

Puppet-Like-Existence of Hardian Women Characters

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Hardy OM (2 June 1840 – 11 January 1928) was an English novelist and poet. A Victorian realist in the tradition of George Eliot, he was influenced both in his novels and in his poetry by Romanticism, including the poetry of William Wordsworth. He was highly critical of much in Victorian society, especially on the declining status of rural people in Britain, such as those from his native South West England. While Hardy wrote poetry throughout his life and regarded himself primarily as a poet, his first collection was not published until 1898. Initially, he gained fame as the author of novels such as *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). During his lifetime, Hardy's poetry was acclaimed by younger poets (particularly the Georgians) who viewed him as a mentor. After his death his poems were lauded by Ezra Pound, W. H. Auden and Philip Larkin. Many of his novels concern tragic characters struggling against their passions and social circumstances, and they are often set in the semi-fictional region of Wessex; initially based on the medieval Anglo-Saxon kingdom, Hardy's Wessex eventually came to include the counties of Dorset, Wiltshire, Somerset, Devon, Hampshire and much of Berkshire, in southwest and south central England. Two of his novels, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*, were listed in the top 50 on the BBC's survey *The Big Read*.

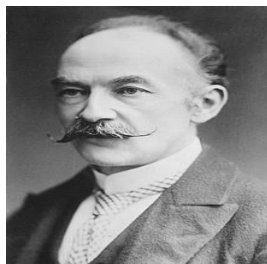
KEYWORDS: *puppet, women, Hardy, Britain, poet, novels, romanticism, England, mentor*

INTRODUCTION

It is true that Hardian women characters had puppet like existence in his life.

Thomas Hardy

The works of Hardy which has spanned a number of decades, and makes no claim to being a specialist, but rather a devotee. This is evident in Thomas Hardy's *Women*, for it does not contain academic jargon, nor is it saturated with analyses adhering to specific disciplines of literary criticism. Hardy was the 'perennial wooer or suitor', for whom 'the idea of marriage, perhaps, appealed more than its actuality'. Hardy was not infallible, no matter how much we may revere the man and his prolific oeuvre – 'Insensitivity to causing



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hurt by slighting women in some way was a part of his person, as his sisters and wives found out, yet when made aware, he could choose to show contrition and guilt'. Mary and Kate adored their gifted older brother, but were very much sidelined and never a part of Hardy's public life. The story of how his first wife Emma was alienated and found Hardy to be insufferable in his treatment of her is well documented, as is the outpouring of grief in the 'Poems 1912-13' published after her death. Hardy's second wife Florence was mortified by this publication, and when she later required hospital treatment for the cancer that would eventually lead to her death, Hardy refused to pay the expenses, as he felt this was her responsibility. These are facets of Hardy's nature that sit uncomfortably with us, but they co-existed with his genius for literature and his searing indictments of the hypocritical patriarchal

society he found himself a part of. The two are not mutually exclusive.[1,2]

We are also reminded of Hardy's 'penchant for pretty women', and his 'inability to sustain a long and loving relationship (possibly the exception being with Florence Henniker, largely because she kept him at arm's length)', which was being largely down to Hardy's upbringing 'and the exhortations of his mother'. Jemima Hardy certainly exercised an incredible influence over all four of her children, with three of them not marrying at all, as was her wish. But to Hardy himself a 'Fitzpierstonism', a perpetual longing for the unattainable ideal, with immediate cessation of interest once obtained. Fitzpierstonism is the person who most exhibit this trait –and we can see a great deal of Hardy himself in the latter character, who pines for something that never truly exists, and when he comes within the possibility of claiming it for his own, all attraction dissolves and the object is relinquished, mourned for when death guarantees that possession will never again be possible. There is obviously no better example of this than Emma Lavina Gifford.[3,4]

Discussion

Hardy was 'emotionally immature', that it was 'not that he did not feel love or affection for either Emma and [sic] Florence at times in his married life, but that he was unable to sustain any feeling for another, except through his writing'. One obviously needs to discount Jemima Hardy here. He was a strange combination: a cynic on love, yet a romantic, albeit one who eschewed commitment; shy and socially self-conscious, yet in his writing, provocative and controversial. His heroines are the hub of much of his fiction just as the women he knew through kin and friendship shaped and moulded his own life and writing. [5,6]

And thus we are able to read of Eustacia Vye who wishes to 'be loved to madness' but in fact has what may be viewed as fickle ideas of what love entails, and Sue Bridehead who wishes to live as soulmates with Jude Fawley, but not to be 'licensed to be loved on the premises by you'.

