WOMEN IN THOMAS HARDY'S NOVELS: AN INTERPRETATIVE STUDY.

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INTRODUCTION.

When one begins a study of the women in Hardy's novels one discovers critical views of great diversity. There are features of Hardy's work which received favourable comment then as now; his descriptions of nature for instance, and his rustic characters have appealed to most critics over the years. But his philosophical and social comment have drawn criticism ranging from the virulent to the scornful. In particular his attitude to and treatment of love and marriage relationships have been widely argued, and it is the women concerned who have been assessed in the most surprising and contradictory manner.

The first critic of stature was Lionel Johnson[1] best known as a poet. In 1894 he wrote of Hardy's women: 'I cannot think that any of them is so powerfully conceived and drawn as are the best of the men;' but he adds that they provoke an 'amazed awe of their infinite ingenuities,' and quotes a remark of Swift's about the pleasure that a few words 'spoken plain by a parrot will give.'

The only other book written on Hardy in the 90s is Annie Macdonell's.[2] She makes the observation that Victorian women like to see themselves as goddesses and therefore are displeased to see themselves painted as human beings.

John A. Steuart[3] has something to say about this in his Letters to

[1] Lionel Johnson, The Art of Thomas Hardy (1894). London, 1923, p.193.

[2] Annie Macdonell, Thomas Hardy. New York, 1895, p.99.

[3] John A. Steuart, Letters to Living Authors, 1890. Quoted by Lerner and Holmstrom, Thomas Hardy and his Readers. London, 1968, pp.154-5.

Living Authors: 'I understand', he writes to Hardy, 'you are no favourite with the young lady who patronises the circulating libraries. . . . Precisely why the fair one quarrels with you is, of course, among the mysteries of the world, but it is vaguely understood she considers herself slandered in your female characters.' He writes a little later: 'Your women are not conventional. They are not of the flaccid pink and white type; but neither . . . are they inherently wicked. Let us have living creations--that is the great want in fiction--and that you give us in your women as well as in your men.'

Lascelles Abercrombie[4] in 1912 gives a much more common estimate of the women. He considers that Hardy is 'one of the greatest inventors and describers of the female character', but insists that his power lies in drawing 'inevitable caprice', and speaks of the action of the women springing always from emotion 'without passing through the formulation and questioning of reason.'

Samuel Chew echoes this when he says 'they are fickle and vain, insincere, conscienceless, and seductive.' He further maintains that Hardy's 'opinion of them is bitter', and that they are 'all of one type . . . essentially Cyrenaics.'[5]

A little later, in 1925, Herbert Grimsditch adds his judgment--that 'there is no safety in presupposing consistent and honourable conduct on

[4] Lascelles Abercrombie, Thomas Hardy, a Critical Study (1912). New York, 1964, p.85.

[5] Samuel C. Chew, Thomas Hardy, Poet and Novelist (1921). New York, 1964, pp.133-5.

the part of a woman be she ever so seemingly ingenuous.'[6]

Two writers from France, Pierre d'Exideuil[7] and D. A. Hedgcock,[8] have in common the emphasis which they place on the sensual nature of the women, and in this agree with Grimsditch. However d'Exideuil maintains that Hardy excels as a painter of women, while Hedgcock sees his men as more varied.

Irving Howe, to instance a modern critic who has something to say in line with d'Exideuil and Hedgcock, says: 'At the deepest level of his imagination Hardy held to a vision of the feminine that was thoroughly traditional in celebrating the maternal, the protective, the fecund, the tender, the life-giving. It was Hardy's openness to the feminine principle that drew D. H. Lawrence to his work and led him to see there, with some justice, a kinship to his own.'[9] The first sentence may be true of D. H. Lawrence, who, with much that is perceptive about Hardy writes also much that is simply an exploration of his own attitudes; it is not true of Hardy. 'Tender' some of his women are, but 'fecund' and 'maternal' they are not. None of them is shown as a mother. Tess has a child, Sue has three, but they are not shown in a maternal role and they are not motherly to their men.

Howe says further: 'Sue Bridehead anticipates the modern cult of

[6] Herbert B. Grimsditch, Character and Environment in the novels of Thomas Hardy, (1925). New York, 1962, pp.109-10.

[7] Pierre d'Exideuil, The Human Pair in the Work of Thomas Hardy, (1928). London, 1930.

[8] F. A. Hedgcock, Thomas Hardy, penseur et artiste. Paris, 1911.

[9] Irving Howe, Thomas Hardy. London, 1968, p.109.

personality with all its urgency and clamor' (p.111). Whether there is such a cult is arguable, but I certainly should not agree that Sue was a forerunner. Such a changeable, tormented, gay, courageous woman, a woman so difficult to analyse because of her infinite variety--to sum her up as belonging to a self-conscious cult of personality is to show how little the critic follows Hardy's intention.

