

Essay on Thomas Hardy

Theme/Topic: “You have wit, description and philosophy – those go a good way towards the production of a novel.”
(George Henry Lewes to George Eliot)

What do you think are the most important qualities that go into the making of a novelist like Thomas Hardy?”

Course Director: Rod Mengham

Submitted by: Albert Hans

Date of submission: 15th August, 2001

Signature:
(A. Hans)

There is no finite definition of, no ultimate key to what makes a novelist in the good old classical style/sense – a novelist, whose novels are pieces of art, i.e. are recurrently re-interpretable and as such, timeless, like genuine artefacts (cf. sculptures, paintings, architecturally outstanding buildings, etc.) themselves. A solid good novel will therefore be worth reading in presumably hundreds of years from now, as has been and will be true for any drama or piece of poetry (cf. sonnet) originating from a genius like Shakespeare.

It is basically **two criteria** that account for a novel as a piece of art.

In the first place there is its uniqueness, which means it exists only once in the very particular shape innate to it, multitude and variety of meanings, evocative allusions, all of which is meant to make the reader think about it, i.e. its message(s) for them. A novel is singular, too, i.e. irreproducible, irretrievable. Once it's gone lost, it cannot be reproduced, re-created or called back to life in its original (infinitely subtle and frequently sublime nuances of) sense. Such is art, such is a novel. What goes for a painting, a violin (designed and hand-)made by Stradivari, for instance, an ancient cathedral, temple or such like artefact, goes for any novel of literary value, too.

A *second feature/characteristic* absolutely indispensable for a piece of art is its unlimited scope of interpretations. Thus a single image within the context of such a piece of writing should have the power if not capacity to elicit in the reader's mind virtually countless connotations. In other words, the way of looking at a certain passage within a novel, the modes of approaching it should be numerically as well as 'spatially' unrestricted. It is the openness of a piece of art that lures people into contemplating it. And each time they glance at it anew they should be able to discover novel aspects about it, new insights into life through/from it. Once a reader's interest is roused, it should be raised schemingly, in a way and to an extent that induces/tempts them to identify with a particular character and/or situation in the novel so that they are re-experiencing

their own lives from a different angle and are thus enabled to come to terms with their own lives in a much better way. So there should be a certain kind of pragmatism in each novel, too, besides its purely aesthetic value, from whose mirror the reader sees – from a distance quasi – their own lives reflected. Reading a good novel is therefore equivalent with re-living one's life.

The question that arises from the foregoing reasoning is whether Hardy possesses all these 'ingredients' necessary for the 'recipe' of a tasty and thought-provoking novel – whether he shares if not surpasses/exceeds the qualities and skills of a literary mind like George Eliot's, which unquestionable fact was so beautifully summed up in this concise and to the point formulated compliment made to her by Henry Lewes.

A marvellous passage, which reveals Hardy's penetrating perception of landscape in what it conveys to us, not just physically in its bare nature, but in its ramification of overtly emerging as well as stealthily occurring meanings and messages – partly in between the lines and in the undercurrent of its tone – lies in the introductory chapter, the very opening pages, to his novel *The Return of the Native*.

The initial passage to the book is devoted to the description of the landscape, the locale, the regional area in which the ensuing 'story' is to take place. And it is from this very first moment that we realize Hardy does not use exclusively narrative techniques to depict a basically pastoral scene, but a 'realm', a real treasure of devices to surprise us with and catch our interest in the story.

Thus he deliberately compares the landscape, against which the characters are to be cast, to a "face"¹. And a "face" as such is usually 'something' not just to be looked at, but to be read in, to reflect about, deduce factors from like its past, potential history or single events that shaped and marked it in its individual, idiosyncratic way. What happens in any such craftily set out novel is that the reader gets invited to scratch beneath the surface of what they see to find out more about what they are faced with. All they do is try and look behind the façade of the 'face' of the landscape. While they are wandering along what they observe (in minute details), they begin to wonder about it.

