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THE MOST TRAGIC OF AUTHORS

A Paper Presented to  
Mrs. Martha Black  
Ouachita Baptist University

In Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for  
English Special Studies, 493

#181

by  
Susan Murray  
Fall Semester, 1968

### The Most Tragic Of Authors

That Thomas Hardy is not a novelist who tells stories merely for the diversion of his audiences, nor a poet who delights in the sensuous and suggestive appeal of cleverly built word structures is apparent even to the most superficial of his readers. One recognizes inevitably that Hardy's underlying aim has always been the conveyance of ideas, and that he has throughout his literary career drawn from the depths of a definite and fairly consistent world-view.

Hardy was not merely a spectator in the theater of the world nor a reporter of what he saw. Thomas Hardy had listened so intently to what Wordsworth called "the still, sad music of humanity" that he had become attuned to its tragic chords. As Carl J. Weber states in the introduction to Jude the Obscure:

Hardy had acquired the power to accept tragedy in its starkest and bleakest aspect--tragedy not as divine punishment for wrongdoing, nor as a seasonal catastrophe that can be repaired, but simply and finally, without possibility of repair, as tragedy.

So convincing is the tragic panorama, that Hardy's pessimism is the prevailing impression left on readers.

There can be little question of the darkness and wrath of Hardy's conception of the life and fate to which the soul is born. Life is a lost, inglorious and bloody battle, a wide deep sea of misery with but a very few flowering islands, a gift so doubtful that it were almost a wise man's part to refuse it altogether.<sup>1</sup>

The author of this paper will attempt to present through a study of Hardy's life and his major writings the origin and development of his pessimistic attitudes towards man's existence.

Thomas Hardy was born on June 2, 1840, in a cottage at Upper Bockhampton in the parish of Stinsford, Dorset, close to the heath later named "Egdon". Hardy's family had long lived in the country. His father, Thomas, a master mason and builder, was descended from Clement le Hardy, bailly or first civil officer of Jersey. His mother, Jemima, a woman of unusual ability and judgment, was related to certain local landholders. When Hardy was born, he was cast aside for a stillbirth and was saved only by the shrewd perception of a nurse. When the infant Hardy was reposing in his cradle one day, a snake crawled upon his breast and slept there. The many little items such as these that seem to make Hardy a "crusted character" like so many of the personages of his fiction, are not of minor or dubious importance.<sup>2</sup>

Though healthy he was fragile, and precocious to a degree, being able to read almost before he could walk, and to tune a violin when of quite tender years. He was of ecstatic temperament, extraordinarily sensitive to music. There are early evidences of a lack of social ambition which followed him through life.<sup>3</sup> Thomas, the eldest of four children, entered the village school in Bockhampton at the age of eight years. He entered a day school in Dorchester, Mr. Last's Academy for Young Gentlemen, in 1849. He stayed in this non-conformist school until 1856. Hardy never forgot his seeing

the Pope and Cardinal Wiseman burned ~~it~~ an effigy during the No-Popery Riots in the old Roman amphitheatre. Thomas Hardy was an apt pupil who studied Latin, French, and German as well as teaching Sunday School in Stinsford. He loved adventures on the fiddle and played for weddings and parties. He was popular with the other students, but he was bothered by them many times because he liked to be alone.

As a boy it was noted that Hardy hated to be touched, and to the end of his life disliked even the most friendly hand being laid on his arm or shoulder. This brings to mind Eustacia Vye's hesitantly allowing Charley to hold her hand or Henchard leaning heavily on Farfrae's shoulder. A similar sensitivity to music, which would send Hardy into tears as a child, can be seen in the two most alienated figures of his novels: Henchard and Jude Fawley.<sup>3</sup> Hardy had a vivid memory of such things as a half-frozen thrush which his father had killed and a boy who had died of starvation with nothing but raw turnip in his stomach. Part of his complexity lies in his intuitive and sensitive reaction to the terrible.

At the age of sixteen he was apprenticed to John Hicks, a local architect and church restorer. When not at his drafting board Hardy studied the Latin and Greek classics and also continued to act as fiddler at country dances and weddings.

