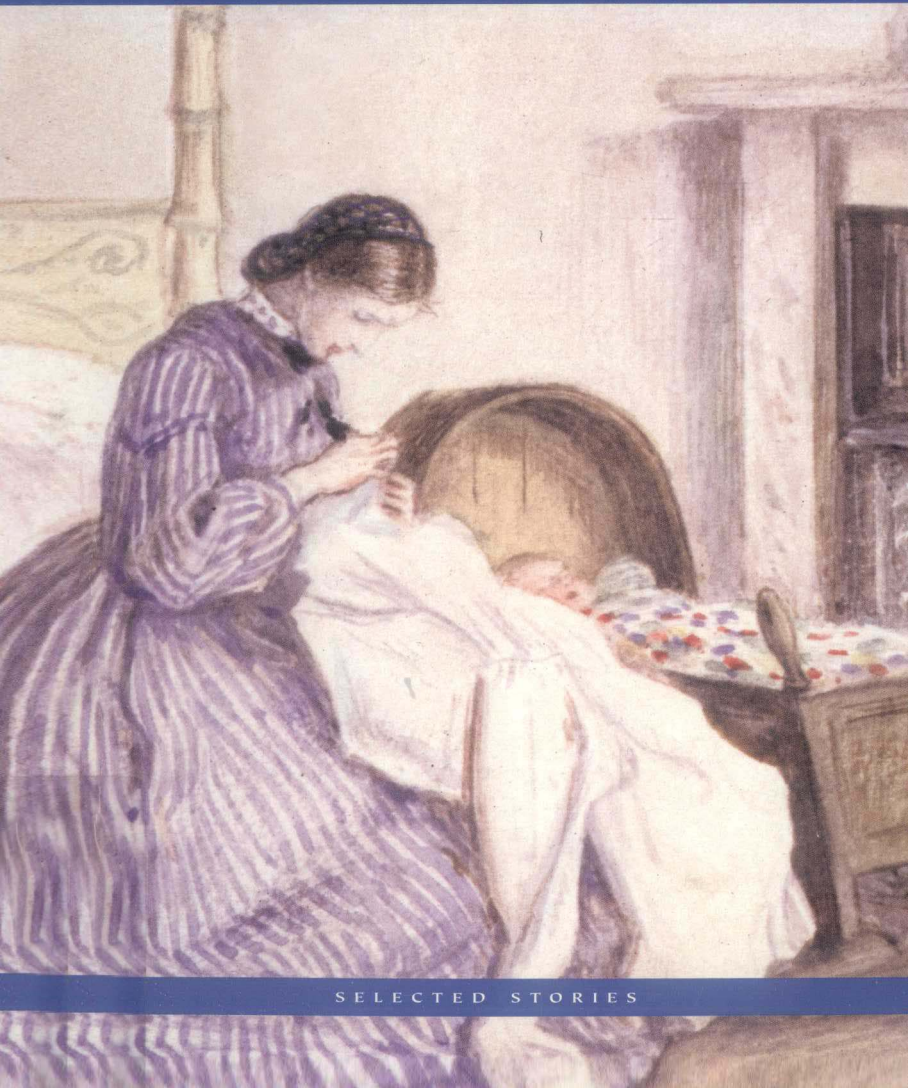


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Life's Little Ironies

THOMAS HARDY



SELECTED STORIES

LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES

Strange, Lively and Commonplace

Thomas Hardy

Introduction and Notes by

DR CLAIRE SEYMOUR

University of Kent at Canterbury

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets, and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hardy was the author of more than forty short stories, varying considerably in length and quality, but he is not usually closely identified with the genre. In contrast to the compressed, consciously artistic form which we associate with the masters of short-story writing – Poe, James, Chekhov and Hemingway – Hardy's stories are more 'oral' or ballad-like in character – colourful and colloquial yet meandering, easy-paced and often lacking in unity of effect. When he began publishing them in 1874, Hardy was already viewed as a specialist in longer fictional forms and his tales have frequently been considered mere 'journeyman's work', minor pieces in which he himself had little interest, casually produced to earn a quick profit and please a wide audience.

