

**THOMAS HARDY:
A STEP TOWARD MODERN CHARACTERS**

BY

CHARLOTTE AUSTREW FORT

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THOMAS HARDY: A STEP TOWARD MODERN CHARACTERS

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Charlotte Austrew Fort

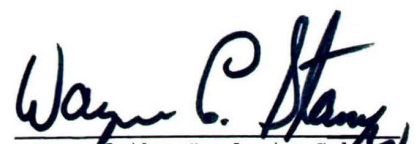
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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Charlotte Austrew Fort entitled "Thomas Hardy: A Step Toward Modern Characters." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.


Major Professor

Accepted for the Council:


Dean of the Graduate School

THOMAS HARDY: A STEP TOWARD MODERN CHARACTERS

As a late Victorian novelist, Thomas Hardy helped to lay the groundwork for the realistic novelists that were to follow him. Much of this groundwork was done in the area of character development. Before Hardy's novels, the characters in English fiction were often only flat reflections of social history. Then came Hardy's unique characters who were strange mixtures of the old and the new. For all their dependence on myth and natural surroundings, Tess Durbeyfield and Michael Henchard are perplexing, psychological creations. Each stands out as an individual. Each finds his strength in his ability to endure suffering brought on most often by his own inflexibility. Each refuses to conform to the norms of nature, and in the old tragic sense his pride leads to his downfall. In their juxtaposition with the rustic Wessex inhabitants, the full conflict between what is natural and unchanging and what is new, changeful, and often tragic is brought to the surface. This study will examine Hardy's use of old and new techniques in character development to determine his contribution to the growth of the modern novel. The focus of the study will be on two of Hardy's later novels: Tess of the d'Urbervilles and The Mayor of Casterbridge, with more detailed study devoted to Tess of the d'Urbervilles.

Some of the more significant studies of the "old" in the development of Hardy's characters have been done by F. B. Pinion, Arnold Kettle, John Holloway, Richard Carpenter, D. H. Lawrence, and Dorothy Van Ghent. These studies deal with the use of nature in character development, with fate's role in character determination, and with myths as they are bases for characters. F. B. Pinion and John Holloway view nature as a reflection of the

character's situation; D. H. Lawrence and John Holloway see Tess used as a "sport" because of her isolation from the norms established by nature. Here the term sport implies that Tess is hunted down and destroyed by external forces because of her internal nature. She is toyed with and then destroyed. Pinion sees Tess fluctuate between life and death much as nature fluctuates through her seasons---living, dying, living again.¹ Tess is introduced to the reader in the month of May during the fertility celebration of May Day. She is as pure and innocent as the land of Marlott, which has been violated neither by tourist nor landscape painters. Almost in the next breath Hardy reveals an intrusion in the form of Angel Clare, who will later play an integral part in Tess's downfall.² However, here Tess is as alive and as pure as nature.

Later, after Tess has gone to Trantridge, nature seems at the least to be indifferent to Tess's situation with Alec, and at the most, involved in actually aiding in Tess's downfall. On the night of Alec's violation of Tess's innocence, they are enveloped in a fog which shuts out the moonlight. It is no longer spring but September in the woods, and Tess is wrapped in darkness as she sleeps on the dead leaves.

When Tess returns to Marlott a year later, it is "Sad October," and she has begun to know her capacity for pain. Nature has taught her the first in a very bitter series of lessons: "The serpent hisses where the sweet birds sing." (Tess, p. 82.)

¹
F. B. Pinion, A Hardy Companion (New York, 1968), p. 19.

²
Thomas Hardy, Tess of the d'Urbervilles (New York, 1921), p. 1.
Hereafter will be referred to as Tess.

Tess's rally takes place at Talbothay's amid the genteel people because this is the natural place and time (spring) for rebirth. The theme of rebirth is carried over to the river Froom which is described through the eyes of Tess: "The Froom waters were clear as the pure River of Life shown to the Evangelist. . . ." (Tess, p. 114.)

The fertility of the valley brings out the sexuality of Tess in her natural state. Kettle feels that the note of the valley is one of fertility running almost to excess.³ The text speaks for itself in lines of description like the following:

Amid the oozing fatness of the Froom Vale at a season when the rush of juices could almost be heard below the hiss of fertilization, it was impossible that the most fanciful love should not grow passionate. (Tess, p. 166.)