An unusual incident occurred during his stay at Hicks' which, though it had nothing to do with his own life, was dramatic enough to have mention. One summer morning just

before he sat down to breakfast, he remembered that a man was to be hanged at eight o'clock at Dorchester. He took up the brass telescope that had been handed on in the family, and hastened to a hill on the heath a quarter of a mile from the house, where he looked toward town. The form of the murderer in white fustian and the executioner and officials in dark clothing could be seen. At the moment of his placing the glass to his eye the white figure dropped downwards, and the faint note of the town clock struck eight o'clock.

The whole thing had been so sudden that the glass nearly fell from Hardy's hands. He seemed alone on the heath with the hanged man, and crept homeward wishing he had not been so curious.<sup>5</sup> From an emotional point of view, it obviously had something to do with his life because it formed one aspect of his imagination. A notable characteristic of Hardy's fiction and poetry is the macabre and grotesque, most often ironically juxtaposed with the ordinary, a sudden inclusion of the irrationally terrible. Such an inclusion is the appearance of the hanged man, brought so near by the symbolic instrument, the telescope, which mysteriously involves us intimately in happenings that ought to be remote and detached.

Hardy's life as a self-tutored scholar, architectural apprentice, and amateur musician was ended in 1862, when he left for London and joined the architect Arthur Blomfield as an assistant to design church restorations. He was the winner of two architectural prizes in 1863.

Hardy's tastes reverted to literary pursuits and he began to read a great deal. In March of 1865 his first published

work, a sketch entitled "How I Built Myself a House," was published in Chambers Journal. It was only out of necessity that Hardy tried his hand at prose fiction. In 1868-69 he submitted the three publishers The Poor Man and the Lady, a sweeping satire on the squirearchy and nobility, the social mores and political and religious beliefs, all contained in the experiences of a West-country student "cast upon the billows of London with no protection but brains."<sup>6</sup> Excessive and caustic--it was rejected.

Hardy set about writing a novel less controversial but more complicated in plot, Desperate Remedies, a detective and mystery story eventually published in 1871. Next followed Under the Greenwood Tree (1872), an idyllic pastoral, and A Pair of Blue Eyes (1873), a romance set on the windswept uplands of northern Cornwall. There, while making sketches in 1870 for the restoration of St. Juliot Church, Hardy had fallen in love with the rector's sister-in-law, Emma Lavinia Gifford. They were married on September 17, 1874 in St. Juliot Church.

By this time, Hardy had given up architecture to devote himself entirely to writing. Far From the Madding Crowd appeared in 1874 and with its great success, Thomas Hardy was definitely launched on his literary career. Hardy had been warned before the publication of this novel that the seduction of Fanny Robin would have to be treated gingerly, because of previous complaints by subscribers.

After frequent changes of residence, Hardy and his wife, Emma, settled outside Dorchester, where he built Max Gate.

The Hand of Ethelberta (1876) marks Hardy's entry into the fashionable social world of refined manners; he was advised to return to sheep farming. He returned to the heath country and followed its darker, thwarted paths in Return of the Native (1878). One reviewer said the readers would find themselves farther from the madding crowd than ever.<sup>7</sup> This novel received much public acclaim, as well as much harsh criticism. His next three novels remained equally rural. The Trumpet-Major, published in 1880, had as its basis the romantic entanglements of two brothers in a village fearful of Napoleon's threatened invasion. A Laodicean (1881), set in a renovated Gothic castle, features a palid architect, a sinister adventurer, and the daughter of a rich railway magnate. Two On a Tower (1882) is the ill-starred affair between a youthful astronomer and the married noblewoman of a neighboring estate. The environs of Max Gate in Dorchester provided the setting for The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886). The Woodlanders was published in 1887 while Hardy and his wife took a long holiday in Italy.

