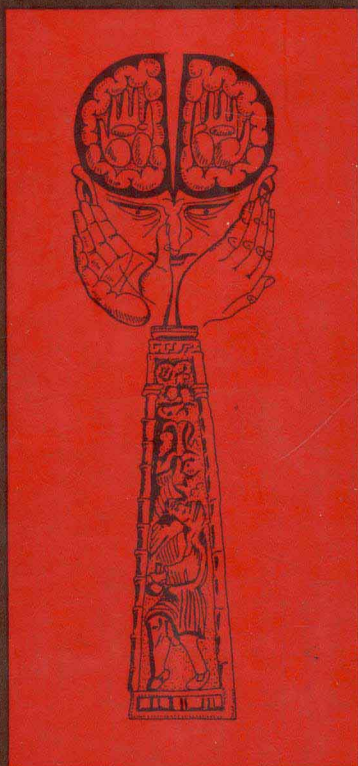


ROSEMARY SUMNER

THOMAS HARDY

Psychological Novelist



THOMAS HARDY: Psychological Novelist

Rosemary Sumner



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R. S.

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Illustration: from *The Literary Notes of Thomas Hardy*

1 Introduction

"If you mean to make the world listen, you must say now what they will all be thinking and saying five and twenty years hence",¹ wrote Hardy to Mrs Henniker in 1893. It was not till more than 70 years later that Hardy critics began to recognise how much he had to say to the modern world. He is now beginning to be seen less as a traditional Victorian novelist and more as a pioneer in the novel. His affinities with twentieth-century novelists are beginning to be examined; his ideas on man and society are now seen to have much in common with some aspects of twentieth-century thinking, including existentialism, as Roy Morell² and Jean Brooks³ have suggested. Critics are beginning to acknowledge, though in passing rather than in detail, that his psychological insight, subtlety and complexity are much greater, and closer to twentieth-century psychological theories than had previously been recognised. But though critics have paid passing tribute to this aspect of his fiction, sometimes even using the epithet "Freudian", no one has yet examined this in detail. This is rather surprising in view of the central importance of character in novels and of Hardy's own emphasis on this "centrality". In "The Science of Fiction", he says that what a novelist requires above all is "a quick perception of the more ethereal characteristics of humanity", and "a sympathetic appreciation of life in all its manifestations" in order to give "an accurate delineation of human nature".⁴ In "Candour in English Fiction",⁵ the main theme is the conflict between the necessity for any significant fiction to express honestly what human beings are actually like and the taboo on doing so in contemporary English society. In his best novels, Hardy was continually trying to do just this, in all its complexity, in defiance of the taboo. Even in his earliest novel he is beginning to work in this direction, and by *Jude the Obscure*, if not before, he has achieved a profound and sympathetic understanding of the mind, including some of its more disturbing aspects; he has ventured into those areas of sexuality which many of his contemporaries found so

alarming. His analysis is sometimes so minute that Sue Bridehead, for instance, has been said to "move away from being a figure of Tragedy to being a clinical 'case'".⁶ Though some passages might almost seem to have been lifted from a case history, Hardy's imaginative sympathy is so great that she remains to the end a living, suffering, irritating and interesting human being. It is the combination of the "sympathetic appreciation", the sense that Hardy knew what it feels like to be Sue, and what it is like to love her, with the unflinching analysis of her psychological disturbance which makes this character in some ways the culmination of his work.

The nature of Sue's psychological problems made *Jude the Obscure* particularly challenging to contemporary readers. Though he had written about similar problems in many of his novels (in the 1896 Preface to *Desperate Remedies* he said that "certain characteristics which provoked most discussion in my latest story were present in this my first — published in 1871, when there was no French name for them") he had never been quite so explicit before. In "Candour in English Fiction", he said, "Life being a physiological fact, its honest portrayal must be largely concerned with for one thing the relationship of the sexes". Catastrophes must "be based on the sexual relationship as it is. To this English society opposes a well-nigh insuperable bar".⁷