In fact, Hardy's stories possess all the power of his novels: the wealth of description, the realistic portrayal of the quaint lore and folk of Wessex, the Chaucerian humour and characterisation, the relentless irony, the

shrewd and critical psychology, the poignant estimate of human nature, the brooding sense of wonder at the essential mystery of life. In some stories – such as ‘A Tragedy of Two Ambitions’ – there appears to be enough material for a full-length novel; similarly, poems such as ‘The Tramp Woman’s Tragedy’ come close to the modern idea of the short story. Individual stories underwent numerous, scrupulous revisions, and the collections have a strong internal shape and coherence. Furthermore, Hardy’s entire fictional and poetic corpus is characterised by an interconnectedness of theme, setting, atmosphere and tone, as diverse works are linked by a pattern of cross-references and self-allusions.

The tales which make up *Life’s Little Ironies* were mostly written between 1890 and 1893 and explore issues such as the pain caused by loveless marriage, the frustrations of philistine, bourgeois life, and the connection between education, the Church and upward social mobility. At this time Hardy was completing his last great novels, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, and it is not surprising that the short stories share many of the concerns of these two works, principally the failure of modern marriage as an institution for formalising and stabilising sexual relationships, and the insidious effects of social ambition on the family and community life. Individual stories first appeared in periodicals, such as *Pall Mall Magazine* and *Scribner’s*, often in a substantially revised form, as in the case of ‘On the Western Circuit’, a highly charged tale of illegitimacy, infidelity and sublimated sexuality, which had been severely bowdlerised for serial publication.¹ The collection was first published in 1894, by Osgood McIlvain. For the 1912 Wessex Edition, Hardy altered the actual content of the collection, transferring ‘A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred and Four’ and ‘The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion’ to *Wessex Tales* (published in 1888), and beginning the volume with the newly added ‘An Imaginative Woman’. As the author’s Preface explained, he believed that this was where the story more properly belonged, ‘turning as it does upon a trick of Nature, so to speak’.

‘An Imaginative Woman’ is indeed a fitting opening to *Life’s Little Ironies* since it forcefully expresses its essential theme – that there is an inevitable discrepancy between human expectations or desires and practical outcomes. It depicts both the tragic inadequacy of nineteenth-century marriage as a means of articulating and fulfilling the romantic aspirations of the individual, and the futility of imagining that life will conform to one’s dreams. Marriage is portrayed as the exemplification of ‘the necessity of getting life-leased at all cost, a cardinal virtue which

1 Martin Ray, pp. 167–258. For full details of this and other references turn to the Bibliography at the end of this Introduction.

all good mothers teach' (p. 2), and the Marchmills' marriage is characterised by evasion and self-deception at every stage.

William Marchmill may be crude, unsympathetic and indifferent, but he is not deliberately cruel, and Ella also contributes to the sterility of their marriage. She is 'a "votary of the muse". An impressionable, palpitating creature . . . shrinking humanely from detailed knowledge of her husband's [gunmaking] trade' which she considered 'sordid and material' (p. 1). Deploring her 'proprietor's obtuseness and want of refinement', Ella releases 'her delicate and ethereal emotions in imaginative occupations, day-dreams and night-sighs' (p. 2). Hardy's original title was 'A Woman of Imagination'² but the retitling is apt as it is not Ella's imagination which is her downfall but her deceptively 'harmless' imaginativeness, the potential destructiveness of which Hardy exposes. Ella is a solipsistic dreamer, secretive and self-absorbed, detached from her children and forming only the vaguest conclusions about her marriage. Her attraction to the poet, Robert Trewe, is a combination of intense, obsessive, unexpressed sexual passion and artistic creativity, a theme Hardy also explored in *The Well-Beloved*. In this way, her poetry, and Trewe's, is not a heightening but an evasion of reality – the literary embodiment of sublimated feelings projected as idealised love. (Indeed, his name is first brought to her attention when they are simultaneously inspired by the same tragic incident to write verse.)

Frustrated by her soulless marriage and her unproductive literary efforts, Ella both worships and envies the poet, appropriating his room 'because [his] books are here', scanning and weakly imitating his work, donning his hat and coat and admiring herself in the looking-glass (in a manner reminiscent of Sue in *Jude*) and adopting his imagined posture while contemplating the scraps of verse he has scribbled on the wall: 'He must often have put up his hand so – with the pencil in it' (p. 11).³ Ella's self-absorption is most intense in the startlingly explicit scene where,

2 A key event in Hardy's conception of Ella Marchmill and many of the incidental events of the tale was his first meeting, and subsequent infatuation, with Florence Henniker in May 1893. Florence, whose 'emotional imaginativeness' Hardy remarked, lived in a sea-facing house at South Parade, Southsea, for one year, with her husband who, like William Marchmill, was 'unpoetical' and connected with the gun trade. In his second letter to her, Hardy apologises for forgetting to give her a photograph of himself; moreover, the lock of hair which Ella requests after Trewe's death recalls the lock of Keats's hair which Florence's father owned. For further correspondences see Hardy and Pinion (p. 38) and Ray (pp. 171–80).