Thus Hardy compares the landscape to a person. The heath is personified and thereby treated like a person, with respect or disregard, welcomed, i.e. accepted or rejected or just tolerated, met with a compromise. This 'person' is submitted to a close and severe scrutiny, an analysis of the mind, body and soul, so to speak. And it is this 'person' who has to be put/linked into interaction with the real persons, the very characters themselves. So it is completely a question of how far the author succeeds in presenting/providing us with a picture of the landscape that

¹ Cf. the very title of this chapter (☞ "A face on which time ...")

suits us, is to our expectation and therefore kindles our imagination, sparks off our fantasy and makes us form a 'plot' of our own, makes us work with the constituents given in accordance with our own wishes. It is here at such descriptions where Hardy is at his best. A good opening of a novel is a promising start. It helps to keep the reader's interest sustained.

In a cluster of (stylistic) devices Hardy deliberately starts out to create atmosphere, suspense and tension. And yet the 'story' is more than just a 'thriller', a trashy penny-novel of the day. Hardy manages to get us involved with the novel before any of the characters to come is introduced to us. It is the landscape that gets us wrapped up with, entangled with and won't loosen its tight grip on us through the rest of the 'play'. We don't offer resistance to this. We just feel captivated by a landscape, which is delineated as a barren, arid place, a heath that resembles more a desert and is yet full of life. The point that the land is bleak, useless, essentially infertile like a desert, is brought across to us in a metaphor. Thus the "glory" of Egdon heath is that it is a "waste"² – what cynicism in this dichotomy! Eliot's 'wasteland' pre-empted?! We have to suppose or rather take it for granted that the people dwelling in that area have to work hard in order to carve out a living on which to survive.

Hardy's masterful portrait of the Wessex heath is apt to remind us of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, in which the King sits out upon the heath, destitute, betrayed and abandoned by his own family, with no perspective to change his lot.³

It is within this Shakespearian and coincidentally, it seems to me, Dostojewskian epic, this broad, soil erupting analysis of a social study (of country-related small communities), that we get absorbed and willingly fall prey to what is bound to evolve/come forth.

Like a painter has to know how to use colours through which to impart his message(s) to us, Hardy similarly uses tones through articulate language. These lingual 'tones' serve a double purpose: they describe the sight, the outer appearance of the landscape, but what is more important than this ('façade'), what prevails, predominates is the sinister, gloomy outlook they foreshadow. It is very significant and highly effective when Hardy refers to the "twilight" in close connection with "November" and a "moonless midnight". This has a tense, dramatising impetus upon the reader, putting them into the right mood so as to enable them to identify and feel with the personae of the novel and thus to share their presentiment of what fateful events are bound to happen. It is this foreboding of something terrible to near, this being doomed to the premature failure of one's plans, the thwarting of a bright future one feels entitled to, has

² Second line in the last paragraph on page 9 in the Penguin Classics edition of Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, ed. Tony Slade and Penny Boumelha, London, New York and other cities, 1999.

³ No matter if we think of Eustacia, Mrs Yeobright, Thomasin, Clym, or Diggory Venn. These characters in *The Return of the Native* are basically all left alone, doomed to drift into isolation by circumstances beyond their influences - which makes them tragic figures in a way - without really being

deserved that spreads hopelessness. No wonder that the underlying meaning of “Domesday” down at the bottom of page 11 is certainly one of ‘impending death’. The dark vowels in the words “obscure, obsolete”⁴ preceding the word “Domesday” in the same line contribute to the dismal atmosphere of the opening passage to the novel. This image of something bad looming ahead is poignantly emphasized by the word “darkness” reiterated twice on the very first page of the novel. And yet it is interesting how Hardy juxtaposes this dark side of nature, of which we receive rather a hostile view, within the same breathtaking action/moment with a notion of nature that lets it come off in a charmingly beautiful way. Nature in its propensity to ‘darkness’ is counterbalanced in the very first paragraph by an opposing view of it. The scenery of the heath is reversed into the image of a “tent”, whose ‘walls’ are formed by a “whitish cloud” protectively enshrouding the heath as the “floor” of it. This comparison, this view of nature is to reconcile us with it, to warm us up to it by the very cosiness it radiates. It is the associative undertone of ‘shelter’ we automatically and immediately attach to this picture. Thus Hardy achieves a well-balanced view of nature. He is not just a painter in that he is a narrator, but a true philosopher (on top of it).

It seems to me that this is exactly part of Hardy’s wider, overall philosophy, which is that nature is a harmonious system in itself, a phenomenon, to which there are always two sides of the medal. This concept says that a thing in and by itself is neither good nor evil. According to some insight of the ancient Greeks it is the right measure, the adequate proportion of something that decides about whether it is to the benefit or detriment of man, i.e. nature in itself is neither good nor bad. It is man that passes judgments, has preconceived ideas about nature instead of living up to it in an appropriate, well-balanced way evening out the extremes. The treasure of nature, its resourceful make-up, is such that it yields both: the good and the bad.