His details included his 'Family', which concentrates on Hardy's mother, sisters and wives; 'Friends and Muses', discussing Tryphena Sparks, Florence Henniker, Agnes Grove and Gertrude Bugler; and 'Fiction and Fantasy', an analysis of many of Hardy's female characters, especially Bathsheba, Eustacia and Tess; followed by a conclusion which asks if Hardy was a misogynist, a fantasist, a romantic or a feminist. Perhaps it is possible that all four of these things in various aspects can be found in his personality throughout his life. Hardy was an avid

collector of photographs of said muses. Hardy did not have any tangible reminder of Tryphena Sparks at her death, prompting his poem 'Thoughts of Phena' with its powerful lines 'And in vain do I urge my unsight/ To conceive my lost prize/ At her close'. [7,8]

Hardy separated parts of his life at his own convenience and his lack of empathy with those closest to him. He saw no contradiction in what he wrote or said and would have meant Florence no harm; but by acting as he did Florence felt he was saying to her that she was not sufficient to nurture his soul and imagination or feed his libido; for that he needed a Gertrude. It was Hardy's obsession with Gertrude Bugler by separating the important parts of his life into independent compartments, Hardy was able to become a literary genius, but he also alienated anyone who ever got close to him.[9,10]

When discussing Hardy's female characters, everything is open to interpretation, no two readers will read a text in quite the same way. He notes that personal interpretations will change over time according to prevailing social conventions – 'We start with a heroine who is seen as honest and well-meaning yet find also a woman charged with sensuality and eroticism'. However 'Few heroines escape Hardy's feminine cloak -Hardy's heroines could not stray far before being put back into their boxes'. I also don't agree with the observation that 'it is apparent that being cast as a woman in one of Hardy's novels is a life sentence for if fate does not do for you, then a woman's foibles will'. This repeats that 'survivors in his fiction are more often than not meek and obsequious'. I can think of many exceptions to this rule, particularly Arabella Donn, Felice Charmond, Suke Damson, Avice Caro the second and Martha Bencomb. Arabella indeed is far from being meek or obsequious, or viewing her womanhood as a 'life sentence', she is in fact Hardy's most alpha-male character throughout his entire oeuvre. Arabella Donn is forthright, practical and a survivor who flies in the face of traditionally received Victorian patriarchal gender conventions. She is the ultimate Darwinian survivor, exploding stereotypical notions of femininity while remaining distinctly feminine. The second Avice Caro turns the tables on Jocelyn Pierston by exhibiting what might be termed 'reverse Fitzpierstonism', an equally forthright female character not afraid to speak her mind. Grace Melbury's character, that she is 'a good woman at heart who suffers from a bad marriage and then is twice cursed by the end, first losing the man she truly loves and then being reunited with her faithless husband'. Grace is vain, fickle and ignorant. She only 'loves' Giles when he is dying, and then voluntarily

chooses to return to Fitzpiers at the conclusion of the novel for decidedly fleshly reasons. But this of course is only an opinion – two readers can peruse the same text and reach wildly different conclusions.[11,12]

The categorization of five of Hardy's novels as 'failure (Ethelberta), masterpiece (The Return of the Native), slight historical novel (The Trumpet-Major), failure (A Laodicean), interesting oddity (Two on a Tower)'.