Thomas Hardy never became a townsman in appearance or manners even though they would spend several months in London each year. Quiet and unobtrusive, middling in stature, he had keen, penetrating eyes that took in social foibles more than he was taken in by superficial social graces; even so, he did seem to derive a bemused satisfaction from mingling with the prominent in literary circles and society.<sup>8</sup>

Thomas Hardy's reputation as a simple country raconteur was little altered by Wessex Tales (1888). Tess of the D'Urbervilles was published in 1891. Reviewers wrote of it:



"vile, extremely disagreeable, unreal, the result of a disordered liver."<sup>9</sup> The idea that Tess might be a "pure woman" as the subtitle has it, was more than many reviewers could stomach. The controversy never touched two other collections of stories, A Group of Noble Dames (1891) and Life's Little Ironies (1894).

The furor began again with Jude the Obscure (1896) which bleakly and bitterly indicated what Hardy felt to be the difference between society's Christian precepts and its actual moral practice. The reviewers and critics were violent in the denunciations. Jeannette Gilder stated in the New York World: Jude the Obscure "is almost the worst book I have read. Aside from its immorality, there is its coarseness which is beyond belief. He goes out of his way to write of nastiness."<sup>10</sup> Hardy abandoned novel writing. He spoke of this experience with Jude the Obscure as a cause for this abandonment: "The experience completely cur(ed) me of further interest in novel-writing."<sup>11</sup> He published no more fiction except The Well Beloved (1897), revised from an earlier serial, an airy romance of Platonic and Shelleyan love-yearning.

Hardy turned to poetry as his means of expression. A volume entitled Wessex Poems was published in 1898. He issued seven other volumes of verse during the next thirty years, all ranging widely in type and quality. The Dynasts, a lengthy epic drama of the Napoleonic war, appeared in three parts. Time's Laughingstock and Other Verses appeared in 1909. Hardy received the Order of Merit in 1910. In 1912 Mrs. Hardy died and A Changed Man and Other Tales was published.

He was married in 1914 to Florence Emily Dugdale. Several volumes of poetry were published after this: Moments of Vision (1917); Late Lyrics and Earlier (1922); The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall, an Arthurian drama (1923).

The second Mrs. Hardy reveals a part of the nature of her husband in her journal. She tells of an incident in which Hardy was walking through a graveyard and saw a coffin accidentally spilled open. He commented that this incident had just about made his day. It is impossible to overlook Mrs. Hardy's journal entry after this experience: Thomas "is now, this afternoon, writing a poem with great spirit; always a sign of well-being with him. Needless to say, it is an intensely dismal poem."<sup>12</sup>

After a long illness and severe heart attack, Thomas Hardy died on January 11, 1928. His ashes were placed in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey, next to those of Dickens.

Hardy had his problems with publishers and with the public, with illness and with the social snobbery of his first wife, whom he came to cordially hate until her death. No overt traumatic experiences disturbed the even tenor of Hardy's life, nor were his later days saddened as those of other artists. Whatever there was within him, he kept it well hidden, expressing it only as a philosophical pessimism. He always kept a polite and ironic mask before the world.

As a novelist, Hardy was the major transitional figure between the popular moralists and popular <sup>entertainers</sup> ~~entertainers~~ of Victorian

fiction, and the serious visionary, often symbolizing novelists of today. "Hardy wrote as a ballad-maker would write if a ballad-maker were to have to write novels."<sup>13</sup> He wrote a number of ballads and ballad-like poems. His novels seem to be an extension in the form of modern prose fiction of a ballad or oral tale. They consist of stories primarily, with narrative of foremost interest, often intricate plot and the balance and antithesis of characters associated with traditional fiction from ancient time. His novels are full of references to old singers, tunes, and dances, as well as fatalistic or pessimistic meanings which were peculiarities of old popular ballads. Gabriel Oak in Far From the Madding Crowd represents the "faithful lover" of many ballads who must endure a testing. Fanny Robin seems to be the typical deserted maiden.

J. F. Pyre states in the introduction to The Mayor of Casterbridge that Hardy's method may be broadly characterized as dramatic, and his ideal form is thought to have been considerably influenced by his study and admiration of ancient Greek tragedy. Surprising coincidences and striking parallels of incident, accompanied by picturesque settings and extravagant action, abound in his novels and are typical factors in Hardy's method. His studies in Greek simply reinforced an original tendency. Action, not description, is foremost: the event dominates, rather than the motive or psychology.