3 Ella's delight at inhabiting Trewe's residence may dramatise Hardy's own adulation of Shelley, whom he admired above all other poets. He describes how, when as a child of eight or nine he was returning from London with his mother, they put up at a coaching inn called 'The Cross-Keys', in St John Street:

after long, luxurious preparations and with ecstatic anticipation, she reclines in bed, sexually aroused as she contemplates and kisses Trewe's photograph, 'immersed in the very essence of him, permeated by his spirit as by an ether' (p. 11).

Returning early, her husband interrupts her and demands her attention: the subsequent conception of their fourth child is thus a brutal desecration of her love for the ethereal poet. Throughout the story, her maternal responsibilities and poetic fantasies are juxtaposed. For example, with the collapse of her poetic ventures and the birth of her third child, her husband pays 'the publisher's bill with the doctor's' (p. 5). Her children are the irrevocable evidence of her relationship with Marchmill: thus her realisation that Trewe has no interest in her or her poetry is accompanied by 'a sudden sense of disgust at being reminded how plain-looking [her children] were, like their father' (p. 16). Her eventual death in childbirth is a powerful symbol of the dangerous discrepancy between her real and imagined life.

Circumstances have cruelly and tragically contrived to keep Ella and Trewe apart, and both they and the reader are denied the relief of the conventional happy ending which such a sentimental, romantic tale commonly demands. However, in the closing pages Ella seems convinced that she, the 'imaginative woman', is Trewe's 'Woman Unknown', that 'unattainable creature . . . this undiscoverable, elusive one . . . the imaginary woman . . . unrevealed, unmet, unwon' (p. 17) for whom his *Lyrics* are composed. Ironically, her husband is infected by her delusions and the story of an imaginative woman becomes the story of an imaginative man who is deceived by his own superstitions and false conclusions, and who consequently rejects his own son. In this way, Hardy shows how the futile, cruel conventions of Victorian marriage not only extinguish love and passion, but also damage and taint future generations.

The ways in which sexual needs are defined by social and intellectual expectations is further explored in 'On the Western Circuit'. A 'lonely, impressionable creature', existing in an emotional and physical vacuum, Edith Harnham has much in common with Ella Marchmill. 'Influenced

. . . It was the inn at which Shelley and Mary Godwin had been accustomed to meet at week-ends not two-score years before, and was at that time unaltered from its state during the lovers' romantic experiences there . . . As Mrs Hardy and her little boy took a room rather high up the staircase for economy, and the poet had probably done so for the same reason, there is a possibility that it may have been the same as that occupied by our most marvellous lyricist.

(*Life*, p. 17)

by the belief of the British parent that a bad marriage with its aversions is better than free womanhood with its interests, dignity, and leisure' (p. 86), she has married a rich, elderly wine-merchant but now cares little for him. Though socially divided, Edith and Anna are united by their inexperience and vulnerability; while she is aware of the moral danger of her position, Edith increasingly projects herself into her young protégée's position, eager to assume for herself the role of 'seduced maiden'. Apart from their initial brief meeting, when Raye mistakenly caresses Edith's fingers believing her hand to be Anna's, their contact, like that of Ella and Trewe, is exclusively through the written word. Yet the feelings aroused by their correspondence are distinctly physical. As she indulges her passions in her writing, she becomes 'possessed to the bottom of her soul with the image of a man to whom she was hardly so much as a name' (p. 86). Her emotions fan his and a 'magnetic reciprocity' develops between them, leading Raye to declare when the deception is finally exposed, 'Legally I have married her – God help us both! – in soul and spirit I have married you, and no other woman in the world!' (p. 94)

