

Three Tragic Novels of Thomas Hardy

by Alma Evers



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Scope of Topic

A consideration of three tragic novels by Thomas Hardy, of critical reaction to them and of the importance in them of his concern for animals.

BOOKS TO READ

Thomas Hardy: *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (Macmillan, 1957)

Thomas Hardy: *The Return of the Native* (Macmillan, 1957)

Thomas Hardy: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (Macmillan, 1957)

NOTES

Hardy may take much of the credit for major changes in the concept of the tragic hero and, even more, the tragic heroine. In classical tragedy, the hero is of high social status with at least potentially great political power. Hardy's idea of tragedy lies not in the externals of a character's situation and experiences but in the capacity for extraordinarily intense suffering, an extreme sensitivity, a quality he shared with his own creations. At best, this takes the form of an exceptional degree of sympathetic imagination — again, the chief virtue often attributed to Hardy — which is illustrated by Tess in her finest moment. Though grief stricken and in terrible trouble, she reproaches herself for not noticing the injured gamebirds whom she puts down with brave compassion. Hardy hoped that human beings generally might develop into a higher, gentler form typified by Tess and that literature could help to educate them into 'loving kindness.' Indeed, far from being the pessimist of received opinion, he stated unequivocally that, until the First World War killed off such hopes for him, he believed in 'evolutionary meliorism', the possible gradual improvement of human nature with enhanced sensibility.

There is a strong tradition of reading into Hardy's tragedy a controlling malignant or indifferent Fate, the reference to the 'President of the Immortals' at the end of *Tess* often being taken as a key to the whole book — even to an entire coherent philosophical outlook — though Hardy claimed it was little more than a throwaway line. However, a really close examination of the novels can lead to the identification of a quite different common thread: in most cases, disaster results from a protagonist's major failure of judgement. Hardy's heroes and heroines often suffer from a form of romantic pygmalionism. They construct, prematurely and on insufficient evidence, out of their own imaginative wishful thinking, a potential lover; subsequently, they prove inflexible, unable to accept the real person. Tess's adulation of Angel (her relationship with him is repeatedly depicted in terms of heliolatry, sun worship, which reaches its culmination at Stone Henge) while he loves a non-existent 'child of nature.' Eustacia needs, in her boredom and idleness, to fall in love with Clym as she literally finds nothing better to do (note the basic cliché of the knight imagery of her dream and the mumming play) and he, even more absurdly, sees her as the future matron of a boy's school! Throughout the greater part of Hardy's prose, parallels can be found of such victims of their own fantasies and rigidity of outlook.

Such failure of perspicacity, of course, involves a similar failure of self-knowledge. Mistakes over choosing a mate spring partly from a mistaken idea of one's own personality. Eustacia, perhaps more than any other creation of Hardy's, has little grasp of reality. She is repeatedly

presented as an essentially histrionic woman. Edgdon is her natural auditorium in which, often with herself as her only audience, she strikes melodramatic, prima donna attitudes; the irony with which she is portrayed is indicated above all by her posturing being compared to the operatic 'Queen of the Night.'

Michael Henchard conforms more closely to the classic tragic hero in having the basic defect of pride, the proto-sin, which leads to the great mistake of the wife sale and the subsequent retribution it brings. However, his sad life can also be seen as, primarily, the painful acquisition, too late, of self-knowledge. (Critics have often commented on his affinity with King Lear; both have slenderly known themselves.) By the time of his virtual passive suicide, this usually unreflective man has come to realise that, perhaps, his motivating desire has been less for power and status than to be loved; by the very end, pitifully, he would be ready to settle for just being permitted to love.

It is a matter for the individual reader's interpretation and approach to the whole issue of literary 'character', whether Henchard has fundamentally changed over some two decades or whether he has failed from the beginning to understand his own emotional temperament.

Closely linked to the inability to accept the present and thus be constructive about the future is a similar inability to come to terms with the past.

Many of Hardy's people will never be able to cope with bygones till they are bygones themselves. His novels can be read as a case of one damn' thing before another. Michael Henchard's wife returns, as do Lucetta and the furmity-seller as an embodiment of nemesis, an involuntary link in the chain leading to his public disgrace. Clym, the native, returns but, although when furze-cutting he has become so assimilated into the heath that he is accepted by the animals of Edgdon as almost one of themselves, he, nevertheless, has been alienated by his experience of the outside world. Thus he returns with inappropriate ideas for reforming, transforming, the lives of the human heath-dwellers who tolerate him as an unfortunate, irrelevant eccentric; he illustrates the apparent futility of trying to retrieve the past. Tess, it is suggested, has, innocently, inherited some of the guilt of her knightly ancestors' misdeeds, a d'Urberville curse, like some classic heroes expiating the offences committed by others. More importantly, she rejects, to a large extent, her own capacity for free will; she regards human life as existing on a blighted planet and herself as, inherently, a natural victim. Paradoxically, though she does not accept her own (limited) freedom of choice, she cannot forgive herself or Alec for having, briefly, been lovers and, in turn, Angel cannot forgive her common human fallibility.

