

Determinism and Pessimism in the Novels of Thomas Hardy

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Hardy set his "Novels of Character and Environment," as he did most of his other novels, poems and short stories, around the market town of Dorchester ('Casterbridge'), near his boyhood home at Bockhampton, on the edge of 'Egdon' Heath. Although both Anthony Trollope (1815-82) and George Eliot (1819-80) had used similar settings in their novels, Hardy's rural backdrop is neither romantic nor idealized. From the publication of his first novels Hardy's critics accused him of being overly pessimistic about humanity's place in the scheme of things. In all his fiction, chance is the incarnation of the blind forces controlling human destiny," as Lord David Cecil remarks in *Hardy the Novelist*, p. 24-30. Ironically the blind forces of 'Hap' seem to favour certain characters while they relentlessly pursue those who deserve better, such as Tess, as well as those whose ends we might regard as proof of *Nemesis* or Poetic Justice (Sergeant Troy in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Lucetta in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and Alec in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*). An entry in Hardy's notebook dated April 1878 gives us a clue to the guiding principle behind his fiction:

A Plot, or Tragedy, should arise from the gradual closing in of a situation that comes of ordinary human passions, prejudices, and ambitions, by reason of the characters taking no trouble to ward off the disastrous events produced by the said passions, prejudices, and ambitions.

The tremendous emotions experienced by Hardy's powerful and elemental characters are in contrast to the placid, accepting natures of the lesser mortals whom we meet in the taverns of Casterbridge, around bonfires, and harvesting in the fields. Critics generally feel that Hardy intends these rustics to be taken as "the symbol of the great majority of humdrum mortals," a chorus in the original Greek sense that "gives the reader a standard of normality by which he can gauge the heights and depths to which the main characters rise and fall." Social gatherings such as the opening bonfire in *The Return of the Native* (1878) and the planning of the Skimmington in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, for example, suggest the choric scenes of Greek tragedy and more particularly of the commoners of Shakespearean drama. Like the great tragedies of fifth-century Athens and Elizabethan England, Hardy's Novels of Character and Environment convey a strong sense of fatalism, a view that in life human actions have been predetermined, either by the very nature of things, or by God, or by Fate. Hardy dramatized his conception of destiny in human affairs as the Imminent Will in his poetry, especially in his poetic drama of the Napoleonic wars, *The Dynasts*. By his emphasis on chance and circumstance in the plots of his stories Hardy consistently suggests that human will is not free but fettered. In both *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Under the Greenwood Tree*, for example, he employs chance coincidence as more than a mere device of plotting. Dick Dewey in *Under the Greenwood Tree* is called away to a friend's funeral on the same day that his beloved, Fancy Day, is to debut as the church organist, and Angel returns to Tess from Brazil and near-death after she has established a commonlaw marriage with Alec. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), Hardy seems to apply the concept of 'Fortune's False Wheel' (which Chaucer discusses at length in "The Monk's Tale" and to which Shakespeare alludes many times in *King Lear*) to the rise and fall of Michael Henchard: starting as a poor hay-trusser with a drinking problem, he renounces alcohol and works his way up to become the town's leading corn factor and mayor, only to undergo a startling series of reversals and end life an outcast.

Although *Far from the Madding Crowd* has some of the qualities of Shakespearean comedy, most of the Novels of Character and Environment (also known as "The Wessex Novels") such as *The Return of the Native* are tragic in their

conception. The conclusion of the former, however, is not entirely happy, while the latter's ending with the marriage of the enigmatic Diggory Venn and the pathetic Thomasin was the consequence of Hardy's modifying his original plan to satisfy the readers of his serial version.

This feeling of the constant attrition, and final obliteration, of the human shape and all human structures, permeates Hardy's work. Interviewed about Stonehenge he commented that "it is a matter of wonder that the erection has stood so long," adding however that "time nibbles year after year" at the structure (Tony Tanner, "Colour and Movement in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*," *The Victorian Novel: Essays in Criticism* : 425). In contrast to 'grand' ruins both inanimate and human, a minor and more normative character such as publican of the Three Mariners, Mrs. Stannidge, has a more even life; yet is the jovial inn-keeper really more fortunate for not having been tested by experience? Hardy like Milton could "not praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue." In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy clarified the happy "blessings" of mediocrity:

A well-proportioned mind is one which shows no particular bias; one of which we may safely say that it will never cause its owner to be confined as a madman . . . [or] to be applauded as a prophet . . .