The title of this story and Hardy's use of dry legal language and terminology encourage the reader to view the characters and events objectively. Hardy describes marriage as 'a contract', and presents the events using clichéd legal phrases which are woefully inadequate to depict the powerful human emotions and problems unleashed by the action. This strategy climaxes when Raye elicits the facts about the deception from Edith as if she is in the witness box. He accuses her of ruining him by her 'deception', an ironic reversal of the conventional 'ruined maiden'. In fact, deception or self-deception is the crime of which all three characters are guilty, their images of each other being a gross distortion of the facts. Raye, the educated gentleman, professionally and intellectually frustrated, is initially captivated by Anna, whom he imagines to be a simple but dignified 'fascinating child of nature' (p. 83), a phrase recalling Alex d'Urberville's image of Tess. At the close of the story, disillusioned but stoical, Raye is not unaware of the irony and pathos of his situation. Seated with his new wife in the train compartment he resignedly reads 'all those sweet letters to me signed "Anna"' (p. 95), letters which merely bear her name, as she now bears his. Edith's impassioned dream has tragically condemned Anna and Raye to a marriage as unhappy as her own. A disastrous marriage is a life sentence, and the reader feels sympathy for characters who are tripped up not by bad motives but by the misapplication of good ones. This tale, like many others in the volume, dramatises Hardy's belief in the inability of men and women to act without deception in matters of passion, and the insufficiency of law and social convention to cope with this human failing.

The deluded belief in the 'good' or socially advantageous marriage is exposed in 'The Son's Veto'. An increase in wealth, social respectability and a modern, urban lifestyle do not bring happiness to the heroine, Sophy, whose submissive character and predicament are once again reminiscent of Tess. London, with its 'drab' houses, 'wretched holes' and 'well-packed' cemetery is portrayed as a place of pervasive decay, inertia and death. In contrast, her native Gaymead is fecund and thriving, as the daily wagon procession bearing the fruits of the country to the town amply illustrates. When she turns her thoughts to Sam, whose advances she has rebuffed in deference to her son Randolph's wishes, Sophy wonders 'if life in a cottage with him would not have been a happier lot than the life she had accepted' (p. 30).

Sophy may lack social refinement but she is a devoted and loving mother. In contrast, Randolph, influenced by his deceased father, is irritated by, and critical of, his mother's cultural and linguistic deficiencies and concerned solely with his own future happiness. In this conflict between the young man's worldly ambition and his feelings for a parent of humble origins, natural affection stands no chance against the ruthless drive for success. Hardy is careful to stress that Randolph's egoism has derived from his religious education. His cruelty, which climaxes when he forces his mother to kneel before the altar he has erected in his bedroom and swear never to marry Samuel Hobson, is evidence of Hardy's own animosity to the clergy, which resurfaces throughout the collection.

Indeed, Hardy seldom misses the opportunity to ironically expose the hypocrisy and ethical double standards which he believed were common among Victorian clergymen. In 'Andrey Satchel and the Parson and Clerk', the 'Chaucerian' Parson Toogood – a lazy and blasphemous rake, with a fondness for alcohol and the earthly pleasures of rural life – was based upon a real-life hunting clergyman of the Regency period, of whom Hardy wrote, in the Preface to the 1896 edition of *Life's Little Ironies*:

To present that truly delightful personage as he entirely was, is beyond the power of my uncertain pen . . . He had several imitators in his composite calling of sportsman and divine, but no rival.

In the late 1880s, Hardy's vision of Christianity darkened. His dismay at the dominance of the letter of Christianity over its spirit – at the contemporary clergy's failure to see that the essence of the Church lies in its spirit of compassion, humility and forgiveness and not in a literal, rigid interpretation of moral precepts – is most powerfully dramatised in 'A Tragedy of Two Ambitions'. From the opening scene Hardy depicts the way in which human affections are subservient to professional aspirations. Although Joshua attempts to persuade himself that 'it was

ardour for Christianity which spurred him on, and not pride of place' (p. 57), he is aware that 'the Church conferred social prestige up to a certain point at a cheaper price than any other profession or pursuit' (p. 65). Social ambition also lies behind his concern for his sister Rosa's education, for it is 'indispensable' that she should be 'an accomplished and refined woman . . . for the fulfilment of her destiny, and for moving onwards and upwards with us' (p. 57).

