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<tbody>
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<td>タイトル</td>
<td>THOMAS HARDY'S TRAGIC VISION</td>
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THOMAS HARDY'S TRAGIC VISION

Eiki SENAHA

Critics are now in general agreement that Thomas Hardy is the Shakespeare of the English novel. It implies that he has made a completely satisfactory medium of the English novel for high tragedy as no other English writer has done. It does not necessarily mean, however, that Shakespeare and Hardy have approached tragedy in the same way.

It appears that there is some difference between the two in their tragic vision by which is meant a tragic view of life, that is, "the ideas or outlook on life tragedy embodies--ideas that may or may not be expressed but that are certainly implied by the kind of characters chosen and by the way in which the course of action is developed."¹ Shakespeare's hero, on the one hand, is not a perfect man. He has some variation of what Aristotle calls a tragic fault. The reason is that he must change for the better when he discovers his own fault within himself. If he has no fault he can not change for the better, but only for the worse. As a consequence of his fault or his attempt to correct it, he becomes a nobler person because of his recognition of his fault and the consequent alteration of his course of action. Take Hamlet, for example. He is not a perfect man though he is a scholar, soldier, courtier, and prince, a typical Renaissance gentleman. His fault is that he can not make up his mind to act. He offers many excuses for his indecision until he discovers that there is no real reason for hesitation and that he has delayed out of cowardice. His irresoluteness has brought him ruin. As critics comment, we could assume, thus, that his acts spring from what he is and that he is responsible for his own tragedy. To see or read more plays like King Lear or Macbeth would disclose more clearly how character shapes a man's destiny.

With Hardy, on the other hand, character might not be the source of tragedy. It is true, of course, that his hero, though not a man of high rank like Hamlet or Macbeth, is neither wholly good nor wholly bad, but somewhere between these extremes, with some flaw within himself: "a standard woman but for a slight uncautiousness." (TD, p. 114) In spite of this fact, the fault would not entirely seem to be the fatal cause of the hero’s downfall. In order to examine the sort of web that Hardy envisions as catching mankind and bringing him to ruin or destruction, let us divide his tragic motif into four parts for easy discussion: External Nature, Internal Nature, Time and Chance. A survey of these four parts will, it is hoped, clarify his tragic vision revealed in his novels, mainly *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* which marks the height of his tragic power as Van Dyke remarks.

I

As a start, let us take up External Nature to see man’s relationship to Nature. Hardy’s novels have been called Wessex novels for the reason that the setting for his novels is in Wessex. Any setting may be:

the expression of a human will. It may, if it is a natural setting, be a projection of the will. Says the self-analyst Amiel, "A landscape is state of mind." Between man and nature there are obvious cor­relatives, most intensely (but not exclusively) felt by the Romantics. A stormy, tempestuous hero rushes out into the storm. A sunny disposition likes sunlight.

As in quotations above, the setting of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* changes symphonically with the mood of the novel. Blackmoor Vale, where Tess’s child Sorrow is born, leaves an impression of oppressive heaviness. The valley of the Froom, where she falls in love with Angel Clare, is bright and cheerful, a region of crystal streams and fragrant fields. Here Hardy comments that she has never been so happy in her recent life as she is.

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2 All page references are to the Modern Library College edition of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* of which TD is symbolic.

now, and that she would possibly never be happy again. The place that Hardy calls Wellbridge Mill, where Angel leaves Tess after discovering her secret, is sinister and desolate. There are gruesome family portraits on the walls of the ruined manor house.

In Trantridge Nature changes Tess as she is changed by contact with other personalities. We might note how the season or the weather itself changes Tess. It is in spring when everything alive is full of life that she feels the pulse of hopeful life warm within herself again and leaves her home for the second time so that she may escape her past memories:

A particularly fine spring came round, and the stir of germination was almost audible in the buds; it moved her, as it moved the wild animals, and made her passionate to go. (TD, p. 126)

A little later Hardy goes on to say:

and some spirit within her rose automatically as the sap in the twigs. It was unexpected youth, surging up anew after its temporary check, and bringing with it hope, and the invincible instinct towards self-delight. (TD, p.127)

Still later on a further evidence is provided in the following statement:

Or perhaps the summer fog was more general, and the meadow lay like a white sea, out of which the scattered trees, rose like dangerous rocks. Birds would soar through it into the upper radiance, and hang on the wing sunning themselves, or alight on the wet rails subdividing the mead, which now shone like glass rods. Minutes diamonds of moisture from the mist hung, too, upon Tess’ eyelashes, and drops upon her hair, like seed pearls. When the day grew quite strong and commonplace these dried off her; moreover, Tess then lost her strange and ethereal beauty; her teeth, lips, and eyes scintillated in the sunbeams, and she was again the dazzlingly fair dairymaid only, who had to hold her own against the other women of the world. (TD, p. 168–9)