It is helpful and entertaining to approach this situation from another angle, *The Hand of Ethelberta*, a comic, 'minor' novel much underrated, especially by those who have not read it. Ethelberta is a Darwinian survivor, in many ways the reverse image of Tess. With full self-knowledge, perception and a total lack of idealism or illusion, she counts love well lost for the world. With this clear-sightedness, ambition plus a gift for strategy and, above all, adaptability, Ethelberta, a professional story-teller, effectively constructs herself: she writes her own script and then acts it out but, unlike Eustacia, keeping her consciousness ironically distanced from the adopted persona. Ethelberta, like Tess, helps to support the younger siblings in her large, working-class family chiefly but, in her case, by marrying and utterly subduing a naughty old aristocrat, ending as the almost feudal autocratic lady of an increasingly prosperous estate.

Because they are, in terms of social class, generally humble and obscure, Hardyan heroes cannot have an impact on a whole society comparable with that of their classic forerunners. However, as egregious individuals, they do, nevertheless, have an important and often disastrous effect on those in their own small circles. Michael Henchard, the only one with anything approaching political power, though he makes two women unhappy, damages himself most; his public punishment as the proud temporary leader of Casterbridge society fits the offence in that it takes the form of humiliation; what makes the reader pity him is that all his mistakes are due to rashness and spontaneity; there is no premeditated malice in him.

Eustacia, a brilliant study of concentrated, single-minded selfishness, manages to cause havoc in the more limited arena of Edgdon. In her egotism, she causes deep unhappiness to

Clym, his mother and cousin and totally destroys Wildene and herself. In this respect, it is interesting to compare her to Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. Both these works by contemporaries of Hardy, who especially admired the latter and supported him when attacked by critics for his 'immorality', portray Continental equivalents of Eustacia: women bored and frustrated in their very limited provincial environments. Like her, they are self-deluding, egotistic and, like her, destroy those closest to them. They can also be compared to Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch* though, unlike them, Rosamond is a survivor. Although, in her own estimation, she aspires to heroic proportions and is accorded the authorial tribute of possessing some of the raw material of a classical divinity, in fact, it is with Clym that Greek myths are implicitly associated. This thought-ridden man of the future, presented as a possible alternative to the Tess model, has been seen as a failed Prometheus, trying in vain to bring enlightenment to 'pagan' Egdon; in his close, difficult relationship with Mrs Yeobright there is a clear echo of Oedipus.

Tess, in her own rare accurate moments of self-assessment, is so tender she cannot bear to hurt a fly - unlike Eustacia who, in her moth signals, shows her casual disregard for all her sentient fellow-creatures. Yet instances of violence cluster round her: the death of Prince, her own rape, the milkmaid's suicide, her murder of Alec and, of course, her own execution. In all these cases, the disasters can be seen as arbitrary. The reader may undergo catharsis but there is no apparent purging or renewal of the survivors. Thomasin and Venn may be happy but it is in spite of not because of their rivals' deaths. Tess's sacrifice seems pointless and Henchard has already been superseded by the pragmatic, resourceful Farfrae.

This change, if not renewal, is interpreted by Marxist/materialist critics led, initially, by Arnold Kettle, as a metaphor for the destruction of the English peasantry and artisans by capitalists armed with advanced technology. Farfrae with superior, modern commercialism defeats rule-of-thumb Henchard; Tess's spirit is nearly crushed by the exploiting land-owner of Flintcomb Ash with his dehumanising machinery. Because of his pre-occupation with heroines rather than heroes, Hardy has also received special notice from Feminists. In the past, he was often applauded for his sympathetic attitude to the 'Fallen Woman' in contrast to many of his Victorian contemporaries, including some women novelists who charged him with moral corruption of readers. His insight into female psychology was regarded as so sympathetic that, in an undergraduate seminar a couple of decades ago, when the tutor asked students which novelist they would choose to write their life histories, the girls voted unanimously for Hardy. Now, in some quarters, it is fashionable to savage him as one more example of patriarchal power exercising condescension in the guise of compassion. Critics are often far more revealing of themselves than enlightening on the texts they analyse; this is especially the case with those holding strong and often reductive ideological commitments, called by some liberal traditionalists the 'School of Resentment.'

