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A CRITICAL STUDY OF
THE TALES OF THOMAS HARDY

M.A. Thesis Submitted

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P R E F A C E

For a Hardyian student, it is striking to note that in most histories of the English short-story, Hardy's name does not figure. Despite the fact that he wrote four collections of short-stories, some of which were written in the nineteen-nineties and early twentieth century, his right to being discussed as a short-story writer or even to being placed in the history of the short-story, has been denied him in the majority of cases.

Before placing Hardy as a short-story writer and assessing his contribution to this popular modern prose form, it is important first to trace briefly the development of the English short-story.

The English short-story has passed through numerous stages. It has been a vehicle for religious teaching; it has taken the form of merely grotesque anecdotes "accentuating the dark and gloomy horrors of passionate intrigue"¹; it was used by the eighteenth century essayists to inculcate

¹ H.S. Canby, The Short Story in English (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1926), p. 107.



moral ideas and relay moral advice to their readers, although on a more domestic level than before. It is only in the nineteenth century, and with a handful of writers, that the short-story begins to acquire a form somewhat close to that of what we term now the modern short-story. In the early nineteenth century, the short-story shows ample evidence of the Gothic influence. The short-stories of this period are full of sentiment, horror, mystery and pathos. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, local-colour stories became popular -- stories in which "a strong fascitious interest is lent by the local peculiarities of place and action".¹ Descriptive writing increased and the short-story relayed an impressionist vision and was proof of an atmospheric art. Simultaneously, more attention was given to style. By the end of the century, the short-story was distinct from its earlier versions in both structure and texture. It now had "a greater artistic stringency and a broader moral permissiveness".²

¹ Ibid., p. 318.

² Derek Stanford, "Nineteenth Short Story : Birth of a new Genre", Contemporary Review, 212, Feb. 1968, p. 97.

Throughout, chronology in the short-story had been linear, and it is only in the twenties of this century that chronology and development became distorted. The narrator was nearly always omniscient; the tone and plot were mostly either sensational or moralistic and "the end of the story coincided with the logical termination of the action;"¹ the pace of the story is "leisurely". Brevity, now the order of the day, was not an essential factor. Nowadays, narrative voice is not always reliable, being often a first person narrator who may also participate in the action, the end of the story now is not necessarily an epiphany as it was with James Joyce, but rather there are "a series of revelations or revelatory moments - through repetition and cumulative impact the story establishes its point."² The modern short story, rather than supplying comprehensive details and meandering through events of a whole lifetime, is restricted to a small area of human experience, generally a single situation, but in its depths "the story

¹ R. Kostelanetz, "Short Story in Search of Status", Twentieth Century, 174, Aut. 1965, p. 67.

² Ibid., p. 66.

accurate account of neurotic disease and its attendant hallucinations."¹ In Hardy's group of sensational tales the Gothic atmosphere and setting are almost totally absent, and even in the few tales in which Hardy depends on ghosts or apparitions for effect, a logical explanation is supplied to ensure the reader's willing suspension of disbelief. Like Washington Irving in Rip van Winkle, The Legend of Sleepy Hollow and other tales of the supernatural, Hardy strives to make a fabulous story credible.

Another genre of short-stories written at the time is what has now come to be termed local colour tales, and this is a trait which naturally appealed to the "Wessex"-loving Hardy. Miss Mitford's early nineteenth century stories were all inspired by a village in southern England and "are rich in local circumstance and in faithful portraiture."² With Washington Irving, this element was imbued with humour, given a structural balance and supplied with the "requisite

¹ Pamela Search (ed.), The Supernatural in the English Short Story (London: Bernard Hanison Ltd.: 1959), p. 9.