The success of Joshua's eloquent preaching directly contrasts with his selfish ambition and lack of charity. This disparity is reinforced when, unlike his more morally sensitive brother, Cornelius, he proves capable of dissociating his guilt and remorse from his sense of professional duty as a clergyman, when performing at his father's funeral. However, despite the merciless exposure of Hardy's characterisation, the brothers are not criticised openly; the presentation of their predicament is more subtle and suggestive. In a letter to his publisher, Henry Quilter, Hardy had described the tale (originally entitled 'The Shame of the Halboroughs') as 'embodying present-day aspirations - i.e. concerning the ambitions of two men, their struggles for education, a position in the church, & so on, ending tragically' (Ray, p. 194). Joshua himself defines their position:

To succeed in the Church, people must believe in you, first of all, as a gentleman, secondly as a man of means, thirdly as a scholar, fourthly as a preacher, fifthly, perhaps, as a Christian - but always first as a gentleman . . . [p.60]

Joshua's acceptance of these requirements may be unedifying but a sardonic analysis of Victorian society is implicit in his list; the brothers are indeed the victims of circumstances that prevent their advancement, except by hypocrisy.

Hardy continues his exploration of the moral and psychological problems of social mobility in 'For Conscience' Sake', the plot of which he loosely based upon a local anecdote concerning an old country woman who, betrayed and abandoned by her lover, had raised their child alone, refusing to marry her deserter when he later returned, considerably poorer than she:

The young woman's conduct in not caring to be 'made respectable' won the novelist-poet's admiration . . . [Life, p. 157]⁴

4 *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840-91* and *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy, 1892-1928* were described in the original publications of 1928 and 1930 as being 'compiled largely from contemporary notes, letters, diaries, and biographical memoranda, as well as from oral information in conversations extending over many years by Florence Emily Hardy' (Hardy's second wife). In fact, Hardy had himself

In this story Hardy examines the ethical bewilderment which often accompanies the conventional moral life, comparing 'the utilitarian' and 'the intuitive' theories of the moral sense. The betrayer, Millborne, having many years previously seduced and abandoned a young girl whom it was 'beneath his position to marry', concocts a businesslike scheme for reparation motivated not by guilt but fundamentally if unconsciously by pride and egotism, hoping thereby to recover his self-respect and honour. Seeking out Leonora Frankland he proposes marriage, telling her 'it is an affair of conscience, a case of fulfilment. I promised you, and it was dishonourable of me to go away. I want to remove that sense of dishonour before I die' (p. 43).

Leonora is justly suspicious of his motives, being unwilling to forfeit her hard-won social respectability simply to ease her former lover's conscience. Yet, despite her apparent independence of thought and action, she capitulates under the pressure of his arguments, fearing that her daughter's marriage prospects will be harmed by her concealed illegitimacy. Indeed, Hardy wryly comments on Leonora's moral shortsightedness and unquestioning subservience to society's rules, noting that, although she was a 'trifle worldly', she was 'a serious-minded lady who . . . balanced matters by . . . giving musical recitations in aid of funds for bewildering happy savages, and other such enthusiasms of this enlightened country' (p. 41).

The courtship of Frances and Reverend Cope offers an ironic parallel to that of the older couple. Cope's attachment to Frances is one of calculated detachment rather than passion. He is scrupulously correct, but his behaviour reveals the narrowness of his values; like Millborne he regards marriage merely as a choice which will influence his reputation. Frances's only shortcoming is the ambiguity of her relationship with Millborne, humorously revealed by the effects of sea-sickness which betray the hereditary connection between them, in a manner recalling 'An Imaginative Woman'.

This tale is an ironic scrutiny of the Victorian notions of 'conscience', 'honour' and 'respectability': Millborne returns to his former lover in an attempt to right a past wrong but discovers that his daughter, now the wife of Reverend Cope, can achieve respectability only if he abandons her again. By emphasising the curate's wife's secure social status in contrast to Millborne's exiled, drunken anonymity, Hardy inverts conventional assumptions about the relative social standing of 'seducer' and 'seduced',

methodically selected and prepared this material before his death in 1928 and, despite the third-person narration, the *Life* should be considered to be autobiographical.

undermining the sacrosanct Victorian tenet that every man should marry the woman he has wronged. Thus Millborne's belated act is futile, a human meddling which disturbs the natural balance effected by Time.

In the painfully bitter and vengeful tale 'To Please His Wife', the themes of marriage, class difference and education as an instrument of social mobility are combined. The earnestness, honesty and sincerity of the returning seaman, Joliffe Shadrach, is shown to be incompatible with the accepted standards of his native town; his simple faith is no match for the egoism, ambition and greed of his future wife, Joanna Phippard. The social distance between them is emphasised by Shadrach's use of dialect and non-standard speech, which Hardy heightened when preparing the 1894 edition.

