth's phrase 'visionary gleam' in the preceding line of the poem.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, p. 415. See also Dennis Taylor, 'Hardy and Wordsworth', *Victorian Poetry*, 24, 4 (1986), p. 443 [441–454].

and subjective assumptions. It should be remembered, however, that Hardy here only emphasizes what Wordsworth himself already knew. In his copy, Hardy marked lines 127-129 of the ode with parallel lines in the margin: 'Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight, / And custom lie upon thee with a weight, / Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!' On the other hand, however, Hardy does admit that there are such things as songs of innocence when he has the experienced Jude hear coming from Phillotson's school 'the usual sing-song tones of the little voices that had not learnt Creation's groan' (p. 387).

It is evident, I would like to point out, that the son of Jude and Arabella, 'Little Father Time', is a grotesque parody of the Wordsworthian child. In the ninth stanza of the 'Immortality Ode', though 'inland far' (line 163), the speaker can look back on an 'immortal sea' (line 164) and can 'hear the mighty waters rolling evermore' (line 168). By contrast, in *Jude the Obscure*, the narrator says of this 'enslaved and dwarfed Divinity, sitting passive':

A ground swell from ancient years of night seemed now and then to lift the child in this his morning-life, when his face took a back view over some great Atlantic of time, and appeared not to care about what it saw.  
(p. 276)

His total indifference to the 'immediate figures' (p. 276) in the carriage is evident in his attitude towards the kitten as well.

In Wordsworth's 'The Kitten and the Falling Leaves', the poet celebrates the pure joy which his baby daughter spontaneously expresses by responding to the kitten innocently sporting with the falling leaves:

Such a light of gladness breaks,  
Pretty Kitten! From thy freaks, —  
Spreads with such a living grace  
O'er my little Laura's face.]

(lines 101-104)

Given the other verbal echoes of Wordsworth in Hardy, and the very strong likelihood that Hardy as a cat lover was attracted by, and did read, this poem about a kitten, which is included in his copy of *The Poetical Works of William*

*Wordsworth: A New Edition With a Life* (London: Routledge, 1864), pp. 114–116,<sup>6</sup> it seems almost certain that Hardy echoes Wordsworth's description of the 'antics play'd' (line 33) by the 'little Tabby' (line 36), when he describes the 'playful antics' of 'a tabby kitten', and that he intended the contrast between the child 'laughing in my arms' (line 106) and the child who seems to think 'there is no laughing thing under the sun'. The latter is, the narrator says, 'Age masquerading as Juvenility'. This neglected child, the reader perceives, had lived too hard a life by then to retain a natural childlike innocence. His ability to laugh had to be paralyzed. Little Father Time's consciousness cannot enjoy a moment-by-moment pleasure but rather has to find an absurd meaning in it and to see no purpose in life as a whole. At the Wessex Agricultural Show, for example, while Sue, adoring and smelling roses in the pavilion of flowers, feels a kind of *carpe diem* happiness, this ironically mature boy has to 'keep on thinking they [will] be all withered in a few days!' (p. 297) It is not surprising, therefore, that the kitten's 'antics' cannot provide a Wordsworthian spot of time for Little Father Time, who seems 'never to have concerned himself with the particulars' (p. 278). The 'enslaved and dwarfed Divinity' (p. 276), then, having lost the ability to indulge in play, represents Hardy's pessimistic reversal of the divinity which Wordsworth has discovered in childlike innocence. And this contrast is revealed by their common (i.e., shared and ordinary) attention to a tabby kitten.

*Hiroshima University*

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<sup>6</sup> I am very grateful for Mr Andrew H. Leah, Hon. Archivist of the Dorset County Museum, who had the kindness to send me photographs of the relevant pages of Hardy's copy of Wordsworth. The COVID-19 prevents me from travelling in 2021.