Admittedly, marital problems were a topical subject in the 1890s and Hardy was accused of jumping on the "marriage question" bandwagon with *Jude the Obscure*; but his contemporaries dealt mainly with the social aspects of the problem, unlike Hardy who, in the treatment of human relationships in the novel, is primarily concerned with psychological and sexual difficulties. Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did*, a popular novel which came out in the same year as *Jude the Obscure*, is about an advanced liberated young woman who dressed in 1890s women's lib style of flowing robes, sandals and hair fillet, rejected marriage and the conventional family set-up and managed to find a man who was prepared to accept her plans for their sexual relationship. They would have children, take equal responsibility, financial and otherwise, for their upbringing, but would not live together, though they would visit one another whenever they wished. Unfortunately, Grant Allen did not have the temerity to let them carry out their plans in the novel; instead, he killed off the father before the child was born and the rest of the novel is concerned with the financial and social problems of the one-parent family. A comparison of *The Woman Who Did* and *Jude the*

Obscure serves mainly to draw attention to Hardy's profound and intense concentration on the psychological complexities of his characters. His understanding of the sexual basis of much psychological disturbance anticipates Freud's thinking on these lines by many years.

As a consequence of dealing honestly and outspokenly with sexual matters, Hardy necessarily included some consideration of the physical aspects of sexual relationships. He even, very cautiously, in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* suggested that Angel, "with more animalism might have been a nobler man".⁸ Tess herself embodies Hardy's vision of a perfect balance between the physical and the spiritual (her anxieties on the subject are seen as superimposed by society's conditioning rather than integral to her nature). In *Jude the Obscure* he writes of "the deadly war between flesh and spirit", but he shows, in Jude's case, flesh winning and implies that the war is an unnecessary one. This is one of the ways in which Hardy can be seen moving towards one of Lawrence's major themes: "Life is only bearable when mind and body are in harmony and there is a natural balance between them, and each has a natural respect for the other".⁹

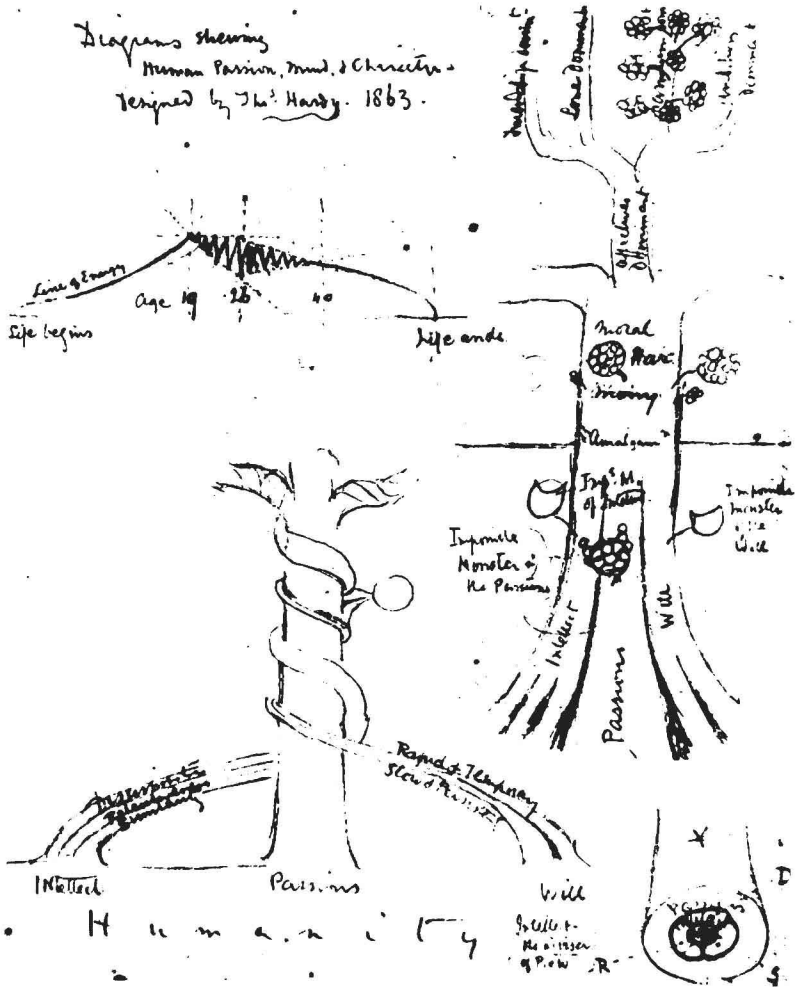
Many of Hardy's central characters can accurately be described as psychologically disturbed. This is often seen as arising from the fact that they are "modern" men and women. They are frequently intelligent young people who have difficulty in finding harmony of mind and body and who are also attempting to adjust to "the loss of faith in a beneficent deity"¹⁰ and to a sense of rootlessness. Here lies the immense importance of landscape in Hardy's novels. Those characters who retain a sense of oneness with Nature stand a greater chance of survival than those who, like Sue, have completely lost this contact. In *The Return of the Native*, he says, "to know that everything around and underneath had been from prehistoric times as unaltered as the stars overhead, gave ballast to the mind adrift on change and harassed by the irrepressible new".¹¹ D. H. Lawrence explored the same problems in a much more extreme form in an industrialised society. Here again the two writers share the same concerns, and we can see Hardy embarking on a subject which Lawrence was to deal with more fully.