When George Lewes spoke of “wit”, he most probably didn’t refer to it in its rather modern, present-day sense of humour, irony, cynicism, sarcasm or any other form within that category of meaning, though this might also be implied, but in its typically 19th century sense, in which it was meant to cover ‘ingenuity’, sharpness of the mind, awareness of oneself, the world and life as such, perception, discernment.⁵ It is exactly in that particular sense, in which it befits Hardy best. Had Hardy lived in Shakespeare’s time, he would have been reckoned among the

guilty of this and thus being blamed for their solitary position in society.

⁴ Here Hardy skilfully uses two figures of speech concurrently: a) the one of ‘assonance’ in b) an instance of ‘alliteration’.

⁵ Also of the world of ‘the small’, those tiny bits and pieces that make up the concealed shades of meanings of a single word or of what is said in between the lines.

‘University Wits’⁶, a term coined by Saintsbury (1845-1833)⁷ and applied to several outstanding playwrights of the Elizabethan Age.

What distinguishes Hardy as a most remarkable ‘wit’ of the late 19th century is foremost his power to create suspense, which winds through all his novels, unflaggingly, from beginning to end. Parallel and intertwined with suspense runs passion. It is through these criteria that Hardy knows how to unlock the reader’s heart. At the same time he does not flatter to please them.

On the contrary, when Hardy’s protagonists suffer, the reader suffers, too, when they feel treated unjustly, whether irony of fate has played a trick upon them or whether they have been left in the lurch by society, the reader re-senses all their emotions with them and has sympathy for them. In this context it has often been argued that injustice prevails in Hardy’s novels, and that it is this for which Hardy cannot be called a ‘didactic writer’ teaching his audience a moral now and then.⁸ This might be true on the surface, in an uncritical approach to his novels.

Hardy’s world is not one controlled by a man-made order, but one imposed by nature. And it is through ‘nature’ that justice is done and order restored, very often this is true in violation of man’s sense of justice. Whenever we ask ourselves if a certain character has deserved such or such a tragic outcome of their lives, we are bound to go wrong. Nature⁹ is essentially ‘indifferent’. It doesn’t judge in human terms and pass out sentences in conformity with them. Man’s life is enigmatic in a way, unpredictable, not subject to reason ultimately. This is part of Hardy’s ‘philosophy’, his view of life, man’s existence on earth. This idea or rather concept is presented to us in a number of beautiful instances, one of which is the following quotation from *The Mayor of Casterbridge*: “The lugubrious harmony of the spot ...”.¹⁰ At first sight this image of ‘harmony veiled in grief and mourning’ seems to be a contradiction. Logic as a means of approach to it is evidently exempted. And yet if we linger and ponder a moment on the sensitivity with which this seeming paradox is brought nearer to us, we marvel at the analytical clairvoyance with which ‘nature’ has been seen in its true character. We connote ‘lugubriousness’ with ‘sadness’ and perhaps ‘melancholy’, which puts us into “a pensive mood”.¹¹ So it is the degree of the shade of light that makes us thoughtful and anticipate things so as to be careful not to take any incalculable risks and watch out for what is to come. On the

⁶ Together with Ben Jonson, for instance

⁷ Cf. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, ed. Margaret Drabble, Oxford, University Press, 2000, 6th edition, p.1049, entry under “University Wits”

⁸ Yet just cf. whether Hardy does not speak through Susan Henchard as a mouthpiece – and thus adopting her Christian attitude – when she writes in a letter to her husband Michael: “... and forgive, if you can, a woman you once deeply wronged, as she forgives you.” (Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge. The Life and Death of a Man of Character*, in: Penguin Classics, ed. Keith Wilson, London, New York and other places, 1997, p.123)

⁹ And here I see some similarity to Hemingway, though a very anachronistic view, to be true.

¹⁰ Op. cit., p.125, third paragraph, second sentence

Also cf. my passage on “Domesday” in connection with “darkness”, pp.3f.