The central issue in most of the novels is sexual love, a grinding passion that sweeps men and women along despite themselves and more often than not leads to grief. Although infidelity and illegitimacy are the concomitants of the kinds of love

affairs Hardy deals with, he cannot do more than hint at the actualities which bring these misfortunes about.<sup>14</sup>

The necessity of treating love only on a spiritual plane has provided us with intense symbolism, from the sword exercise in Far From the Madding Crowd to Sue Bridehead's neuroticism. Permeating Hardy's works are the familiar symbols of the demonic: the sinister landscape, the sinister garden, the tree of death, and such images as crosses, scaffolds, and the sinister whirlpool.

Hardy seems to agree with all aspects of Schopenhaur's philosophy which has been expressed in this way:

The life of every individual, if surveyed as a whole, and regarded in its significant features, is really always a tragedy, but considered in the details, it presents a ludicrous aspect. For the vexations of the day, the restless irritation of the moment, the desires and fears of every week, the mishaps and calamities of every hour, the pranks and tricks of chance bear the character of a hideous comedy. But the unsatisfied wishes, the frustrated efforts, the hopes unmercifully crushed by fate, the unfortunate errors of the whole life, with the even higher rising tide of suffering and despair and grim death waiting at the end, are the elements of tragedy, yet we cannot even maintain the dignity of tragic characters, but in the broad detail of life, must inevitably appear as foolish characters of a comedy.<sup>15</sup>

Fatalism, which is present in Hardy's novels, is:

the mental attitude of one who feels that what happens to us, or what we do, is necessitated by the nature of things or by the decree of some mysterious power over which we have no control.<sup>16</sup>

It is an attitude of mind natural to men who have been defeated in their struggle with the world in spite of the best they can do, and who, in their despair of being able to affect the cause of things, exclaim with Clym Yeobright, "Well, what

must be will be," or with Jude, "Nothing can be done. Things are as they are, and will be brought to their destined issue."

The determinist attitude shown is one which is concerned with the universal laws of cause and effect. Hardy shows determinism in this passage:

That she had chosen for her afternoon walk the road along which she had returned to Casterbridge three hours earlier in a carriage was curious--if anything should be called curious in a concatenation of phenomena wherein each is known to have its accounting cause.

Hardy's concept of the universe is that it is a monistic one governed by one mysterious causality. He makes it clear that it is not really a metaphysical mystery that lies behind his tragic stories, but the wholly natural mystery of maladjustments in the very nature of things.<sup>17</sup> In the earliest novels, chance and circumstance rule human destinies. It is perhaps natural that fatalism, a motif gradually taking the place of circumstance, should be found first expressed by the rustics in Hardy's works. A fatalistic cast is given to so many of his novels by the large use in them of accident and coincidences, forcing the hands of the characters.

By the time Hardy gets well into the writing of A Pair of Blue Eyes, the determinist trend of thought comes to equal in significance the notion of chance as the prime mover of the world.<sup>18</sup> Throughout Hardy's early writings nature is also felt as a vast, vague personality, bound up in some manner with the human action of the stories. It is rather startling to find also in the very early works the clearest foreshadowing of the immanent will.

The group of novels beginning with Far From the Madding Crowd shows a gradually fading personification of chance and time, with fatalism and the developing and maturing idea of the immanent will as the summation of all activity. <sup>19</sup> The thoughts of Bathsheba, regarding the valentine sent to Boldwood reveal this idea:

She resolved never again, by look or by sign,  
to interrupt the steady flow of this man's life.  
But a resolution to avoid an evil is seldom  
framed till the evil is so far advanced as to  
make avoidance impossible.

The undertone of fatalism is present in the views of life of both Boldwood and Troy.

He (Boldwood) saw no absurd sides to the follies of life, and thus, though not quite companionable in the eyes of merry men and scoffers, and those to whom all things show life as a jest, he was not intolerable to the earnest and those acquainted with grief. Being a man who read all the dramas of life seriously, if he failed to please when they were comedies, there was no frivolous treatment to reproach him for when they chanced to end tragically.

