

THE
SHORT STORIES
— OF —
THOMAS
HARDY



KRISTIN BRADY

THE SHORT STORIES OF THOMAS HARDY

Tales of Past and Present 新

ed by

Kristin Brady

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MACMILLAN PRESS
LONDON

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First published 1982

Reprinted 1984

Published by

THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD

London and Basingstoke

Companies and representatives

throughout the world

ISBN 0 333 31531 6 (*hardcover*)

ISBN 0 333 37219 0 (*paperback*)

Printed in Hong Kong

To my parents

Preface

Thomas Hardy's novels have long been the subject of critical scrutiny and his poetry has recently begun to receive the recognition he always wanted it to have. His short stories, however, have never been seriously studied, except as an adjunct to his larger fictional canon. Generally, he has been considered a short-story writer *manqué*, a novelist writing in an unfamiliar genre. Yet some of Hardy's first attempts in fiction were short stories, and his productivity in the form increased as he felt more free to write what he pleased – after he had established himself, professionally and financially, as a novelist. Many of the best stories are products of his maturity and the careful organization of the short-story volumes especially demonstrates Hardy's own awareness of the themes and techniques that draw together his otherwise different narratives. The collections are themselves single fictional works. The aim of this study is to examine Hardy's short fiction in close detail in an attempt to understand his developing conception of the short story as a literary form. In many instances, the novels and poems are invoked in order to illuminate an aspect of a story or collection, but my chief concern is to study the short stories in isolation, as works of literature distinct from, though not utterly unlike, Hardy's other achievements in prose and verse. My focus is primarily on the narratives collected in *Wessex Tales*, *A Group of Noble Dames*, and *Life's Little Ironies* – not only because these are the works which Hardy freely chose to reprint, but also because they are artistic wholes in their own right and exemplify three distinct kinds of story in his fictional canon. Because *A Changed Man* was never considered by Hardy as a coherent fictional unit, my treatment of the stories in that volume is confined to a retrospective survey in the concluding chapter of all Hardy's short stories, collected and uncollected. This is not in itself a judgment on the quality of *A Changed Man* – though Hardy

himself thought it inferior – but rather a decision to focus on those stories which Hardy considered his best, and which he collected into carefully ordered volumes.

Hardy's status as a writer of short fiction can be measured by the quality of his entire corpus, by its variety, and by his artistry in its individual forms. In each of the first three collections, there is discernible not only a particular kind of subject matter but also a correspondingly distinct narrative perspective which gives to the volume its own coherence and integrity. I have coined three descriptive terms to designate the forms that emerge from these different narrative perspectives: a specifically regional voice informs the 'pastoral histories' of *Wessex Tales*; the narrowly subjective view of the Wessex Field and Antiquarian Club makes it possible to think of their stories in *A Group of Noble Dames* as 'ambivalent exempla'; and the ironic stance of the voice in *Life's Little Ironies* turns ostensibly farcical situations into 'tragedies of circumstance'. My concern in making these distinctions is to argue not for generic differences between the collections but rather for variations, with some overlapping, in the prevailing mode of each. The stories are discussed individually and in the order of their arrangement in the volumes, but attention is also paid to the juxtapositions and thematic relationships among them. Stories which seem especially important are treated at greater length than others, with some reference to their sources and textual histories. The emphasis, however, is on the shape of the volumes as a whole and on the unique forms of their stories – evidence of Hardy's originality as a writer of the short story and his consciousness of what he called 'beauty of shape' and a 'well-knit interdependence of parts' in fiction. By discussing the short stories in terms of the organization Hardy chose to give them, I hope to provide a better understanding of the narratives themselves, and of the volumes in which they were collected.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the financial aid of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada which made the work on this book possible. I am also grateful to the Trustees of the late F. E. Dugdale for allowing me to quote material from unpublished Hardy manuscripts and notebooks and to the Trustees of the Leslie Stephen Estate for permitting the publication of part of Stephen's 1880 letter to Hardy. A version of my discussion of 'On the Western Circuit' appeared in the *Journal of the Eighteen Nineties Society*, and the editor has kindly allowed me to reprint it here. My thanks are also due to Mr Roger Peers, Curator of the Dorset County Museum, who granted me access to the Museum's collection of unpublished Hardy materials.