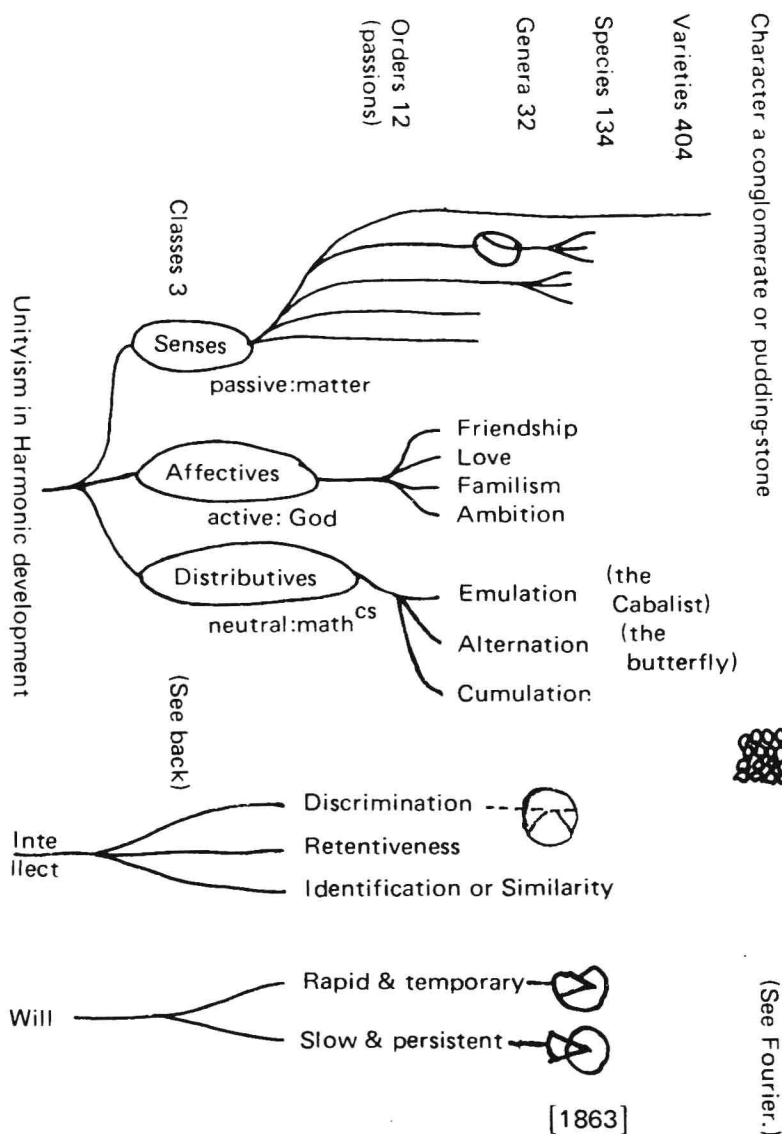
One of Hardy's greatest strengths as a novelist is his creation of "a sense of felt life", so that his readers can experience what it is like to be Tess or Sue, Clym or Jude. This derives in part from his ability to "let a bucket down into the subconscious" (as Forster