In his article "Hardy's Major Fiction" John Holloway expresses the belief that Hardy places emphasis upon Tess's own sensuality through his depiction of nature. Holloway sees a genuine bond formed "between Tess's own sensuality and the mild cows and the lush blossoms where the fruit is setting."⁴

The rally fails and Tess dies a second time. She leaves for the harsh upland soil where existence is more difficult. In Holloway's view she struggles not at the level of reproduction but at the level of survival in the swede fields. These swede fields had properly been given the name of starve-acre place by those who toiled there.

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Arnold Kettle, "Introduction to Tess of the d'Urbervilles," Twentieth Century Studies of Tess of the d'Urbervilles, ed. Albert J. LaValley (New Jersey, 1969), pp. 14-30.

4

John Holloway, "Hardy's Major Fiction," Hardy, ed. Albert F. Guerard (New Jersey, 1964), pp. 52-62.

Through the eyes of Tess we see the difference between Flintcomb-Ash and Talbothay's:

The swede-field . . . was a stretch of a hundred odd acres in one patch, on the highest ground of the farm, rising above the stony lanchets or lynchets---the outcrop of silicious veins in the chalk formation, composed of myriads of loose white flints in bulbous, cusped, and phallic shapes. The upper half of each turnip had been eaten off by livestock, and it was the business of the women to grub for the lower half (Tess, p. 325)

It is here at Flintcomb-Ash that Tess must eventually give in to the external forces, which ironically are not the land and its hardships but Alec d'Urberville. She is forced to give in not for her own sake but for the sake of her family.

After Alec's death, Tess rejoins Angel, and the rich woodland of the first few days corresponds to the rich vale of the dairies. The empty manor house is like the ancient house where their marriage was nearly consecrated before. Barren Salisbury plain corresponds to the uplands of Flintcomb-Ash, and the Stonehenge corresponds to the vaults of their ancestors where Tess and her family are forced to take refuge after having
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to leave Marlott. It is as though her surroundings those last few days mirror her life. This mirroring technique seems to insure that the reader will not forget all that has gone into the making of Tess's character through experience.

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The views of D. H. Lawrence and John Holloway are similar. They see Tess being used as a sport by nature because she possesses a character

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Ibid.

⁶
D. H. Lawrence, "Sue Bridehead," Hardy, ed. Albert F. Guerard (New Jersey, 1964), pp. 71-76.

alien to the established norms. This view helps to explain Hardy's use of so much animal imagery and his final sardonic note at the novel's closing. From the beginning of the novel one can trace Tess's movements as an ever narrowing circular pattern leading to her destruction. She moves, constantly pursued by d'Urberville. Hardy reminds the reader rather harshly at times of the futility of her movement. No reminder is quite so vivid as that of the hares who move ever inward in an attempt to escape the reaping machine only to be finally trapped and killed.

The narrow lane of stubble encompassing the field grew wider and wider with each circuit, and the standing corn was reduced to smaller area as the morning wore on. Rabbits, hares, snakes, rats, and mice retreated inward as into a fastness, unaware of the ephemeral nature of their refuge, and of the doom that awaited them later in the day when their covert shrinking to a more and more horrible narrowness, they were huddled together, friends and foes till the last few yards of upright wheat fell also under the teeth of the unerring reaper, and they were every one put to death by the sticks and stones of the harvesters. (Tess, p. 96.)

The same image is used again at Flintcomb-Ash:

The time for the rat catching arrived at last, and the hunt began. The creatures had crept downwards with the subsidence of the rick till they were all together at the bottom, and, being uncovered from their last refuge, they ran across the open ground in all direction. . . . (Tess, p. 383.)

This image parallels Tess's circle, which contains the same false hope. Tess is openly defiant of her fate after her fall with Alec, and refuses to accept that her lot in life is to abide with a man she has instinctively detested from their first meeting. She prefers to cling to the futile hope that she and Angel can have a life together. There is housed in this belief the same hopelessness as that of the animals depicted in the above scenes.

The strongest, most well developed animal imagery used by Hardy to show Tess as a victim of sport is his bird imagery. Often the scenes involving birds are the agonizing results of the cruelty of man and nature. They

help to emphasize Tess's role as a victim of this same cruelty. Pinion points out some of these images in his study.⁷ Tess is in sympathy with a bird when she cries at the sight of Mrs. d'Urberville's bullfinches in a cage. She is later caught like a bird in a springe that night in the woods with Alec. She is drawn to Angel like a fascinated bird, and eventually she is caught like a bird in a clap net.