The critics today have abandoned the moral stand-point of those of Hardy's day. They do not criticize Hardy's women as fickle and full of caprice; in other words they do not ask them to fit the Victorian mould of womanhood. Perhaps they make a demand of our own time: that they fit type patterns which with hindsight they see emerging from the Victorian period --the feminist, the 'free' woman, the intellectual, the voluptuary. In other words they look for stereotypes just as the Victorians did.

To understand Hardy's women one has to read what he wrote with a clear vision, unclouded by the moral or social conventions of his or one's own time, unclouded by one's own attitudes. How many male critics, for instance, dislike Sue because she lacks sensuality; they see only her 'coldness' and never the whole woman. They do not read what Hardy says about her, either in the novel or elsewhere.

Hardy said of his first novel, The Poor Man and the Lady, that it showed 'a wonderful insight into female character'.[10] This was not, however, the aspect which drew comment from the publisher to whom it was offered. Alexander Macmillan and his friend John Morley praised the rural scenes, but thought much of it overwritten and unconvincing. George

[10] Evelyn Hardy, Thomas Hardy; a Critical Biography. London, 1954, p.86.

Meredith (at this time Macmillan's reader) with whom Hardy had an interview, gave him two notable pieces of advice: 'not to nail his colours to the mast' so definitely, and to try to write another novel with a 'more complicated plot.'[11]

If we examine the first piece of advice we shall recognize a characteristic of Hardy's writing which remained with him in varying degree all his novel-writing career. He took Meredith's advice and wrote plots, but he also followed his original inclination towards 'colours on the mast'. In other words he explored themes in which he was interested and did not attempt to conceal his views on matters of social, religious, moral significance. He looked at men and women in the world around him; he studied them in relation to the world, to society, and to one another.

In opposition to Johnson and Hedgcock I maintain that it is in feminine portrayal that Hardy excels; that in only The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886) is a male character the dominant figure, although in Jude the Obscure (1896) Jude is almost a partner of Sue, and in other novels men are finely drawn. But even in the minor novels the women are of some interest, and this is partly because they illustrate the ideas which Hardy would put before us. They embody, they are affected by, the social and moral views which Hardy is examining. In their characters the social battles take place, their fate points the social attitude. They are both victim and agent of society's will. I intend therefore to examine Hardy's women in relation to some of the themes which interested him and see if an interpretation of their characters can be reached closer

[11] Florence Emily Hardy, The Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840-1928. London, 1965, pp. 58-62.

to Hardy's intention; to see also whether in fact Hardy always achieved his own intention with regard to them.

His first novel, The Poor Man and the Lady, was much concerned with class distinction, and although he ignored it in his second, he returned to it again and again. Under the Greenwood Tree (1872), for instance, shows a pattern which becomes familiar, of disparity between hero and heroine, Fancy Day being more educated than Dick Dewy. Elfride in A Pair of Blue Eyes (1873) is in the same situation with her first lover, but the position is reversed with the second. Far from the Madding Crowd (1874) shows the same inequality—Bathsheba socially more elevated than Gabriel. The Hand of Ethelberta (1876) is solely a comedy of social disparities. The Return of the Native (1878) explores the question to a degree, and it enters even into the rustic romance, The Trumpet Major (1880). The heroine of The Laodicean (1881) is obsessed with class; Viviette of Two on a Tower (1882) considers it, but less obsessively. It is considered again in The Woodlanders (1887), and in Tess of the d'Urbervilles (1891).

Closely allied with this is Hardy's interest in moral attitudes, in many instances shown to be typical of and identified with a particular class. It is noticeable that greater concern with moral issues is a feature of his finer novels. The Woodlanders, for instance, examines a number of moral and psychological problems arising from or connected with concern for social position. The issues appear as less clear-cut and more sophisticated in the novels of Hardy's creative peaks.

Attitudes to love and marriage are dealt with in all the novels; are indeed interwoven with the threads of class and morals.

So the women will be examined in their relationship to their

surroundings. Some of them will be seen as victims of circumstance, society, or their own weaknesses, but each of them accepts responsibility for her situation, struggles on, stands on her own feet, and fights back. Not one of them is the conventional figure of Victorian womanhood though often she is placed in a typical Victorian situation: pregnant and deserted by lover, abandoned by husband in favour of another woman, dependent upon domineering father. Nor does she behave in what we are accustomed to think of as typically Victorian fashion. She makes things happen; she is active, as often for bad as for good, but she does act. She has courage, stamina, and decision. She may also have intelligence and education though not necessarily. She may, and very often does have charm, beauty, and gaiety. Whether she is good or bad we cannot say; Hardy himself is never dogmatic about this. He observes all, loves, sometimes pities, but never judges. In describing one of them he gives us a clue to his attitude: 'The woman herself was a conjectural creature. . . a shape in the gloom, whose true quality could only be approximated by putting together a movement now and a glance then, in that patient attention which nothing but watchful loving kindness ever troubles itself to give.'[12] 'Watchful loving kindness'--this is what Hardy gave to all his characters, but especially to his women.