describes the process) so that he is imaginatively exploring his characters in the process of creating them. His tendency to tell editors that he is writing a story suitable for their magazines, a story which will, he thinks, be entirely "proper", and then to find that it is going in a quite different direction and proving itself quite unsuitable for serial production, demonstrates his intuitive understanding of human beings, and his honesty in portraying them; in spite of bowdlerisation for magazines, he refused, in most of his final versions, to force events and characters in a preconceived direction. *Jude the Obscure* carried him into "such unexpected fields" that he offered to cancel the contract with the publishers.¹² Instead they published a bowdlerised version in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* and Hardy's original novel, with a few modifications, was published in book form by another firm. He was prepared to reject his own preconception in favour of ideas that seemed to arise spontaneously in the course of writing; he admitted that he had been unable to make Grace Melbury behave in a way which he himself would have found interesting, "but she was too common-place and straight-laced and I could not make her". This feeling for truth to human nature, forcing him to write in a way opposed to his conscious wish fits in with his statement in the 1912 Preface to *Jude the Obscure* that "no doubt there can be more in a book than the author consciously puts there". As Lawrence said, "Trust the tale, not the teller".

This sympathetic, intuitive insight into human nature, gives the reader such a sense of involvement with the characters that the accompanying conscious understanding and formulation of psychological theory tends to be overlooked or even condemned as being intrusive and spoiling a good story. But Hardy's exploration of the mind and emotions is deepened by his speculations about them; he combined the study of psychological theory with sympathetic observation, analytical comments with creative imagining. This can be seen in all his major novels, and sometimes in a particularly clear way in his minor novels and short stories, where the theory and the imaginative creation have not been fully integrated. The three essays on the novel ("The Science of Fiction", "The Profitable Reading of Fiction", and "Candour in English Fiction") and occasional sentences in the Prefaces and in the *Life of Thomas Hardy*¹³ give further evidence that he was well aware that he was probing into relatively unexplored areas of human experience. Further evidence of his interest in psychological theory is now avail-

Diagram showing
Human Passion, Mind, & Character
Designed by Thos Hardy. 1863.





able in the *Notebooks*.¹⁴ The first pages consist of "Diagrams showing Human Passions, Mind and Character — Designed by Thos. Hardy 1863". The page is annotated "See Fourier" and is probably based on J. R. Morell's translation of Charles Fourier's *Passions of the Human Soul*, which was the only translation available in 1863 (though Hardy could have read it in French). Since the rest of the *Notebooks* contains material dating from 1876, it can be assumed to be indicative of Hardy's interest in the subject that he preserved these early notes and incorporated them in a later notebook.¹⁵

Fourier maintained that emotion is the motive power of human activity, and that most of the miseries of mankind stem from suppression of the passions. Though Hardy did not accept such a view wholesale, it is obvious that he felt some sympathy for it (as his treatment of Angel, to give just one example, suggests). There is also in the *Notebooks* a number of passages copied from Comte's *Social Dynamics*, including, among others, such subjects as The Brain, Sensations, Madness, Subjectivity¹⁶ and two long passages on the importance of "studying the laws of mental and social development"; "To the moral world of man with its complicating passions and aspirings must be applied that search for natural laws, for uniformities amid diversities which had already led men to such wonderful results in physics and astronomy."¹⁷ The fact that Hardy copied out these passages supports the other evidence of his interest in theories about psychology.

But it would be wrong to assume that he simply accepted what writers such as Fourier and Comte had to say. Shortly after a group of passages from Comte, Hardy quotes a remark that some French thinkers "fall into the error . . . of supposing in nature a greater simplicity than is to be found there".¹⁸ It is significant that he makes a note of this; the novels illustrate his consciousness of the diversity of human nature and experience, his unwillingness to force his vision into a system, his insistence that "unadjusted impressions have their value".¹⁹ He does not regard himself as a mere pupil of philosophical/psychological writers such as Fourier and Comte (nor indeed of Schopenhauer and Von Hartmann). In his novels he is probing, pushing out the boundaries, going much further in some of the directions in which they had started to advance. It is not altogether surprising that throughout his novels there is much that is closer to Freud and later psychological writers than to their predecessors in the nineteenth century.