The night Tess spends alone in the woods on her journey to Flintcomb-Ash sleeping near the suffering wounded pheasants is the most striking parallel between her and birds, which are so often the sport of man.

. . . Under the trees several pheasants lay about, their rich plumage dabbled with blood. . . . some feebly moving their wings, some staring up at the sky . . . some contorted, some stretched out---all of them writhing in agony, except the fortunate ones whose tortures had ended. . . .

With the impulse of a soul who could feel for kindred sufferers as much as for herself, Tess's first thought was to put the still living birds out of their torture, and to this end with her own trembling hands she broke the necks of as many as she could find. . . . (Tess, p. 318.)

No reader can miss the striking similarity between Tess and the pheasants. She is on her way to Flintcomb-Ash where she will ultimately give in to pressures and go with Alec. When Alec's sport with Tess is finished, she will have suffered greatly, committed murder, and finally be relieved of her suffering on the gallows. The similarities exist even in the manner of death--both Tess and the pheasants die of a broken neck.

A glance at The Mayor of Casterbridge will show Hardy's use of some of the same techniques of character development through parallels with nature, an old and much used device. Just as Tess is shown to be innocent by her association with birds, so Susan Henchard's plea to her husband, Michael,

to reconsider his proposal to sell her to the highest bidder is heard as "bird-like chirpings."⁸ The swallow that circles in the tent before the sale of Susan seems to reflect Henchard's confused state of mind, and his even more confused destiny. (Mayor, p. 6.) Finally, late in the novel the body of the dead goldfinch which had been Henchard's wedding gift to Farfrae and Elizabeth-Jane is a symbol of the isolated Henchard, his life snuffed out, forgotten, and alone in darkness. (Mayor, p. 379.) In another outstanding use of animal imagery other than birds, Henchard saves Lucetta from a bull. (Mayor, p. 337.) The irony of the scene is that Henchard is the bull. He is imprisoned in a nose ring of events and mastered by stronger forces.⁹ There is a striking resemblance between this scene and that of Tess killing the pheasants. All these symbolic nature images either reflect actual qualities within the characters or reflect the psychological pressures which will mean their defeat.

Another well demonstrated critical view of character development in Hardy's novels deals with his use of myth. Critics who propose this theory see Hardy's main characters as reenactments of ancient archetypal figures. Again in considering this view, Tess of the d'Urbervilles will be used as the major frame of reference with support for Hardy's use of myth in The Mayor of Casterbridge.

Dorothy Van Ghent uses the garden scene from Tess of the d'Urbervilles

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Thomas Hardy, The Mayor of Casterbridge (London, 1950), p. 6. Hereafter will be referred to as Mayor.

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Fredrick Karl, "The Mayor of Casterbridge: A New Fiction Defined," Modern Fiction Studies, VI (Autumn, 1960), pp. 195-202.

to propose that Tess is a re-enactment of a myth.¹⁰ The garden scene takes place at Talbothay's:

The outskirts of the garden in which Tess found herself had been left uncultivated for some time, and was now damp and rank with juicy grass which sent up mists of pollen; and tall blooming weeds, emitting offensive smells --- weeds, whose red and yellow and purple hues formed a polychrome as dazzling as that of cultivated flowers. She went stealthily as a cat through the profusion of growth, gathering cuckoo-spittle on her skirts, brushing off snails that were climbing the apple tree stems, staining her hands with thistle milk and slug-slime, and rubbing off upon her naked arms sticky blights that, though snow white on the tree trunks make blood-red stains on her skin; thus she drew near to Clare, though still unobserved of him. (Tess, p. 137.)

Miss Van Ghent says of the garden: ". . . It is in this part of Paradise (an outskirt of the garden--there are even apple trees here) that the minister's son is hidden, who, in his conceited impotence, will violate Tess more than her sensual seducer: Who but Hardy would have dared to give him the name Angel and a harp too?"¹¹ She further states that the subject is mythological, for it places the human protagonist in dramatic relationship with the nonhuman and orients his destiny among preternatural powers.¹²

There is also a mythological element in the development of Michael Henchard. The myth here centers around the fertility god. Henchard's position in Casterbridge is equivalent to that of the legendary king whose position is threatened by a young hero. Henchard is the scapegoat

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Dorothy Van Ghent, The English Novel: Form and Function (New York, 1953), p. 209.