¹¹ To speak with Wordsworth, from whose wonderful poem “The Daffodils” I have borrowed this quotation.

other hand, one can't be constantly in high spirits. It's the ups and downs in life one has to put up with. Only he who knows the depths of life, knows the heights of it, too. I think it is in this combination of extremes mutually counterbalanced and levelled out where Hardy's concept of man is anchored. Thus the two opposites contained in "lugubrious harmony" don't exclude one another. They form a unit despite their semantic contradiction. They emanate a harmony. Seen from this angle, disharmony vanishes. No more riddling, no more puzzling about what seemed inexplicable at first sight. Opposing fragments of nature blend into a wholeness incomprehensible through 'ratio'.

In conclusion one can say that Hardy deserves to be esteemed a 'mastermind' of the novel. On the one hand the diction he uses teems with Latinisms¹², and one feels inclined to think of him as a 'braggart', a self-conceited 'dandy'. Upon second thought, however, and after another close scrutiny of the text passage in question one realizes that those foreign words serve a specific purpose, which fits in with the author's insight into the nature of man and the lessons nonhuman nature teaches the characters of his novels (and us in the end).¹³

All in all, Hardy meets the requirements postulated by Lewes to an exceeding degree.

¹² Which might even intimidate if not scare some persons and deter them from reading on.

¹³ Though very often one can't get rid of the impression that Hardy's philosophical recognitions resemble a relatively dis coherent collection/anthology of aphorisms, which in a last perusal boil down to hackneyed, threadbare truisms in their essence.

These two instances might be sufficient proof/evidence of my statement:

a) "Fancies find room in the strongest minds." (M. o. Casterbridge, op. cit., p.141)

b) "... a churchyard old as civilization" (op. cit., p.141)

☞ needless to say, superfluous, redundant 'embellishment'/ornament of a 'churchyard

Bibliography

Primary literature

- a) Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, ed. Tony Slade and Penny Boumelha, Penguin Classics, London, New York et alii loci, 1919
- b) Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge, The Life and Death of a Man of Character*, ed. Keith Wilson, Penguin Classics, London, New York et alii loci, 1997

Secondary literature

The Oxford Companion to English Literature, ed. Margaret Drabble, Oxford, University Press, 2000

Explanatory notes to the essay:

1) Point of assessment of the paper by my course director and tutor:

According to the evaluation system specific to the University of Cambridge my paper was awarded

- a) the class-mark II:i
and assigned to
- b) the percentage mark of: 65,
- c) which is the top position in grade A-

(Grade A+ in class-mark I starts from 70 % and above.)

2) And here the transcript of the hand-written report by my tutor:

An impressive meditation – an intellectually very busy essay but with an odd structure. The 2 criteria you set out are not made up of consistently in the ensuing discussion, which touches on the description of landscape to an extent that precludes consideration of other important elements (characterization, plot). You need to give a sense of the complexity & scope of the whole text – the intensity of your scrutiny of the opening passage has its own value but is in the end too narrowly focused.

3) I was determined to opt to write a paper for evaluation before I had even embarked on this 3-week summer course on English literature. The question that bothered me most was how to make meet both ends of writing the paper and attending the general (plenary) lectures as well as the special subject classes, two of which were compulsory for everybody, in my case ‘Thomas Hardy’ and ‘Ezra Pound + T.S. Eliot’ – work to be done simultaneously, more or less; a task imposing tremendous strain and stress upon me.

Within the relatively short span of a fortnight I had to conceive, draft, and finalise the paper as during the first week I was occupied with listening attentively to what my tutor and supervisor had to say about Thomas Hardy in his morning lectures. It was this way that I got a first taste of what my ‘Cambridge marker’ might expect of me. While writing the essay I wasn’t invited to any tutorial on it nor did I ask for one. The only clues I received were – apart from a few well-meant, well-wishing illuminating tips from Charles Moseley, the Director of Studies, and as such in charge of the whole summer school - some guidelines about how to write an essay,

compiled on an extra sheet of paper.

The one requirement which was binding in that it marked out the frame within which we were free to unfold our writing capacity regarding argumentative structure, form and style of the essay was really hard to fulfil. In the instructions on the topic it said the essay should comprise between 2000 and 3000 words, warning us “that students will be penalised if their essays are significantly over or under length”. What a horror of a vision! Yet, it didn’t deter me from writing my paper.

So much as a foil against or rather context within which my paper had to be realized.