

Thomas
Hardy

The Forms
of Tragedy

by DALE KRAMER

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS



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For
Frances
Cheris

Brinlee

Jana

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Textual Note

Quotations from Hardy's novels are from the Wessex edition (London: Macmillan, 1912), or from reissues of this edition termed the Library edition and the Greenwood edition. Page references to these editions which are identical are given in the text. I have altered the punctuation of dialogue to conform with customary American usage so that the punctuation of long passages is consistent with that of brief quotations within my own sentences. References to Hardy's memoirs, or autobiography, are also within the text: *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840-1891* (London: Macmillan, 1928) is cited as *Early Life*; *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy, 1892-1928* (London: Macmillan, 1930) is cited as *Later Years*. The memoirs were written by Hardy in the third person and published after his death under the name of his second wife. For an account of the autobiography, see Richard Little Purdy, *Thomas Hardy: A Bibliographical Study* (1954; reprinted Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 265-67, 272-73.

INTRODUCTION

The crucial role that form or structure plays in the novelist's presentation of life was obvious to Thomas Hardy. His novels are carefully constructed; and the once fashionable observation that his architectural training as a youth was the reason he built neat, geometric plots does not account for the range of experimentation and inventiveness in the forms of his novels. Hardy's continuing popularity has to do with a combination of seriousness, tenderness, and tolerance that enables him to make significant interpretations of experience. The structural features of his novels are not usually noticed either by general readers or by critics, even though structure is a dominant factor in creating the tragic qualities of the individual novels. My interest is to suggest some of the ways the forms Hardy employed in his great novels contribute to his achievement of tragedy.

The rarity of studies of the structure of Hardy's work is surprising,¹ but not difficult to explain. Both critics and their readers soon became wearied by demonstrations that Hardy's mechanical plots were masterpieces of organization. Rigid character alignments like those in *Far from the Madding Crowd* have lost their appeal, and few readers have attempted to see more subtle manifestations of structural technique in Hardy. Albert Guerard, a well-known modern critic of Hardy, reverts to old standards long enough to admire the structure

of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Under the Greenwood Tree*, but otherwise condemns Hardy's novels as "radically imperfect in structure."² The disinclination to apply rigorous analysis to Hardy's novels is the natural result of a strong prejudice still lingering that Hardy was a simple man and that his books are straightforward and often awkward, and therefore must be as structurally innovative as children's tales (which of course are often more innovative than careless opinion allows).

Still, this lacuna in Hardy studies is ironic. Hardy could reasonably have expected his employment of form to be examined as exhaustively as any other aspect of his work. Certainly, he was more conscious of the qualities of the forms of his works than he was of their "philosophy." He always insisted that he was a philosophical impressionist, eschewing responsibility as a thinker. But he took the shape of his books seriously. His primary criterion for judging a fellow novelist is form. He praises Anatole France as one "who never forgets the value of organic form and symmetry" (*Later Years*, p. 159), and admires the "construction" of Trollope's *Eustace Diamonds*.³ He extolls the first thirty chapters of *Vanity Fair* as "well-nigh complete in artistic presentation," and *The Bride of Lammermoor* as "an almost perfect specimen of form," superior to the lauded *Tom Jones*.⁴ He holds his age in scorn because it is not interested in form: in the same passage in *Later Years* in which he praises Anatole France, he describes the times (1913) as "these days when the literature of narrative and verse seems to be losing its qualities as an art, and to be assuming a structureless and conglomerate character." About 1920, he wryly notes that the *Saturday Review* called *A Pair of Blue Eyes* "the most artistically constructed of the novels of its time [1873] — a quality which, by the bye, would carry little recommendation in these days of loose construction and indifference to organic homogeneity" (*Early Life*, p. 126). He remarks upon the "simplicity" of Bible narrative as "the simplicity of the highest cunning" and adds, "One is led to inquire, when even in these latter days artistic development and arrangement are the qualities least appreciated by readers, who was there likely to appreciate the art in these chronicles at that day?" (*Early Life*, pp. 222-23). Hardy's objection to the tastes of his age is grounded in an abhorrence of the results of literary realism.⁵ In 1891 he criticizes William Dean Howells "and those of his school" for for-

getting that a story must be striking (*Early Life*, p. 314); and he says in 1897 that he stopped writing serials “with all the less reluctance in that the novel was, in [Hardy’s] own words, ‘gradually losing artistic form, with a beginning, middle, and end, and becoming a spasmodic inventory of items, which has nothing to do with art’” (*Later Years*, p. 65).

The key word in Hardy’s comments on form in fiction would seem to be *organic*. Everything affecting the plot and characters must be natural to the conditions in the novel and must grow out of those conditions. Hardy’s admission that he made no effort in *The Dynasts* to be organic indicates something of his idea of the concept:

No attempt has been made to create that completely organic structure of action, and closely-webbed development of character and motive, which are demanded in a drama strictly self-contained. A panoramic show like the present is a series of historical “ordinates” (to use a term in geometry): the subject is familiar to all; and foreknowledge is assumed to fill in the junctions required to combine the scenes into an artistic unity.⁶

Although he criticizes himself for damaging *The Mayor of Casterbridge* “as an artistic whole” by including an incident in each week’s serial plot, he adds that the plot “was quite coherent and organic, in spite of its complication.” One look at this entire passage shows how contorted Hardy’s syntax becomes when he refers to his indifference to fiction, as if he were torn by equally strong urges to affirm and to deny the dedication he had given to his writing decades before he came to write his autobiography:

The Mayor of Casterbridge... was a story which Hardy fancied he had damaged more recklessly as an artistic whole, in the interest of the newspaper in which it appeared serially, than perhaps any other of his novels, his aiming to get an incident into almost every week’s part causing him in his own judgment to add events to the narrative somewhat too freely. However, as at this time he called his novel-writing “mere journeywork” he cared little about it as art, though it must be said in favour of the plot, as he admitted later, that it was quite coherent and organic, in spite of its complication. [*Early Life*, p. 235]

In “The Profitable Reading of Fiction,” his longest statement of his