¹¹
Ibid.

¹²
Ibid.

king; he has come to Casterbridge with a secret in his background, he has risen to a dominant position in life, and he has adopted his spiritual son from a far country who bids fairly to become his successor. The ritual form of combat between the two men is translated into economic terms. Eventually the positions of the two men are reversed: Henchard the king is low, and Farfrae is elevated to mayor. Henchard must die so the new order can prevail. This same scapegoat myth is reflected in Tess at the Stonehenge when she sleeps on the altar. Like other gods and goddesses, she is made to suffer for the misdeeds of her world.

Hardy's use of nature and mythology in the development of his characters has been shown to be intense. In using these methods he incorporated standard techniques, but used them with such constancy and intensity within the development of his characters that even the "old" methods seem to take on a new dimension with him. Hardy's contribution to modern character development does not end with adding new dimensions to the old methods, however. The characters of his late novels point toward modern psychological studies of characters through their responses to their environment. Hardy said that circumstances in his novels implied not only the network of environment¹³ but also the character of the person centrally involved. Circumstance then includes human passions, prejudices, and ambitions. Use of these complex human traits is certainly a step toward the psychological character investigation which occurs in modern novels.

Lord David Cecil contends that the characters of Hardy's novels are¹⁴ not well developed. He sees Hardy as a depicter of "man not men."

¹³

Pinion, p. 144.

¹⁴

Lord David Cecil, Hardy the Novelist (New York, 1943), p. 51.

Cecil believes that Hardy expected his characters to be symbolic representations of mankind in general. This is true to a certain extent and is reflected in all the old methods he used to develop them; however, his characters are individuals as well as symbols. Tess is more than the characteristic wronged woman and Henchard is not all hero or all villain. Both are complex characters who are puzzling because of their ambiguities.

In Tess of the d'Urbervilles, Hardy uses a method similar to that noticed by A. Alvarez in Jude the Obscure.¹⁵ This is the psychological development of one central character through other characters who mirror his dominant traits. Angel Clare and Alec d'Urberville are both egotistical men. Angel's egoism is centered in his idealistic nature and Alec d'Urberville's is centered in his sensuality. Both are separate sides of Tess's character. She is extremely complicated in her motives and actions. She is, in other words, a complex, psychologically full, difficult to understand character. She is incapacitated for life by her moral idealism and conspicuous in life because of her sensuality.

Angel Clare is an ineffectual idealist who cannot extend human understanding to the woman he loves. He is torn between his seemingly genuine love for Tess and his superficial ideas of virtue and the pure woman. Nowhere in the novel is this more evident than in the sleep walking scene:

Here they were within a plantation which formed the Abbey grounds, and taking a new hold of her, he went onward a few steps till they reached the ruined choir of the Abbey church. Against the north wall was the empty stone coffin of an Abbot, without a lid, . . . In this Clare carefully laid Tess. Having kissed her lips a second time. . . . (Tess, p. 284.)

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A. Alvarez, "Jude the Obscure," Hardy, ed. Albert F. Guerard (New Jersey, 1964), pp. 63-70.

Even though Clare loves Tess, it is his rigid adherence to his ideas of a pure woman that isolates him from her love and eventually destroys her. Despite the fact that Angel has had a previous affair, he will not accept Tess after her revelation on their wedding night, and abandons her to travel to Brazil. It is his return after she has rejoined d'Urberville that precipitates the murder. Richard Carpenter said of Angel Clare: ". . . his naive self-deceptions and his neurotic self-torments ally him to such figures as Stephen Dedalus and Quentin Compson rather than the typical Victorian hero."¹⁶

Tess is a victim of this same type of self-deceptive idealism. From the moment she sees Angel, she is attracted to him because he is different. She carries her idealized impression of him with her from that May Day in Marlott to Talbothay's when she sees him a second time. Her impression of him never changes in spite of all the suffering she undergoes as a result of his cruel denial of her. In her idealized love for Angel lie the seeds of her destruction; she kills d'Urberville out of frustration when she discovers Clare's return from Brazil. Had she been less idealistic, Tess might have been willing to settle for the kind of happiness that the rustic Wessex characters, like her mother and father, had.