The abiding tone is pessimistic. Shadrach's trust in God ultimately proves naïve and ineffective in both spiritual and practical terms, failing to prevent his own death and the destruction of his two innocent sons. Similarly, while Joanna's belated piety offers her an illusion of spiritual comfort, her fervent prayers bring her no real consolation. Character and fate have combined to drive her and her family inexorably towards a doom of her own making. She waits, wretched and alone; her insanity enables her to evade acknowledging her own culpability yet, as ambition is replaced by grief, her pathetic humanity is exposed. If a disproportion seems apparent between her flaws and punishment, this merely articulates Hardy's essential sense of tragedy: convention and ambition have suppressed the fundamental human impulse for happiness.

Not all the stories are as bleak and despairing as 'To Please His Wife'. Although Hardy frequently uses musical metaphors to emphasise his sense of rural discontinuity and loss,⁵ his joyful love of music, and his belief in the positive moral and social power of traditional music, also find abundant expression in *Life's Little Ironies*. He was himself a talented violinist and singer, and many of the musical episodes are based upon personal reminiscences. The Hardys were well known as string bandmen, and as a young boy Hardy performed regularly – like the choir and players of Longpuddle church in 'Old Andrey's Experience as a Musician' – at suppers, weddings and parties:

. . . on another occasion at a home-stead, where he was stopped by his hostess clutching his bow-arm at the end of a three-quarter-hour's unbroken footing to his notes by twelve tireless couples in the favourite country-dance of 'The New-Rigged Ship'. The matron had done it lest he should 'burst a blood-vessel', fearing the sustained exertion to be too much for a boy of thirteen or fourteen. [*Life*, p. 23]

5 This theme recurs in the novels; see, for example, *Under the Greenwood Tree*.

In the delightfully humorous 'Absent-Mindedness in a Parish Choir', the lively style leaves no doubt as to the sincerity of the narrator's sentiments as he mourns the disappearance of colourful old customs and their replacement by new ideas and behaviour, more modern and advanced, but dry and impersonal. Hardy's grandfather and father had been staple members of Stinsford church choir:

On removing with his wife in 1801 to this home provided by his father John, Thomas Hardy the First (of these Stinsford Hardys) found the church music there in a deplorable condition, it being conducted from the gallery by a solitary old man with an oboe. He immediately set himself, with the easy-going vicar's hearty concurrence, to improve it, and got together some instrumentalists, himself taking the bass-viol as before, which he played in the gallery of Stinsford Church at two services every Sunday from 1801 or 1802 till his death in 1837, being joined later by his two sons, who, with other reinforcements, continued playing till about 1842, the period of performance by the three Hardys thus covering inclusively a little over forty years. (*Life*, pp. 8-9)

In 'The Fiddler of the Reels' the musicians of the Mellstock choir, with their long-established reputation of solidity and respectability, are mentioned as representing the stability and security of a traditional social and moral order, a counterpoint to the Mephistophelian personality of Mop, whose music is magical, morally ambiguous and potentially destructive.

Set in the context of the Great Exhibition of 1851, the tale presents two worlds – the passing rural and the modern urban – in dramatic conflict, separated by a 'geological "fault" in Time'. However, for all its concern with precise early Victorian chronology and the nature of change and progress, the story has a ballad-like timeless and folklore ambience, a 'doubleness' which is enhanced by the disparity between the empathetic involvement of the elderly gentleman who introduces the tale, and the subsequent younger narrator's objectivity, hindsight and nostalgia.

In the *Life*, Hardy argues that the knowledge of traditional music combines the scholarly and self-conscious with the instinctive and ecstatic. Describing his boyhood self in the third person, he insists on his own extreme emotional sensitivity to music but qualifies his response by recalling his sense of shame and guilt at his weakness:

He was of ecstatic temperament, extraordinarily sensitive to music, and among the endless jigs, hornpipes, reels, waltzes and country-dances that his father played of an evening in his early married years,

and to which the boy danced *à pas seul* in the middle of the room, there were three or four that always moved the child to tears, though he strenuously tried to hide them. Among the airs . . . were, by the way, 'Enrico' (popular in the Regency), 'The Fairy Dance' . . . This peculiarity in himself troubled the mind of 'Tommy' as he was called, and set him wondering at a phenomenon to which he ventured not to confess. He used to say in later life that, like Calantha in Ford's *Broken Heart*, he danced on at these times to conceal his weeping. He was not over four years of age at this date. [*Life*, p. 15]