Results

Hardy was by now well-aware of the new woman, those free spirits who were being paraded in society, a few daring and unconventional, like Rosamund Tomson, or more often dull and shallow flirts who populated the soirées and dinner parties he attended in London. He observed them, occasionally toyed with them and often criticised them, but always enjoyed them. [13,14]

There are no sources or quotes provided to back up this assertion, and it seems to verge a bit too close towards misogyny for my liking. If this is an ugly truth being revealed about Hardy, but did he really find many New Women 'dull and shallow flirts'? Did he 'toy' with them and 'criticise' them? Hardy married a woman almost forty years younger than himself, and then well into his eighties fell in love with an even younger woman whom he considered to be the embodiment of his Tess. 'Sometimes with Hardy the reality becomes more compelling than the fiction' [15,16]

Conclusion

There is much of the Pygmalion in Hardy. Having created Tess as his ideal woman and faithfully presented her as a Pure Woman, Hardy embarks on his own love affair with one of his own creations. He takes pleasure in listing the actresses lining up wanting to play the part of Tess and sees in Gertrude Bugler, his last great infatuation, the embodiment of Tess. Little wonder that Emma and Florence stood so little chance of becoming his 'well-beloved'.

This could be the starting point for an excellent study, Hardy as Pygmalion would provide much fruitful investigation for a future essay should it be pursued, and it would provide an interesting and original dimension to the already prolific research available on Hardy's women, both real and fictional.[17,18]

Hardy and Emma were married in September 1874 and then in March 1874 the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1926 was awarded to Grazia Deledda not George Bernard Shaw noting Fancy Day as a character in *Far From the Madding Crowd* instead of *Under the Greenwood Tree*, claiming Stanley Cockerell as a

friend of Hardy and Florence when it was Sydney Cockerell, Gabriel Oak was not a 'childhood friend' or the 'first love' of Bathsheba Everdene; Sargent Troy most definitely does not 'find Fanny' when she falls ill or 'bring her back to Weatherbury', Festus Derriman cannot be considered a 'suitor' for Ann Garland but instead a stalker, Susan does not refer to Newson in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as 'her present owner' but to Henchard as such ; and Grace Melbury does not 'stay with' Giles 'in the cottage' in *The Woodlanders*, but occupies his cottage herself while he insists on risking exposure in a hovel. Again these mistakes could have been amended with careful proofreading, although in a book about Hardy's women, stating that *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* was published in 1889 rather than 1891 is unforgivable. There is also the repeated assertion that not much is known about Hardy's London years, when this is exactly the subject of Mark Ford's excellent book *Thomas Hardy: Half a Londoner* (2016) thus perhaps not read, which is a shame as it provides a wealth of information on Hardy's life in the capital, the women and the poetry.[19,20]

References

Digital collections

- [1] Works by Thomas Hardy in eBook form at Standard Ebooks
 - [2] Works by Thomas Hardy at Project Gutenberg
 - [3] Works by or about Thomas Hardy at Internet Archive
 - [4] Works by Thomas Hardy at LibriVox (public domain audiobooks)
 - [5] Thomas Hardy at the Poetry Foundation
 - [6] A Hyper-Concordance to the Works of Thomas Hardy at the Victorian Literary Studies Archive, Nagoya University, Japan
- #### Physical collections
- [7] Dorset County Museum, Dorchester, Dorset, contains the largest Hardy collections in the world, donated directly to the Museum by the Hardy family and inscribed on the UNESCO Memory of the World register for the United Kingdom.
 - [8] Hardy Collection at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin
 - [9] Thomas Hardy at the British Library
 - [10] Letter from Hardy to Bertram Windle, transcribed by Birgit Plietzsch, from *Collected Letters*, vol 2, pp.131–133. Retrieved 25 May 2015.

Biographical information

- [11] Thomas Hardy & 1909 Theatre Censorship Committee - UK Parliament Living Heritage

Geographic information

- [12] Hardy's Cottage National Trust visitor information for Hardy's birthplace.
- [13] Hardy Country A visitor guide for 'Hardy Country' in Dorset (sites of interest).
- [14] Max Gate National Trust visitor information for Max Gate (the home Hardy designed, lived and died in).

Other links

- [15] The Thomas Hardy Association (TTHA)
- [16] The Thomas Hardy Society
- [17] The New Hardy Players Theatrical group specialising in the works of Thomas Hardy.
- [18] Newspaper clippings about Thomas Hardy in the 20th Century Press Archives of the ZBW
- [19] Thomas Hardy at Curlie
- [20] The Dynasts on Great War Theatre