Like Joseph Conrad, Thomas Hardy attempted in his fiction to comment on the macrocosm of the human race through an intense study of a microcosm well known to him, the rural society of nineteenth-century 'Wessex', where, from time to time, dramas of a grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean are enacted in the real, by virtue of the concentrated passion and closely-knit inter-dependence of the lives therein. (*Woodlanders*, I)

Despite an obvious fascination for those capable of powerful emotions and tragic fates, Hardy nevertheless expresses sympathy for the lower orders, then rapidly departing their ancestral cottages in search of a better standard of living in the "urban roar" (to quote Hardy's lyric "Where the Picnic Was") of England's industrial cities. Hardy attempts to record such customs as the mumming (in *The Return of the Native*) and the skimmington (in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*), and such superstitions as the fetishistic wax doll (in *RoN*), for these folk-ways were being swiftly destroyed, along with the old folk-lore and orally-transmitted ballads and tales, by education, migration, and printed books and papers.

Complementing his minor roles as folklorist and anthropologist, Hardy was very much the social critic. In his fiction, not only natural forces (such as the adverse weather that assists in ruining Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*) but also human society seem bent on crushing the sensitive and imaginative individual. Society inflicts its gratuitous suffering through exercising outworn conventions and superficial values, as well as through the new age's emphasis on efficiency. The "passionless permanence" of Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native* and the Roman antiquities of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* contrast with futile and pitifully brief human existence. In the novels of Thomas Hardy, time moves rhythmically, in seasons and ages, rather than mechanically, according to watch and even calendar.

As a realist, Hardy felt that art should describe and comment upon actual situations, such as the heavy lot of the rural labourers and the bleak lives of oppressed women. Though the Victorian reading public tolerated his depiction of the problems of modernity, it was less receptive to his religious scepticism and criticism of the divorce laws. His public and critics were especially offended by his frankness about relations between the sexes, particularly in his depicting the seduction of a village girl in *Tess*, and the sexual entrapment and child murders of *Jude*. The passages which so incensed the late Victorians the average twentieth-century reader is apt to miss because Hardy dealt with delicate matters obliquely. The modern reader encounters the prostitutes of Casterbridge's Mixen Lane without recognizing them, and concludes somewhat after the 'Chase' scene in *Tess* that it was then and there that the rape occurred. In Hardy's novels female principals differ from one another far less than do his male principals. The temperamental capriciousness of such characters as Fancy Day, Eustacia Vye, and Bathsheba Everdene arises from an immediate and instinctive obedience to emotional impulse without sufficient corrective control of reason. Hardy's women rarely engage in such intellectual occupations as looking ahead. Of all of Hardy's women, surely it is Tess who has won the greatest respect for her strength of character and struggle to be treated as an individual. As W. R. Herman notes, Tess rejects both the past and the future that threaten to "engulf" her in favour of "the eternal now" (*Explicator* 18, 3: item no. 16), but these inexorable forces close in on her nonetheless at Stonehenge, symbol of the ever-present past. Hardy's attitudes towards women were complex because of his own experiences. Certainly the latter stages of his own marriage to Emma Lavinia Gifford must have contributed much to his somewhat equivocal attitudes. On the one hand, Hardy praises female endurance, strength, passion, and sensitivity; on the other, he depicts women as meek, vain, plotting creatures of mercurial moods. As a young

man, Hardy was easily infatuated, and easily wounded by rejection. Often he describes his bright and beautiful heroines, many drawn from such real-life figures as school-mistress Tryphena Sparks, at length: the blush of their cheeks, the arch of their eyebrows, their likeness to particular birds or flowers. Even modern female readers accept the truth of Hardy's female protagonists because, despite his implication that woman is the weaker sex, as Hardy remarked, "No woman can begrudge flattery."

Rarely do his minor female characters have either inner strength or spiritual power or physical beauty. He treats them with a fond irony, as with Bathsheba's maid Liddy in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, with her "womanly dignity of a diminutive order." Although the old furmity vendor of *MoC*, androgynous or an "anti-woman" as she has been dubbed, appears on only a few occasions, Hardy treats her with the same respect and faithfulness of description that characterize his treatment of "Wide-Oh" (more properly, 'Conjurer Fall') in the same novel. Perhaps, as in *The Well-Beloved*, Hardy's chief female characters are based on the artist's personal conception of the feminine ideal. The quiet, shy, strong-minded, moral, and responsible Elizabeth-Jane of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* endures the trials of poverty, but is able to learn from bitter experience, even providing herself with an education in the classics, just as young Thomas Hardy, the former Dorchester architect's apprentice, had done. The independently-minded Bathsheba of *Far from the Madding Crowd* is, in contrast to Elizabeth-Jane, a non-conformist because she tries to run her own farm and manage men; yet Hardy has her act with a spontaneity of feeling and feel at times inferior to men. However, the novelist reveals his sensitivity towards the situation of women in his society by showing Bathsheba's all-too-modern conflict between the desire for marriage and that for individuality and independence.