A look at Hardy criticism from his own day until now shows how this aspect of his novels has been neglected. Yet many of his contemporaries really understood that Hardy was, at least in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, challenging emotional attitudes to human nature and what it was possible to say about it, and through their shock and disgust they showed their recognition of this (thus giving an excellent illustration of Lawrence's statement that "any really new novel must hurt to some extent"). The Bishop of Wakefield flung *Jude the Obscure* into the fire and wrote to *The Yorkshire Post* to publicise his action.²⁰ Mrs Oliphant complained that Hardy dealt with matters hitherto "banished from the lips of decent people, and as much as possible from their thoughts".²¹ Others showed their appreciation of Hardy's power and insight. Gosse called the character of Sue, "a terrible study in pathology, but of the splendid success of it, of the sustained intellectual force implied in the evolution of it, there cannot, I think, be two opinions".²² Hardy said that Gosse understood his intentions. Havelock Ellis, who was already at work on his vast *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, made somewhat similar comments and added that *Jude the Obscure* was "the natural outcome of Mr Hardy's development".²³ These comments suggest that the points I have been making were already well established by 1896. But, astonishingly, these perceptions then vanished from Hardy criticism for 70 years.

In the mid-twentieth century, Hardy came to be regarded as a very simple traditional novelist, nostalgically recreating a lost rural past, and anything he had written to the contrary tended to be disregarded in an extraordinarily patronising way. Donald Davidson said, "Hardy professed himself an evolutionary meliorist or almost a conventional modern. But this had nothing to do with the stories which started up in his head".²⁴ The implications of this are that Hardy does not know what his philosophy is and his stories "start up in his head" without conscious thought or volition, and mean the opposite of what he says they mean. This is purely derogatory and is not intended to suggest that they derive from profound workings of the unconscious. Later in the same essay, he is "good and innocent," which recalls Henry James's "the good little Thomas Hardy", a phrase which Leavis described as "appropriately sympathetic".²⁵ Lord David Cecil goes even further and calls him "poor, simple conscientious Hardy".²⁶ Similar attitudes were taken by writers who concentrate on what they take to be his Fatalism and Pessimism — both of which he repeatedly denied. Cecil is just one

among many who maintain that the characters are merely puppets in the hands of all-powerful Fate. This theory leads naturally to the conclusion that characterisation is unimportant in the novels, or, if it is of any interest, it lies in its extreme simplicity. Davidson says, "the event dominates, rather than motive or psychology or comment".²⁷ Guerard says that in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, "macabre absurdity, not macabre neurosis spins the plot".²⁸ Cecil calls the characters puppets, then complains that they are not treated as puppets in *Jude the Obscure* and then has the temerity to maintain that it is Hardy who is muddled.²⁹

There are, of course, some exceptions to this trend in mid-century Hardy criticism. Pierre d'Exideuil said that "we should be passing over a point of material importance if we failed to show that the doctrines of the Austrian psychologists are in no respect at variance with anything in the Wessex cycle . . . Hardy was a Freudian before Freud".³⁰ J. I. M. Stewart, in an essay of 1948, described Sue as "a point of major innovation in prose fiction".³¹ But neither of these made any impact on the criticism of their day, nor did Stewart develop his point to any great extent in his book on Hardy published in 1971.

The situation in Hardy criticism has now completely changed. The breakthrough came in 1965 with Morrell's *Thomas Hardy, the Will and the Way*,³² which proved irrefutably that Hardy was right in asserting that he was not a "Fatalist and pessimist", and suggested that he was looking forward as well as back, and had affinities with the Existentialists. The book was an important turning-point because it rejected the patronised, traditional, nostalgic Hardy and suggested his relevance to the modern world. (It has now become commonplace for critics to mention complexity of characterisation, psychology and Freud.)