It gives me pleasure to thank several friends and scholars who aided me in the composition and revision of this book. Professor Jane Millgate first inspired my interest in Victorian fiction, Dr Marjorie Garson offered many useful insights during the early stages of writing, and Avrum Fenson read a completed draft of the book with a sharp eye for problems in clarity and style. Dr Judith Williams brought her valuable editorial skills to the manuscript in the final stages of revision, and Rea Wilmshurst added to expert typing services her own high standards in proofreading. I am also indebted to readings of the manuscript by Professors Henry Auster, W. J. Keith, and Dale Kramer. My greatest debt, however, is to Professor Michael Millgate – for the generosity with which he made available the results of his own researches, for the cogency of his criticism and advice, and for the encouragement of his scholarly example.

Textual Note

Except where otherwise indicated, page references both in the notes and the text are to the Macmillan Wessex Edition as the source for Hardy's prose fiction, drama, and prefaces. For purposes of quotation, I have used printings of the Wessex edition (listed below) which include the revisions supplied by Hardy to Macmillan in 1919. Where the context does not indicate a source, parenthetical page references will include the following abbreviations:

<i>A Changed Man</i>	CM
<i>Far from the Madding Crowd</i>	FMC
<i>A Group of Noble Dames</i>	GND
<i>Jude the Obscure</i>	J
<i>Life's Little Ironies</i>	LLI
<i>The Mayor of Casterbridge</i>	TMC
<i>Poems of the Past and the Present</i>	PPP
<i>The Return of the Native</i>	RN
<i>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</i>	T
<i>The Trumpet-Major</i>	TTM
<i>Two on a Tower</i>	TT
<i>Under the Greenwood Tree</i>	UGT
<i>Wessex Tales</i>	WT
<i>The Woodlanders</i>	TW

Also included within parentheses in the text are page references to the following:

<i>The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy</i> , ed. James Gibson (London: Macmillan, 1976)	CP
Florence Emily Hardy, <i>The Early Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840-1891</i> (London: Macmillan, 1928)	EL
—, <i>The Later Years of Thomas Hardy, 1892-1928</i> (London: Macmillan, 1930)	LY

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1 *Wessex Tales*: Pastoral Histories

Until recently, Thomas Hardy's short stories have been ignored by critics and readers alike. Yet the tales occupy an important place in Hardy's career and an interesting, if minor, one in the development of narrative form. They were written between 1865 and 1900, a longer period than he devoted to novel writing and a time when the genre of the short story was only beginning to be accepted in England. Hardy himself used the terms story, tale, and novel interchangeably, and appears to have made no strict theoretical distinction between the novel and short story as literary genres. For him, a story '*worth the telling*' (LY, 158) was the single criterion for good fiction, and form was more a matter of 'shape'¹ than of length. In practice, however, he was forced to distinguish between short stories and novels because the two genres were differently perceived by the British public. When he began to write in the 1860s, the three-volume novel, preceded by magazine serialization, was the standard and most lucrative form of publication, while publishers were in general more reluctant than in America or on the Continent to print serious short fiction.² George Saintsbury reports that the story 'was very *unpopular*' in the Victorian era 'and library customers would refuse collections of them with something like indignation or disgust'.³ Probably for this reason, Hardy devoted most of his energy at the beginning of his career to novel writing and did not begin to write short fiction with any regularity until the 1880s. Even then, Hardy only published the occasional story in periodicals and did not collect any stories in volume form until the appearance of *Wessex Tales* in 1888. Yet *Wessex Tales* is the product of a writer with a sophisticated and confident sense of both the short story and the short-story collection as fictional genres. Hardy chose for

it five of his best short stories ('A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred and Four' and 'The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion' were added in 1912) and organized them into a book that is itself an artistic whole. The stories are all firmly grounded in Dorset life and folklore during the mid-nineteenth century and are drawn together by a unique narrative perspective, the pastoral voice.