In all of Hardy's great novels there are frustrating, imprisoning marriages that may reflect his own first marriage. Though these relationships may seem almost 'sexless' to the modern reader, they are nevertheless quite believable. The "stale familiarity" that characterizes the relationship between young Susan and Michael Henchard as they trudge towards Weydon- Priors in the opening pages of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is a nimbus that hangs over the unions of Eustacia and Clym in *The Return of the Native*, Lucetta and Farfrae in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Bathsheba and Troy in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and, of course, Jude and Arabella in *Jude*. The novelist, united in holy acrimony for all but three of the thirty-eight years of his first marriage, clearly saw the need and argued eloquently for reasonable and human divorce laws. Unsuitable matches in his novels inevitably lead to suffering for both partners. Early in the same year which saw the death of Emma Hardy, the novelist expressed the opinion in *Hearst's Magazine* (1912) that "the English marriage laws are. . . the gratuitous cause of at least half the misery of the community." There is a strong element of wish-fulfilment in Hardy's sparing Donald Farfrae in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* a protracted marriage to the egotistical and small-minded Lucetta.

Hardy put so much of himself into his fiction that it is hardly surprising he gave it up for poetry after the hostile reception of his last and greatest novels, *Tess* and *Jude*. It was his cynical pessimism and social realism rather than his sympathy with his largely female protagonists that led him into difficulties.

Hardy's heroes, like Clym and Jude and Henchard, are able to struggle actively with their destiny, form plans for opposing it, try to hew out a recognized place in the world. The women in his novels have no such outlet, and this makes their situation more tragic. They are limited to a very few, easily recognizable social roles, and they are always subject to sexual domination and destruction from men [Merryn Williams, *Thomas Hardy and Rural England* : 90-91]

Alluding to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Hardy felt that "A story must be exceptional enough to justify its telling. We tale-tellers are all Ancient Mariners, and none of us is warranted in stopping Wedding Guests (in other words, the hurrying public) unless he has something more unusual to relate than the ordinary experience of every average man and woman." From Hardy's first ventures into fiction he had attempted "the adjustment of things unusual to things external and universal."

Although the frequent iteration of sensational event, surprise, dramatic suspense, irony of circumstance, and reversal of fortune strain the probability of his novels, as he was well aware, Hardy took comfort in the realization that probability of character is far more important than probability of incident. "This accords with Hardy's last definition of tragedy: 'The best tragedy — highest tragedy, in short is that of the WORTHY encompassed by the INEVITABLE'" (F. B. Pinion, *A Hardy Companion* : 145). In "Thomas Hardy's Tragic Hero," Ted R. Spivey argues against Ernest Baker's contention that Hardy's heroes are never quite tragic in the Aristotelian sense because they suffer not from a clearly-defined *hamartia* (an

undermining flaw or fatal error in judgement) but from "paralysis of the will." Spivey contends that Hardy "was a writer of tragedies, a tragic poet, if you will, who did his work in prose" (*Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 9: 181) rather than in the traditional tragic medium, verse drama. In his great novels — *The Return of the Native*, *Jude the Obscure*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* — Hardy saw man beaten down by forces within and without himself and sought to record man's eternal struggle with fate. This is also what the Greeks and Shakespeare do. Conceding that Hardy's heroes lack the universality, the rich intellects and imaginations of Shakespeare's heroes, Spivey nevertheless sees in Tess and Jude "souls capable of great feeling, souls capable of exultation" and "nobility of passion" (182). He concludes that "Tragedy for Hardy is the defeat of the romantic hero's desire to reach a higher spiritual state. The drives of Hardy's characters to achieve states of love and ecstasy are powerful enough to make his chief characters among the most passionate in English literature" (188-9) His tragic heroes and heroines cry out defiantly against their fate, but accept their doom with an insight into and an awareness of the forces of evil which have effected their downfall; by the very strength of their passions Hardy's protagonists command our sympathies, "and we experience a feeling that someone of great worth has been lost when we see them destroyed" (183). Although we do not meet them on the stage, Hardy's heroes and heroines are specifically "tragic" in the Aristotelian sense because they elicit from the reader the requisite (and somewhat contradictory) responses of pity and fear.

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