Sergeant Troy, being entirely innocent of the practice of expectation, was never disappointed. To set against this negative gain there may have been some positive losses from a certain narrowing of the higher tastes and sensations which it entailed. But limitation of the capacity is never recognized as a loss by the loser therefrom.

In The Return of the Native, nature is felt to reflect or to control the disastrous course of events. Hardy says of Egdon Heath:

It was at present a place perfectly accordant with man's nature--neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly; neither commonplace, unmeaning, nor tame; but, like man, slighted and enduring; and withal singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy monotony.

Nature is also presented as being in accordance with the individual person: "Never was harmony more perfect between the chaos of her mind and the chaos of the world without."

Fate is conceived as Heaven or providence and the "colossal Prince of the World" is blamed for misery. This is reflected in Eustacia's thoughts after the death of Clym's mother:

Yet, instead of blaming herself for the issue she laid the fault upon the shoulders of some indistinct, colossal Prince of the world, who had framed her situation and ruled her lot.

The Mayor of Casterbridge is a culmination of Hardy's instinctive and unselfconscious development of the fatalistic and retributive justice ideas.<sup>20</sup> This is shown in Hardy's treatment of Elizabeth-Jane:

She had learned the lesson of renunciation, and was as familiar with the wreck of each day's wishes as with the diurnal setting of the sun. Continually it had happened that what she had desired had not been granted her, and that what had been granted her she had not desired.

She is dismissed at the end of the book in this way:

Her experience had been of a kind to teach her, rightly or wrongly, that the doubtful honor of a brief transit through a sorry world hardly called for effusiveness, even when the path was suddenly irradiated at some half-way point by day-beams rich as hers. But her strong sense that neither she nor any human deserved less than was given, did not blind her to the fact that there were others receiving less who had deserved more. And in being forced to class herself among the fortunate she did not cease to wonder at the persistence of the unforeseen, when the one to whom such unbroken tranquility had been accorded in the adult stage was she whose youth had seemed to teach that happiness was but the occasional episode in a great drama of pain.

In Tess of the D'Urbervilles, there is still a dominant causality represented as time, fate, and nature. Tess' view of the world, shown in her conversation with her younger brother, Abraham, is one presented in most of Hardy's novels.

"Did you say the stars were worlds, Tess?"

"Yes."

"All like ours?"

"I don't know; but I think so. They sometimes seem to be like the apples on our stubborn tree. Most of them splendid and sound--a few blighted"

"Which do we live on?' a splendid one or a blighted one?"

"A blighted one."

"Tis very unlucky that we didn't pitch on a sound one, when there were so many more of 'em!"

Time and coincidence play a very important role in this novel:

Thus the thing began. Had she perceived this meeting's import she might have asked why she was doomed to be seen and coveted that day by the wrong man, and not by some other man, the right and desired one in all respects--as nearly as humanity can supply the right and desired; yet to him who amongst her acquaintance might have approximated to this kind, she was but a transient impression, half-forgotten.

In the ill-judged execution of the well-judged plan of things the call seldom produces the comer, the man to love rarely coincides with the hour of loving. Nature does not often say "See!" to her poor creature at a time when seeing can lead to happy doing; or reply "Here!" to a body's cry of "Where?" till the hide-and-seek has become an irksome, outworn game.

It was not the two halves of a perfect whole that confronted each other at the perfect moment; a missing counterpart wandered independently about the earth waiting in cross obtuseness till the late time came.

Jude the Obscure is said to be "the beginning of the coming universal wish not to live."<sup>21</sup>



Miss Drusilla Fawley, Jude's aunt, said of him: "It would ha' been a blessing if Goddy-mighty had took thee too, wi' thy mother and father, poor useless boy!"

Jude was a very sensitive boy, and Hardy says of this:

This weakness of character, as it may be called, suggested that he was the sort of man who was born to ache a good deal before the fall of the curtain upon his unnecessary life should signify that all was well with him again.

After the killing of the children of Sue and Jude by the eldest child, Father Time, Sue returns to Phillotson and explains:

My children--are dead--and it is right that they should be! I am glad--almost. They were sin-begotten. They were sacrificed to teach me how to live!--their death was the first stage of my purification. That's why they have not died in vain!