The stories in *Wessex Tales* were written at a time when Hardy was frequently shifting his residence between rural Dorset and 'the contrasting world of London'.⁴ This moving 'Between Town and Country'⁵ gave him a clear sense of how Dorset's landscape and culture could be misunderstood by an outsider and contributed to his complaint in 'The Dorsetshire Labourer' (1883) that the 'dull, unvarying, joyless' caricature commonly called Hodge had begun to be taken as a typical representative of country life.⁶ In *Wessex Tales* as in the other 'Novels of Character and Environment', Hardy counters this stereotypical image by presenting a scrupulously observed picture of the rural world based on the actual particularities of his native Dorset. Each story embodies Hardy's personal understanding of his local past, and communicates that vision by a narrative technique that makes it accessible to the non-native. Hodge becomes for the reader, as he is for Hardy, 'disintegrated into a number of dissimilar fellow-creatures, men of many minds, infinite in difference'.⁷

Wessex Tales reflects in its narrative details the social, economic, and cultural diversity of Dorset life. Within a narrow range (no aristocrats or gentry are presented), a complex hierarchy is portrayed, from the shepherds and artisans of 'The Three Strangers' to the relatively wealthy tradesmen of 'Fellow-Townsmen' and 'Interlopers at the Knap'. Most places described in the volume have factual counterparts in Dorset. The sheltered cove in 'A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred and Four' is probably Lulworth; the village in 'The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion' is Bincombe, near Weymouth; the pond at which Gertrude Lodge stops on her way to Casterbridge is Rushy-Pond, located near Hardy's birthplace at Bockhampton; Port-Bredy of 'Fellow-Townsmen' is Bridport, the centre for a prospering flax and twine industry during the early nineteenth century, and one of the few manufacturing towns in Dorset at that

time; the Knap of 'Interlopers' is based on the ancestral home of Hardy's mother's family at Towns End, Melbury Osmond; and Nether-Moynton of 'The Distracted Preacher' is Ower-moigne, an isolated hamlet near the Dorset coast.

These and other details in *Wessex Tales* serve to establish the traditional and local character of the volume as a whole. References are often made to the present state of sites on which significant events occurred and to living persons who had known the principal characters, and although not all of the stories have first-person narrators, each to some degree is told as though it were taken from oral tradition. Much of the traditional material in *Wessex Tales* is, in fact, an amalgam of written and oral sources. Combined with stories Hardy heard from old people is the evidence – and inspiration – he gleaned from the 'casual relics' (*TTM*, vii) of the past that dotted the Dorset landscape, and from such documentary sources as newspapers and parish records. In the composition of 'The Melancholy Hussar', for example, Hardy drew upon all of these: he had talked with old people who had known the 'original' of Phyllis Grove, he knew where the two hussars were buried,⁸ he examined old newspapers and church registers to find accounts of the execution and burials.⁹ The story of 'The Withered Arm' came more exclusively from oral tradition,¹⁰ but the details about smuggling in 'The Distracted Preacher' were variously gathered from verbal reports,¹¹ from information included in the 'Trumpet-Major Notebook',¹² and from a contemporary newspaper account of a trial which took place in 1830.¹³

As a group, the stories in *Wessex Tales* span more than four decades and take place at least thirty-five years before they were written. The two Napoleonic stories are the earliest in dating; 'The Three Strangers', 'The Withered Arm', and 'The Distracted Preacher' are set during the agricultural unrest of the 1820s and 1830s; and 'Fellow-Townsmen' takes place around 1845. It is harder to fix the date of 'Interlopers', but the fact that one of its characters, Mr Darton, is mentioned in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* would suggest that it too can be placed somewhere in the middle of the nineteenth century. Significantly, all of the stories are set a few decades before, or less than a decade after, Hardy's birth. This time-perspective allows Hardy – here and in the *Wessex* novels – to isolate the

fictional world from his own while also seeing connections between them. Distant yet accessible, alien yet familiar, Dorset becomes an image of a world that is past but still remembered. An object of memory, it occupies a place in the imagination and acquires a firmness and wholeness that is impossible to find in any image of the fluid present. This is not to suggest that Hardy's image of Dorset is static, but to point to its integrity as a fictional place – its status, in short, as a microcosm. Dorset becomes Wessex.