The exploratory nature of Hardy's writing is mainly in this venturing into unfamiliar, even taboo areas of human experience. Nevertheless, his awareness of psychological complexity, of unconscious drives, led him to see that new methods of presenting character in the novel were necessary to convey this. By the time of *Jude the Obscure* he was able to incorporate into the novel the "puzzling" and "unstateable" qualities of Sue Bridehead, but even as early as *The Return of the Native* we can see him struggling to create a technique for expressing this conception. In 1886, he said, "Novel-writing as an art cannot go backward. Having reached the analytical stage it must transcend it by going further in the same direction."³³

One effect of "going further in the same direction", was that in his next novel, *The Woodlanders* (1888) he expressed his realisation that however far analysis is pushed, there will always be some areas of the personality which will remain unexplored. He calls Grace "a conjectural creature". As he develops the capacity to probe deeper and deeper into the characters he creates, the more he becomes aware of the need to suggest that they extend beyond his understanding. It seems to me possible that if he had continued writing novels, he would have found a means of expressing this perception more fully. Sue certainly embodies it more fully and vividly than Grace. However, it was left to Lawrence to pursue this line of development and to create a style which enabled him to convey that sense of dealing with "unknown modes of being" which we merely glimpse in Hardy.

Hardy's most profound and searching insights seem to me to be into those minds which are "not well-proportioned". He is also interested in those well-proportioned minds whose "usual blessings are happiness and mediocrity", but it is the mind which may "cause its owner to be confined as a madman" or "applauded as a prophet"³⁴ which leads him to some of his deepest psychological perceptions and to insights into motivation which some of his contemporaries hesitated to accept but which correspond closely to the insights achieved by other means by psychological writers of the twentieth century. In this sense, Hardy was ahead of his time. It is an aspect of his greatness as a writer which has not been fully appreciated; it is only one aspect, but it is an important one. Freud complained of Dostoevsky that "his insight was entirely restricted to the workings of abnormal psychology" and showed how this narrowness warped Dostoevsky's representation of love.³⁵ Hardy, on the other hand, never presents abnormal psychology in isolation. His novels are nearly always structured on a pattern of contrasts which serves to highlight human variety and multiple ways of reacting to a single occurrence. A neurotic or turbulent character (Sue Bridehead or Michael Henchard) may seem to dominate a novel, but the balanced, or placid or superficial characters are also there to show other modes of being. So though there are major characters who live lives of great emotional intensity and disturbance, they are shown to be a part, not the whole of "the great web of human doings". Hardy's sensitive awareness of the variety of psychological experience is closely bound up with both his aesthetic and his social aims. He was passionately concerned, as "Gandour in English Fiction" shows, to make

the novel a vehicle for truth about human nature, however disturbing that truth might be, and he hoped by using it in this way to increase people's tolerance and sympathy and so undermine that "inert, crystallised opinion — hard as a rock — which the vast body of men have vested interests in preserving".³⁶

A realisation of both the range and the immense depth of Hardy's psychological insights is necessary for a full grasp of his scope and stature as a novelist.

2 Minor works: some psychological explorations and experiments

Hardy's minor works and short stories are relevant to this examination of the psychological insight shown in his major works, since some of them illustrate, sometimes in a rather stark way, his continuing interest, throughout his career as a novelist, in psychological complexities. His frequent focusing on unusual or abnormal states of mind, his awareness that he is probing into areas more usually explored by the medical profession, and his occasional sceptical concern about possible therapeutic experiments all serve to highlight particularly clearly his interest in and awareness of psychological theory. The short stories, especially when they focus on a single psychological oddity, illustrate this interest in a single-minded way, which does not necessarily make a good story but does clarify an element in Hardy's writing which is also centrally and significantly present in the major novels. In the latter the psychological interest is embedded in the multiple and diverse "seemings", in the short stories and minor works it tends to stand out as a separate element because of the starkness and simplicity with which it is treated. The exploratory quality which is important in much of Hardy's major work is also to be found running through his minor fiction. The most outstanding and influential aspect of this is probably his recognition of the importance of sexuality in the psychological make-up of the individual and the bearing of this on human relationships. Here, too, he continues to write with candour in a society which was hostile to such outspokenness; even in these minor works we have glimpses of those qualities which make him a