[12]Thomas Hardy, The Woodlanders, (1887). London, 1935, p.45.

CHAPTER 1. PLOT AND CHARACTER.

It is of interest to examine how Hardy followed the second suggestion which Meredith gave him--to write another novel with a more complicated plot. Florence Emily Hardy says: 'He took Meredith's advice too literally and set about constructing the eminently sensational plot of Desperate Remedies'. Wilkie Collins was the model and a mystery murder story was the result.

I have said that Hardy had a didactic purpose in his writing and that he had intuitive skill in character drawing, especially of the female character. Could it be said that those novels in which he was most intent to give the public what he had been told it wanted, that is an exciting plot, are his least successful? Can it be said that emphasis on plot results in puppet figures rather than credible characters?

Hardy's work is so uneven that a cursory examination of, for example, his first four novels produces a verdict of 'not proven.' Desperate Remedies (1871) has a highly melodramatic plot, yet the characters are not altogether incredible. Aeneas Manston is the villain of the piece; he is a liar, seducer, bigamist, and murderer. One could say Hardy failed in his depiction of a villain, but he failed because of his own strength; he saw and drew always human beings, and human beings he saw always as blending of good and bad, of strength and weakness. There is no perfect heroine, no devilish villain. But the character which stands out above the sensational plot in Desperate Remedies is Miss Aldclyffe. She is not consistent nor does she develop; in fact, as with a number of Hardy's minor novels, the character portrayal ceases in the latter part of the book and the plot takes over completely. Nevertheless she remains in the

memory as a woman of great, almost abnormal power.

Looking at the second published novel, Under the Greenwood Tree, one findsdifferent intention. The first eight chapters are reputed to have come from the first novel, The Poor Man and the Lady, and to have been used again because of the favourable comments received about his skill with rustic scene and character. 'A rural painting of the Dutch school' was Hardy's intention and complex plot was therefore of minor importance. Light of touch and humorous, it affords a surprising contrast to Desperate Remedies. Fancy Day is a charming character drawn in gently satiric manner. Neither plot nor character delineation is complex.

Of A Pair of Blue Eyes (1873) Hardy said that he had attempted to 'trace the influence of character on circumstances.'[13] It was the character of Elfride which caused the plot development; 'The conduct pursued under a certain emergency by a young girl supplied the foundation on which I have built the book,' Hardy says in his early preface. It is not certain to which emergency he is referring, but there are two major events which have a profound effect on the tale and these both stem from the character of the girl. The first was the flight to London, the elopement which came to nothing because of the timidity and conventional upbringing of the girl. The second was the rescue of Henry Knight from the cliff face and certain death by the same girl whose resourcefulness and courage on this occasion change the course of the action.

His fourth publication, Far from the Madding Crowd, again shows the characters of men and women influencing circumstances. Yet this is a plot

[13]Carl J. Weber, Hardy of Wessex. New York, 1965, p.86. Quoted from an early preface to A Pair of Blue Eyes.

of considerable complexity; in outline it is even sensational, embracing as it does accident, bankruptcy, seduction, elopement, and murder.

Could one, looking at these four novels, maintain that Hardy retained his interest in a dramatic plot but at the same time progressively developed his skill in character delineation, since Far from the Madding Crowd has such a plot but has four characters of magnitude and credibility? He shows, however, no even progression, for two years later appeared The Hand of Ethelberta, one of his slighter efforts. It was adversely criticized at the time, the chief objection, according to Florence Hardy, seeming to be that it was 'impossible.'[14] It is satire on the class system, the story predominating but character delineation not entirely lacking, and the strong-minded young heroine emerging with individuality.

After this trifle appeared one of Hardy's sombre masterpieces, The Return of the Native. What was his major concern here? An outline of the plot might incline one to extend Florence Hardy's statement that Hardy 'took Meredith's advice too literally' to refer to others beside his first published novel. But examine the characters of Eustacia, of Clym, of Wildeve, of Mrs Yeobright, study the thoughts of their minds and the passions of their hearts, and one sees that events happen because people are as they are. The people make the story and are never puppets fitted into a plot.

Hardy said 'The real, if unavowed, purpose of fiction is to give pleasure by gratifying the love of the uncommon in human experience.' But 'the uncommonness must be in the events, not in the characters.'[15] The

[14] Hardy, p.108

[15] ibid., p.150

distinction between his aesthetically satisfying novels and his failures lies in the character delineation. One might say that Hardy overestimated the 'love of the uncommon;' and this seems certain when one reads The Laodicean or The Well Beloved. But after analyzing the plots of The Mayor of Casterbridge, of Tess of the d'Urbervilles, of Jude the Obscure one is forced to admit that all are 'uncommon', even unlikely. The only conclusion possible is that sometimes the characters grow to such dimensions that they overshadow the plot; in others, although characters are never altogether lacking, they do not develop to the stage where thay can induce in the reader a 'suspension of disbelief' in the 'uncommonness' of events.