One aspect of Hardy's writing which has not generally been accorded its true importance except, perhaps by the American scholar, Harold Orel, and by Philip Larkin, is his concern for animals. There is endless discussion of Hardy and 'Nature' — a term almost never defined in discussions of his work and certainly not defined by the writer himself. Indeed, he often uses it inconsistently within the framework of a single novel, for example, *Tess*. For Hardy, sentience was the measure of all things and he extended his sympathy to all feeling creatures; he was acutely aware of what John Fowles has called, 'Nature's profoundest secret: the universal parity of existence.' Though this crucial aspect of Hardy's life and work has been somewhat undervalued more recently, at the time of his death it was fully acknowledged in obituaries celebrating his charitableness; of these the poet Alfred Noyes's is typical:

Hardy's sense of pity was perhaps the greatest thing about him . . . It is through his tender compassion for all weak and gentle things, and his suffering in thought of their suffering that the greatness of his nature was manifested.

His work may helpfully be approached through the animal imagery applied to human situations and the relationships between humans and other creatures. For example, the heath-croppers of Egdon shy away instinctively from Eustacia, sensing that she is alien and potentially hostile; she hates the heath and all that belongs to it, preferring the somewhat tawdry attractions of Budmouth. Michael Henchard is repeatedly associated with bovine imagery, especially that of a strong but hampered animal not allowed to realise its own strength. His encounter with such a bull is the culmination of this metaphor and the pity felt by the reader for the poor animal is transferred, perhaps half-consciously, to its subduer. The theme of hunting runs through the whole of *Tess*; she is tracked down by Alec, feels herself partly hounded out of her family home and village community and is finally pursued and captured prior to execution. The extermination of the last animals routed out of the harvest field can be seen as an emblem of Tess's own lack of any permanent haven.

Hardy was, in many ways, a Monist, making no fundamental distinction between human and other animals. He pitied them all. When reading his works, we should perhaps bear in mind his own avowed intention to strive that

pain to all upon (earth), tongued or dumb, shall be kept to a minimum by loving-kindness, operating through scientific knowledge, and actuated by the modicum of free will conjecturally possessed by organic life.

Surely he was being too hard on himself when he wrote in his own obituary poem, *Afterwards*,

If I pass during some nocturnal
blackness, mothy and warm,
When the hedgehog travels furtively
over the lawn,
One may say, 'He strove that such
innocent creatures should come to no harm
But he could little for them; and now he is gone

Still less fair is his self censure in *Survivor*:

'You taught not that which you set about,'
Said my own voice talking to me;
'That the greatest of things is Charity ...'
-And the sticks burnt low, and fire went out,
And my voice ceased talking to me.

Perhaps the last word may be given to C Day Lewis in his more objective assessment of Hardy's moral achievement:

In the shadow and sheen yet you abide
All the mellowing traits of a countryside
That nursed your tragi-comical scene;
And in us, warmer-hearted and brisker-eyed
Since you have been.

FURTHER READING

Thomas Hardy has stimulated such a growth industry that it is hardly possible to recommend critical works which will not be considered, by some, to be superseded before this *Bookmark* is printed. Those who feel the need, early in their reading, for some expert guidance are unlikely to go wrong with anything written by Norman Page. However, with Hardy's fiction, as with all creative writing, it is crucial to develop an initial attitude of one's own to the novels before starting to explore the reactions of others, especially those regarded as received wisdom. Any text worth taking seriously is essentially ambiguous; there is no such thing as a definitive interpretation. Above all, mass-produced 'guides' or 'students' notes' should *never* be consulted; those feeling the need for such props as substitutes for first-hand thought and emotion should not be studying literature in depth. Rather than secondary, critical works it is much better, at least early in one's reading, to encounter more Hardy, for example, the so-called 'minor' novels which are, of course, only minor in comparison with the rest of his oeuvre.

Hardy has suffered, perhaps more than any other English writer, from admirers determined to see his imaginative works of fiction as though they were, partly, autobiographical records. Though usually gentle, retiring and tolerant, this attitude, which he regarded as grossly impertinent, roused him to extremes of indignation and denial, a denial still often obstinately ignored. To see his works as directly stemming from actual, external events is to reduce the greatest tragic novelist in the language to a mere verbal draftsman. Moreover, any factual origins of his stories are irrelevant to literary study. The discriminating reader is concerned with 'these words in this order.' All else is either proper to a different discipline — history — or peripheral. Indeed, even his official autobiography, published as though written by his second wife, must be approached with caution; it is, primarily, what he wished the reader to accept as the truth about his life.

Before tackling serious critics, once readers have immersed themselves in real Hardy, they can have fun with the wilder effusions of Lois Deacon and her followers, the banal trivialities of some of the Toucan Press leaflets or the brilliant but demanding pastiche and parody of Peter Ackroyd's *First Light* and Howard Jacobson's *Peeping Tom*.

Visits to real places associated with Hardy can be vastly enjoyable and interesting, but they are significant for the history of his external life and the contexts, not the texts, of his writing. 'Wessex' is *not* Dorset; it is a landscape of the mind. Trying to identify actual geographical places with imagined, created ones is a rather trivial hobby, though useful for tourism. If one needs to visit Dorchester in order to 'see' Casterbridge, then there is a failure either in the writing or in the reader's mind.

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