² H.S. Canby, op. cit., p. 217.

weight of story."¹ Hardy, and his contemporary Kipling, wrote short-stories showing themselves as adept in local colour and subsequently in their powerful choice of words. The stories of both writers are proof of an atmospheric and impressionist art. Both writers in their short stories show skill in story-telling together with obvious evidence that they had the perception of a poet. Kipling, however, had "extraordinary power in focussing the story".² Hardy was more apt to tell his stories at a leisurely pace and only in a few does he achieve intense concentration of purpose.

Together with his predecessors and contemporaries, in short-story and novel alike, Hardy was not averse to moralising. His short-stories are told by an omniscient narrator, the traditional teller-of-tales, and so he has ample opportunity to impede the progress of the tale with heavy moralising, or to damage the effect of the end by imposing some edifying authorial remarks on the story.

¹ Ibid., p. 220.

² Ibid., p. 332.

This superfluous moralising was deemed essential by most Victorian writers. We find it in Dickens's short-stories and even in Stevenson's, in a work acknowledged as one of the masterpieces of English short-story writing, namely, Markheim, which introduces a good deal of moralising with the appearance of the apparition. For besides being interested in the dramatic, Stevenson admits his interest in the moral. Even later on with Henry James and Edith Wharton, the narrator remains omniscient, and the themes are largely moralistic.

Hardy's Tales follow a regular chronological development with none of the distortion or narrative discontinuity of the twenties. At times his Tales follow the story of a whole lifetime, told briefly but usually not with any intense concentration or restraint. Like other end-of-the-century writers, and even like some pre-twenties' short-story writers, his pace is most leisurely and the story is presented explicitly. As Beachcroft notes, Hardy "tends rather to give the long-drawn patterns of interwoven lives."¹ Consequently,

¹ T.O. Beachcroft, The English Short Story (London: Longmans, Green, 1964), p. 8.

the majority of Hardy's Tales are long if judged by modern standards of the short-story. There are, of course, exceptions. His tales The Three Strangers, For Conscience' Sake, The Son's Veto, A Tragedy of Two Ambitions, Incident in the Life of Mr. George Crookhill, are among those short-stories in which Hardy deviates from his norm and writes with extreme economy and brevity. The themes ~~are shorter~~, he is focussing intensely on a single situation dominated by one mood, and he is aiming at achieving a single effect and unity of impression. As Beachcroft says, Hardy's "best stories are revealed simply in scene, action and dialogue."¹ In such stories, Hardy anticipates the modern conception of the short-story.

In some of his Tales, Hardy anticipates James Joyce's use of the epiphany. The end of the story, coming as it does in chronological regularity, is the "logical" termination of the action, but Hardy also renders it ironical or paradoxical. This is due mostly to his own philosophy of the order of things, of Fate and the direction of the universe,²

¹ Ibid., p. 11.

² See below, Chapter I.

and not only to his awareness of any artistic benefit.

The Tales themselves may not stand the test of modern short-story forms, long and meandering as they often are; but the themes and plots are recognisably modern. Hardy undoubtedly paved the way for later short-story writers' "broader moral permissiveness."¹ His Tales as well as his novels abound in frank situations dealing with lovers, mistresses, illegitimate children, adultery and family relationships. Such matters were for the most part avoided by his contemporaries. Stanford remarks on this point: "More and more the forward intelligence of the nation proved itself prepared to hear Hardy speak out plainly."² A.E. Coppard speaks of Hardy's influence on him, with special reference to his short-story The Son's Voto. This latter story dealing as it does with mother-son ties, and To Please his Wife, a story about a destructively jealous and envious woman, are themes, says Beachcroft, "completely in the realm of D.H. Lawrence."³

¹ Derek Stanford, "Nineteenth Century Short Story: Birth of a new Genre", Contemporary Review, 212, Feb. 1968, p. 97.

² Ibid., p. 98.

³ T.O. Beachcroft, op. cit., p. 10.

Hardy's use of single symbols, of an objective correlative, is very meagre in his Tales unlike most modern short-stories in which the central theme is usually "evoked primarily through symbols."¹ However, he succeeds in conveying to the reader his own vision of life, and his underlying philosophy of the universe. This he does by expressing a broad view; the story as a whole may be symbolical of his attitude to Fate, Chance, Love.