Alec d'Urberville was never as cruel to Tess as Angel was. From the beginning he was quite obviously attracted to Tess physically. Alec seems to have only one dimension to his character; this dimension is his sensuality. It is ironic that Tess should be so repulsed by this characteristic in d'Urberville when this is the first characteristic which everyone else notices about her. Her outward sensual beauty is responsible for many of

her troubles, and she, like d'Urberville, has trouble controlling her passions. At Talbothay's she is in constant fear that she will lose the battle with her passion and marry Clare, which is, of course, what she does.

Even though The Mayor of Casterbridge lacks this mirroring of traits among the characters, there is still a character complexity which is created by ambiguity. Michael Henchard is a man of extreme love and extreme hate. Everything he does is done on impulse and is motivated by one of these two emotions. This duality in Henchard embodies the mechanism for his own destruction. He is highly representative of the structural and psychological difference between Hardy's characters and those of other novelists before his time. To illustrate this difference Frederick Karl compared Jane Austen's well-balanced heroes and heroines to the willful self-destructiveness of Hardy's heroes and heroines, who will themselves into "obsession with guilt and penance."¹⁷

Henchard is Hardy's supreme success with self-willed destruction and unreversed destiny of character. He begins by defying all social and moral conventions in the sale of his wife, progresses to alienating everyone from him (even those like Elizabeth-Jane who are sympathetic and loving), and ends by leaving the following last will and testament:

'That Elizabeth-Jane Farfrae be not told of my death
or made to grieve on account of me.
' & that I be not bury's in consecrated ground.
' & that no sexton be asked to toll the bell.
' & that nobody is wished to see my dead body.
' & that no murners walk behind me at my funeral.
' & that no flours be planted on my grave.
' & that no man remember me.
' To this I put my name.

Michael Henchard.' (Mayor, p. 384.)

Hardy discloses an aspect of Henchard's character through Elizabeth-Jane's reaction to reading the will:

What Henchard had written in the anguish of his dying was respected as far as practicable by Elizabeth-Jane, though less from a sense of the sacredness of last words, as such, than from her independent knowledge that the man who wrote them meant what he said. She knew the directions to be a piece of the same stuff that his whole life was made of. . . . (Mayor, pp. 384-385.)

His death wish was as impulsive as his life's struggles. Friedman in his study, The Turn of the Novel, points out that the greatest change from the old novel form to the modern novel form lies in the creation of an open ended novel. These open ended novels present a character who does not undergo a change in his character which brings about a corresponding change in his relationship to his world. Many times the modern novel suggests a painful continuation of the protagonist's experience. These two late novels of Hardy indicate that he recognizes the value of this openness to character development. This is reflected in Michael Henchard, who dies as bitterly as he has lived.

Tess is not as open as The Mayor. For the sake of his Victorian audience Hardy seems to have attempted some sort of regeneration of his characters through Liza-Lou and Angel Clare. Hardy does this, however, only after he has made us aware that Tess's martyrdom is for naught:

"Tell me now, Angel, do you think we shall meet again after we are dead?"

He kissed her to avoid a reply at such a time. "O Angel, I fear that means no!" she said with a suppressed sob. "And I wanted so to see you again--so much, so much! What--not even you and I, Angel, who love each other so well?" (Tess, p. 453.)

With no satisfaction of a real and lasting union, Tess clings to her idealized love of Angel, who cannot bring himself to comfort her even in death, and sleeps on the sacrificial altar of the Stonehenge as her doom advances in the form of a "mere dot." Tess has not reached any understanding of herself or of the world in which she lives. The development of her character has in it the seeds of the modern characters who will withstand a futile existence until their deaths. At the end of the novel Tess's situation is "blurred" and her defeat is "beyond her
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comprehension."

In these two novels Hardy created members of a new breed of characters. In his mixture of myth, nature, and the individual, the experience of his characters reaches far into the past and at the same time continues into the future. Much of the continuation into the future is due to the fact that Hardy began to record through his characters some of the psychological ambiguity which is present in man. Even though fictional characters became more complex after Hardy, he put enough reality into the making of his late characters to create the complex, unfulfilled man rather than the romanticized, well-adjusted hero of the past.

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