Hardy's account of the extreme powers of expressiveness invested in Mop's music is deliberately detailed. Wat Ollamoor is a dark, romantic archetype – foreign-looking, demonic, Pied Piper-like; though he never speaks, the elfin-shrieks and 'unholy music' of his violin are a threat to the stability of the community he haunts:

His fiddling . . . had . . . a most peculiar and personal quality, like that in a moving preacher . . . There was a certain lingual character in the supplicatory expressions he produced . . . He could make any child in the parish, who was at all sensitive to music, burst into tears in a few minutes by simply fiddling one of the old dance-tunes he almost entirely affected . . . [p. 114]

The 'insidious thread of semi- and demi-semiquavers from the E string of his fiddle' lures Car'line Aspent to renounce normal decorum, being seized with a 'wild desire to glide airily in the mazes of an infinite dance' (p. 115). The scientifically-minded narrator observes that 'it would require a neurologist to fully explain' Car'line's 'possession'; but despite Hardy's ironic presence and the technical vocabulary employed, the passage where Car'line is literally entranced and her daughter kidnapped is an inexplicable, anguished and explicit account of sustained emotional ecstasy and sexual compulsion:

. . . the fiddler introduc[ed] into his notes the wild agonising sweetness of a living voice in one too highly wrought; its pathos running high and running low in endless variation, projecting through her nerves excruciating spasms, a sort of blissful torture. [p. 124]

Car'line's intense, uninhibited response to the primitive rhythm of Mop's music is both a virtue and a weakness. His Orphic creativity – his ability to move hearts and souls – might be seen as a Greek 'ideal', a liberating force for human health. However, in contrast to the more realistic presentation of Aeneas Manston's musical wooing of Cytherea

in *Desperate Remedies*, here Hardy stresses Car'line's hysterical nature, her spasms and convulsions. Her profound imaginative capacity is in some ways a 'gift', but her indulgence in the passion which her 'specialness' reveals to her is naïve and misguided; accompanied by a disregard of conventional manners and customs, and later by pride and presumptuousness, it inevitably leads to social conflict and tragedy.

In 'The History of the Hardcomes', the stimulative effect of music and dance is again responsible for a moment of uncanny, irrational infatuation. Hardy moves skilfully from the farcical presentation of Tony Kytes's indiscriminate appreciation of women in the preceding sketch, to a more melancholic portrayal of entangled relations, erotic possession and subversion. The strength of the story lies in the narrator's calm acceptance of the 'rightness' of the love-death couple, the certainty that by marrying the remaining pair 'fulfil their destiny according to Nature's plan' (p. 147). Despite the many ironic reversals of these tales, Hardy seeks to present music as a positive force, as an art which can express unmediated personal feeling through the formal means of tradition. The emotions aroused by traditional music are communal, produced by both the artist and the audience; it is social misjudgment rather than imaginative excess which leads to tragedy.

Hardy was capable of inventing and repeating literally hundreds of ironic situations of the sort described above. His fascination with 'the grotesque' is apparent in the numerous anecdotes – accounts of rural folklore, superstitious beliefs, the supernatural, occasions of mischance – which he recorded in his notebooks and diaries, and which were repeated in the *Life*. Many of these 'grotesque incidents' seem directly related to the tales of misfortune dramatised in *Life's Little Ironies*.

The interwoven sketches which make up 'A Few Crusted Characters' (originally entitled 'Wessex Folk') range from pastoral farce to grim psychological tragedy. They frequently concern the theme of change, of the inescapable passing of peaceful, intuitive, long-established rural customs and the destabilising intrusion of modern, artificial, urban sensibilities. This dichotomy is crystalised in the persona of John Lackland, the frame-story's returning emigrant, who is seeking to rediscover and re-establish himself 'amid the village community he had left behind' (p. 179). He is a ghost-like wanderer in the village, whose melancholy demeanour contrasts with the vivacity of the tales told. At the close, all the stories combine to become *his* story, the churchyard of Longpuddle sadly confirming that 'Time had not condescended to wait his pleasure, nor local life his greeting' (p. 179).