Seen as a whole, *Wessex Tales* represents Hardy's most comprehensive single depiction of the fictional world that he called Wessex. The very discontinuity and disjointedness of the short-story volume – its varied settings, unchronological sequence, diversity of style and subject matter, and seeming haphazardness of arrangement – make it, when considered as a unit, a more complete portrayal of Wessex life than one novel could be. In miniature, it represents the effect of all the Wessex novels when seen together – documenting several levels of the Wessex past and filling in empty spaces on the Wessex map. It also depicts a variety of the ways of life that contribute to the economy and culture of Wessex and exemplifies the abundance of local modes of storytelling. Less coherent internally than any of the Wessex novels, its mosaic-like unity is all the more suggestive of the wide range of human experience that Wessex history comprises.

Underlying Hardy's comprehensive picture of country life is his deeper concern to present Wessex as a symbol. This strategy of subordinating realistic details to a symbolic pattern places *Wessex Tales* firmly in the tradition of pastoral. Numerous critics have noted that the use of pastoral as a literary technique is not confined to the conventions of its classical forms but rather is based upon 'the metaphorical and ironic relationship between the world created by the poet and the real world'.¹⁴ Conventionally, the actual world and the poet's world have been compared in terms of the contrast between 'real' and 'ideal', but as William Empson makes clear, the pastoral contrast more precisely involves the 'process of putting the complex into the simple'.¹⁵ The opposition of simple and complex leads to other contrasts: rural versus urban, regional versus non-regional, past versus present. Such pairings, in which there are bound to be some overlap-

ping elements, force the reader to see his own world by comparing it not to an ideal place but to another fully realized world, one as fraught with suffering and difficulty as his own.

In *Wessex Tales*, Hardy exploits the tension in the discrepancy between historical Dorset and the reader's presumed simplistic image of it. This is done by satisfying the reader's nostalgic impulse for a glimpse of the rural past while presenting this image from a perspective he had not expected to have. His yearning for a simple world is undermined and replaced by his immediate emotional engagement in the events of the stories themselves. He thus becomes familiar with Wessex not as a focus for a retreat from his own world but as a point of comparison with it. By this process of comparison the reader achieves the conventional pastoral 'return' to the present. What was intended to be a withdrawal from the complexities of the moment becomes instead an act of identification with the deeply human dimension of historical Wessex, and this exercise of the sympathetic imagination in turn restores the reader to the present. In Shakespeare's pastoral dramas, the characters retreat temporarily from the court, come to a recognition about themselves in the wood, and return finally to their own world, seeing it with a new eye. In Hardy's pastoral histories, it is the reader who makes this journey of the self.

This 'journey' is made possible because the image of Wessex is so dense and self-contained that the reader begins to view it in terms of something outside itself. As John Lynen has noted, the regional world is 'at once particular in the extreme and, by virtue of this very particularity, a world of archetypes, or ideas'.¹⁶ Lynen describes pastoral in terms that illuminate Hardy's phrase 'Character and Environment': 'The locality, we assume, shapes the man, and the more the poet dwells upon its distinctly local aspects, both as these appear in the landscape and are reflected in the human character, the closer he comes to seeing the life-process itself.'¹⁷ The reader's perception of Wessex as a living organism, sustained by the relationship between its human characters and its locality or 'Environment', causes him to re-examine the 'life-process' of his own time in terms of the universals that unite Wessex and the present. In a small way Hardy's experience when visiting Venice illustrates this method: 'here to this visionary place I

solidly bring in my person Dorchester and Wessex life; and they may well ask why I do it. . . . Yet there is a connection. The bell of the Campanile of S. Marco strikes the hour, and its sound has exactly that tin-tray *timbre* given out by the bells of Longpuddle and Weatherbury, showing that they are of precisely the same-proportioned alloy.' (*EL*, 252–3) The reader of Hardy's pastoral histories learns to discover the 'same-proportioned alloy' that connects Wessex with his own world.