One can thus trace through the novels, the general development, with many overlappings of ideas, of Hardy's expression of a consistent world-view through the notions of chance, time, circumstance, fate, nature, providence, and will.

This conception of the immanent will leads to a denial of religion as a system of divinely revealed truth. Hardy cannot reconcile the idea of an omnipotent and merciful Deity with the human sufferings that he witnesses daily. Religion is seen as a positive influence for evil when its true nature and purposes are misunderstood. Hardy, unlike the true pessimist, represents man as a creature eminently worthy of respect and homage both as a piece of mechanism and as a moral being. The nobility of human nature is the only possible hint of a future state to be found. While man himself can stand erect, however hopeless may be this world there is at least hope for a next.<sup>22</sup>

Some of Hardy's ideas, shaped and misshaped by 19th century science, now seem dated and more dubious; but his struggle with faith--his inability to believe in Christianity and his lingering wish to return to it--is all too contemporary.<sup>23</sup>

Falling victim to the wiles of Eustacia and misconstruing her character, quarreling with his mother, failing to realize the galling burden on Eustacia of his descent to furze cutter, not realizing the temptation presented by Wildeve's nearby presence, subjecting himself to all the self-torment of a murderer at the death of his mother, turning on Eustacia without giving her a chance to confess, trying to effect a reconciliation when it is too late--Clym is the ironic, inverted picture of the hero of the past who triumphs over obstacles; he is modern man as Hardy sees him.<sup>24</sup>

Those persons in the novels in whom life and will are most intense, are the most unhappy and suffer the direst disasters. But there are always certain characters who demand much of life. Fate makes them the cause of their own undoing and the unhappiness of others. They are shown as the victims of a combination of circumstances and hereditary instincts, each of which is accidental and harmless. When the last defeat falls on them, there remains to the reader not only a deep pity for the unhappy sufferer, but an awful sense of mortal futility and failure.

Did Hardy attempt to explain his painful insistence on the useless sufferings and miseries that accompany humanity? He stated in his New Year's thought for 1879: "A perception of the failure of things to be what they are meant to be, lends them, in place of the intended interest, a new and greater interest of an unintended kind."

It may be said that pessimism and fatalism are natural 19th century responses, and the responses of a sensitive man to the reading of Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, and Schopenhaur.

The fact that man, a being endowed with an unlimited capacity for consciousness and suffering, is made to live out his life in a universe ruled by an unconscious and indifferent will, lies at the base of all Hardy's pessimism, and results in the essential tragedy of human existence.<sup>25</sup>

Hardy felt a deep concern for the fortunes of his characters, an incorrigible sympathy for all who are lonely and all who long for happiness. Thomas Hardy remains as the most tragic of authors.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>H. C. Duffin, Thomas Hardy (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1921), p. 193.

<sup>2</sup>Albert Guerard (ed.), Hardy (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup>Florence Hardy, The Early Life of Thomas Hardy (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928), p. 20.

<sup>4</sup>Richard Carpenter, Thomas Hardy (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 20.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>6</sup>George Fayen, "Thomas Hardy," Collier's Encyclopedia (New York: Crowell-Collier Publishing Company, 1963), 648.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 649.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Carpenter, p. 24.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>12</sup>Lawrence Graver, "Howe's Hardy," The New Republic, (June 8, 1968), p. 39.

<sup>13</sup>Guerard, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup>Carpenter, p. 27.

<sup>15</sup>Ernest Brennecke, Thomas Hardy's Universe (London: T. Fisher Unwin, Ltd., 1924), p. 131.

<sup>16</sup>Joseph Beach, The Technique of Thomas Hardy (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1922), p. 228.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 231.

<sup>18</sup>Brennecke, p. 39.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>22</sup>Duffin, p. 192.

<sup>23</sup>\_\_\_\_\_. "Poet in Self Defense," Time, LIX (April 7, 1952), 110.

<sup>24</sup>Carpenter, p. 99.

<sup>25</sup>Brennecke, p. 135.

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