The narrator of *Life's Little Ironies* is a detached observer, stern, impersonal but direct, familiar with rustic and urban settings, with the

past and present, and with one eye turned to the future. This unique blend of characteristics is strangely reminiscent of Hardy's description of himself as a young man:

Owing to the accident of his being an architect's pupil in a country town of assizes and aldermen, which had advanced to railways and telegraphs and daily London papers; yet not living there, but walking in every day from a world of shepherds and ploughmen in a hamlet three miles off, where modern improvements were still regarded as wonders, he saw rustic and borough doings in a juxtaposition peculiarly close. To these externals may be added the peculiarities of his inner life, which might almost have been called academic – a triple existence unusual for a young man – what he used to call, in looking back, a life twisted of three strands – the professional life, the scholar's life, and the rustic life . . .

[*Life*, p. 31–2]

In *Life's Little Ironies* the narrator fuses the traditional and modern perspectives. Hardy is both the chronicler of rural tradition and the earnest student of modern thought, and in his narrator traditional, stoical, rustic qualities blend with the more pessimistic, urban anxieties of the late nineteenth century. The result is a fusion of the timeless and the temporal, the natural and the historical, the universal and the particular.

Despite this, some contemporary reviewers were dismayed by what they considered to be the unalleviated, bitter pessimism of *Life's Little Ironies*. One critic attacked Hardy for 'laughing at the feeble woes of mortals . . . and with a cynical smile on his lips [laying] bare to all the world their pathos and uncompromising misery . . . There is nothing more harrowing in modern literature, and we regret that we have ever read this book, so much has it affected us.'⁶

The title of the collection could adorn any one of Hardy's novels: irony is his pervasive mode of thought, the expression of his basic temperament and outlook, not merely a rhetorical device. Hardy's irony is a philosophical irony, intimately connected to his fundamental awareness of the human proneness to illusion. It lies in the incompatibility of purpose and result; in the fact that the very actions which are designed to bring happiness and to gratify ambition and conscience merely increase misery and despair. As he recorded in 1885, time, circumstance and experience necessarily undo expectation, idealism and hope:

⁶ Anonymous review, *Critic*, Vol. XXIX, 5 May 1894, pp. 298–9. Similarly, George Powell suggested (in 'The Weird of Wessex', *Oxford and Cambridge Review*, XXII, August 1912) that the volume was so cold-blooded and wretched in tone that it would be more aptly titled 'Life's Appalling Fiasco'.

Tragedy. It may be put thus in brief: a tragedy exhibits a state of things in the life of an individual which unavoidably causes some natural aim or desire of his to end in a catastrophe when carried out
[*Life*, p. 176]

However, Hardy's irony is not entirely pessimistic. His critique of contemporary social mores may present domestic life as essentially tragic, yet his sense of tragedy is more social than mythic. The tales represent a blend of the farcical and comic with the satirical and tragic; indeed, after 1888 there is a suggestion of a shift in Hardy's thought towards blurring the distinctions between tragedy and comedy:

If you look beneath the surface of any farce you see a tragedy; and, on the contrary, if you blind yourself to the deeper issues of a tragedy you see a farce.
[*Life*, p. 215]

His characters may be victims of absurd circumstances, but the emphasis on human suffering gives them a truly tragic dimension:

A man would never laugh were he not to forget his situation, or were he not one who never has learnt it. After risibility from comedy, how often does the thoughtful mind reproach itself for forgetting the truth? Laughter always means blindness – either from defect, choice, or accident.
[*Life*, p. 112]

Even blameworthy characters, as in 'The Son's Veto' and 'A Tragedy of Two Ambitions', are not merely figures of fun or vice, but are portrayed within the context of their environment. Hardy's primary aim is not to ridicule or censure but to depict unavoidable human weaknesses which inspire the reader's sympathy and understanding. Thus *Life's Little Ironies* is not simply a didactic complaint against Victorian social conventions but an intense depiction of man's failure to impose order on the chaos of his existence.⁷ Hardy had observed:

The Hypocrisy of things. Nature is an arch-dissembler. A child is deceived completely; the older members of society more or less according to their penetration; though even they seldom get to realise that *nothing* is as it appears.
[*Life*, p. 176]

In exposing the cosmic disorder behind perpetual human struggle, Hardy was acutely aware of the discrepancy between natural and social values, writing in 1889, 'that which, socially, is a great tragedy may be in Nature no alarming circumstance' (*Life*, p. 218). Similarly, more than

7 Brady, pp. 95-156