'The Three Strangers' – a pastoral history in setting, subject matter, and narrative point of view – is a fitting introduction to *Wessex Tales*. Two of its chief characters are a shepherd and shepherdess, and its action takes place in an isolated 'pastoral dwelling' (7).^{*} In the opening paragraphs, the situation of Shepherd Fennel and his family is presented in terms of how it would be misconstrued 'by dwellers on low ground'. Any 'commiseration for the shepherd' is 'misplaced', the reader is told, because this cottage is 'as cosy and comfortable a nook as could be wished for in boisterous weather' (4). Here Hardy is summarily educating the reader, disabusing him of misconceptions before he has a chance to use them. Similarly, many of the story's details are designed to instruct an outsider in precisely how the shepherd and his friends manage to derive a living from their environment. The tale reads almost like a set of stage directions, where each visual detail, gesture, and word contributes to the unravelling of a single mystery. This use of dramatic irony is linked to Hardy's interest, evident throughout his fiction, in the way experience is visualized and interpreted by the spectator. In 'The Three Strangers', the reader's act of puzzling out the scene is especially important because it depends on his ability to construe meaning in profuse regional detail.¹⁸ The narrative is on one level a mystery story. On another, it uses the quasi-theatrical conventions of that genre – which force the reader to see details with an especially keen eye – to present scenes from rural life with the depth that can only be given them by someone who knows the subject from the inside.

^{*}In this chapter only, page references to *Wessex Tales* appear without identifying initials.

To join dramatic plot and narrative point of view in this way is an essential aspect of Hardy's pastoral technique. Lynen observes that pastoral

is always potentially dramatic, for it depends upon a perspective of sharp contrasts. It portrays the town in terms of the country, the rich in terms of the poor, the complex in terms of the simple, and thus it works through a sense of conflict, through opposed points of view, through the ironic difference between people and classes. The very subject matter of pastoral produces the tensions suitable for drama.¹⁹

In 'The Three Strangers', the plot is worked out entirely in terms of dramatic conflicts. Set against the universal conflict between man and Nature is that between Shepherd Fennel's generosity and his wife's frugality, and – more fundamentally – that between the rural man's sense of justice and the urban man's sense of law. All of these levels of opposition are presented by a narrative voice consistently aware of the reader's own possibly erroneous preconceptions about rural life.

The opening paragraphs of the story, especially, attempt to give the reader a balanced view of the pastoral scene. Images of a pastoral ideal and realistic details are placed side by side. The pastoral image is not so much refuted by this juxtaposition as it is modified and extended in order to assimilate the harshness as well as the beauties of rural life. The downs, desolate 'during the long inimical seasons', are pleasing to artists and thinkers 'in fair weather' (3); the rainy night is fierce, but the shepherd's cottage is warm and cosy. Nature is a capricious force, sometimes over-generous and sometimes niggardly in its gifts:

For at Higher Crowstairs, as at all such elevated domiciles, the grand difficulty of housekeeping was an insufficiency of water; and a casual rainfall was utilized by turning out, as catchers, every utensil that the house contained. Some queer stories might be told of the contrivances for economy in suds and dish-waters that are absolutely necessitated in upland habitations during the droughts of summer. But at

this season there were no such exigencies; a mere acceptance of what the skies bestowed was sufficient for an abundant store. (8-9)

Though this passage appears merely as informative local colour, it expresses a truth about rural life that is reiterated throughout the story: Nature's excesses must be controlled and put to use in her sparing moments. This logic applies to children and to mead as well as to rainwater. A birth is a 'glad cause' for celebration, but one that 'a man could hardly wish ... to happen more than once a year' (10). The 'old mead of those days' is delightful, but its supply is always limited, since it is 'brewed of the purest first-year or maiden honey' (14).

The conflict between Shepherd and Shepherdess Fennel represents two complementary ways in which the countryman can regard Nature. The shepherd is willing to be generous with his hospitality and to take life as it comes, while his wife insists on preparing for what the future may bring. He celebrates the present christening (their second), while she anticipates more of them. This is not the crazed hoarding of the second Mrs Day in *Under the Greenwood Tree*, but the prudence of one who must conserve her guineas 'till they should be required for ministering to the needs of a coming family' (5-6). In her careful housewifery, the shepherdess counterbalances her husband's utter confidence in Nature's beneficence, and as a kind of caricature of rural frugality lends a comic aspect to the christening scene. At a deeper level, however, she personifies an important principle of rural life, the need to think of famine even while feasting.

The contrast between the shepherd and his wife serves to highlight the more important contrast between the first two strangers, the man who is sentenced to be hanged, and the man who is designated by law to perform the execution. Timothy Summers and the hangman provide the most dramatic opposition in the story between the rural and the urban worlds. Every action of each is emblematic of his understanding of rural life and his position in its social, economic, and moral structure. From the moment that Summers arrives at the crossing outside the cottage, his movements bespeak desperation, quick wit, and a resource-