Since not all of Hardy's Tales can be termed short-stories in the modern sense of the word, they are referred to in this thesis as "tales". Norman Friedman in an interesting article says that a story may be short because its action is small or because its writer is exercising his powers of selection, scale and so on. However, this action is complete, no matter how short it may be "whenever the delicate interlinkage of causes and effects encompasses whatever is enough to make that action both understandable and likely."² Applying this to Thomas Hardy's Tales, we

¹ Kostelanetz, op. cit., p. 68.

² Norman Friedman, "What makes a Short Story Short?", Modern Fiction Studies, IV, 2, p. 106.

find that they range in length from a few pages to the size of almost a novelette as in The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid. The stories are not always plausible, if convincing, cause and effect do not always have a part in the action, since more often than not, Chance and Fate are the prime movers of the action.

Another critic, Irving Howe, has written lengthily on the distinction between the short-story and the tale.¹ His comments on the tale can be easily applied to the majority of Hardy's Tales. Instead of a speaker addressing an audience, Hardy as we remarked above,² uses an omniscient narrator who comments, supplies irrelevant details, aims at suspense and evoking a sense of wonder. The short-story, on the other hand, usually deals with one action which it attempts to render directly; unlike the tale, it does not stop or start or meander. Furthermore, the short-story does not seek to satisfy the love of the supernatural or grotesque in its readers, but on the whole is more dependent on realism.

¹ See Irving Howe, "A Note on Hardy's Stories", Hudson Review, XIX, 2, '64.

² See above, p. vi.

Hardy's theory and practice. Despite this, the Tales have not been widely reviewed. Cox, in the work on Hardy in The Critical Heritage series, says, "not much need be said about Hardy's short stories : they appear to have been not widely or fully reviewed"¹. The Boston Literary World (28 July 1883) attacked The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid, while the Westminster praised the Wessex Tales for their vivid pictures of rustic life (July 1888, CXXX, p. 115). Both Gosse and Minto, says Cox, comment on Hardy as a short-story writer in 1890 and 1891, and so does Trent in 1892. Even in the twentieth century, in up-to-date works on Hardy, the emphasis in studies of the Tales is rather biographical and historical than critical. On the whole, the importance of the Tales has been underestimated. This leads us to wonder why. Perhaps critics' sparse allusions to the Tales is due to the fact that Hardy himself regarded them merely as journeyman's work and did not give them much care, at times simply

¹ R.G. Cox (ed.), Thomas Hardy : The Critical Heritage (London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. xxxvi.

scribbling them off quickly to satisfy the demands of various magazines.¹ Despite this, however, this thesis is a critical endeavour to show, by analysing and comparing the Tales with one another and with the novels, that they are of essential value to a Hardyian student.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The first discusses Hardy from the social and artistic points of view, dwelling on those criteria which determined the material of the Tales and Hardy's attitude. The second chapter deals with the predominant theme of love and marriage in the Tales. The third discusses sensationalism in the Tales under which heading comes the grotesque, the macabre, the demonic and the general use of suspense. In Chapter IV, Nature in the Tales is discussed - Hardy's awareness of nature, and Nature as opposed to man, or man's relation to it. Finally, Chapter V discusses Hardy's style and use of imagery and symbolism in the Tales.

Thus, this thesis is a study of Hardy's career and

¹ See below, Chapter I, p.14.

achievement as a writer of tales. It shows that they are not as lacking in value as critics appear to think. The aim of the thesis is to prove that the Tales are deserving of an extensive study, for they certainly do not lack interest, they are highly readable and entertaining, in addition to their treating most of the themes, characters and situations that are found in Hardy's acknowledged great novels.

It should be noted that all quotations and page numbers from Hardy's Tales are from the following edition of his Collected Tales :

The Short Stories of Thomas Hardy, Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1928.

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