This is not just a decoration but is meaningful. It tells us that, in an earlier phrase, Tess’s features “had changed from those of a divinity who could confer bliss to those of a being who craved it.” (TD, p. 168)
The setting of the novel, as we have seen, is parallel to Tess's condition and serves to illuminate it. But Hardy does not stop at this point. He has selected the Wessex background as a setting for his novels because he believes, like Wordsworth, that in rustic life "the essential passions of the heart find a better soil" and are 'less under restraint' than in urban society. The closer man lives to nature in humility and ignorance the likelier he is happy, for knowledge is sorrow." 4 The passage is suggestive that Nature has what Wordsworth calls her Holy Plan which works in man's favour. She is the "anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul/Of all my moral being." 5 "In darkness and amid the many shapes/Of joyless daylight, when the fretful stir Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,/Have hung upon the beatings of my heart-/How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,/O sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer thro' the woods,/ How often has my spirit turned to thee!" 6 To Hardy, however, Nature is, far from Wordsworth's Holy Plan, a blighted star, as he makes Tess say in her conversation with her brother. Nature is full of cruelty, and he stresses those aspects of the natural world that are indifferent and hostile to mankind. Tess is seduced by Alec when the moon has just gone down and partly on account of the fog The Chase is wrapped in thick darkness although morning is not far off. Darkness has ruled everywhere. As Hardy comments, "Nature doesn't often say 'See!' to her poor creature at a time when seeing can lead to happy doing; or reply 'Here!' to a body's cry of 'Where?' till the hide-and-seek has become an irksome outworn game." (TD, p. 49) Another indifferent attitude of Nature to man is revealed in Tess's answer to Angel's question of why she does not want to learn anything: she should not mind learning "why the sun do shine on the just and the unjust alike." (TD, p. 162)

In The Return of the Native, Nature becomes the massive determinant,

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5William Wordsworth, "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" L. 109–111
6Ibid., L. 51–7
something over which the individual has little individual control. Hardy develops Nature as a character to show us what man is in relation to the net in which he is caught. The earth labours, suffers, and groans like any human being. Hardy introduces Egdon Heath in the opening chapter of the novel:

To recline on a stump of thorn in the central valley of Egdon, between afternoon and night, as now, where the eye could reach nothing of the world outside the summits and shoulders of heathland which filled the whole circumference of its glance, and 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. The great inviolate place had an ancient permanence which the sea cannot claim. Who can say of a particular sea that it is old? Distilled by the sun, kneaded by the moon, it is renewed in a year, in a day, or in an hour. The sea changed, the fields changed, the rivers, the villages, and the people changed, yet Egdon remained. Those surfaces were neither so steep as to be destructible by weather, nor so flat as to be the victims of floods and deposits. With the exception of an aged highway, and a still more aged barrow presently to be referred to—themselves almost crystallized to natural products by long continuance—even the trifling irregularities were not caused by pickaxe, plough, or spade, but remained as the very finger-touches of the last geological change.7

Egdon Heath gives us the effect of timelessness in change, which hangs over human life and makes it insignificant and futile. Hardy has created it as an opposing force against which Eustacia Vye, the opposing human force, struggles on, but in vain. Her failure to overcome it would seem to support Hardy's view that man is not the master of his own fate.

II

Now let us examine the nature of mankind with specific reference to Heredity and Sex. With Hardy these two are not only legitimate but important, on a tragic view. It is these that produce his profound pity for human nature.

As the sub-title of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* indicates, Tess is a "Pure Woman". She is so innocent that she enjoys dancing with her partner purely for its own sake and that she does not know the complex psychology of "the soft torments, the bitter sweets, the pleasing pains, and the agreeable distresses" (TD, p. 18) of those girls who have ever been wooed and married.

Physically as well as spiritually Tess is a fine and handsome country-bred girl with her "mobile peony mouth and large innocent eyes." (TD, p. 12)

Tess Durbeyfield at this time of her life was a mere vessel of emotion untinctured by experience. The dialect was on her tongue to some extent, despite the village school: the characteristic intonation of that dialect for this district being the voicing approximately rendered by the syllable UR, probably as rich an utterance as any to be found in human speech. The pouted-up deep red mouth to which this syllable was native had hardly as yet settled into its definite shape, and her lower lip had a way of thrusting the middle of her top one upward, when they closed together after a word.

Phases of her childhood lurked in her aspect still. As she walked along to-day, for all her bouncing handsome womanliness, you could sometimes see her twelfth year in her cheeks, or her ninth sparkling from her eyes; and even her fifth would flit over the curves of her mouth now and then.

Yet few knew, and still fewer considered this. A small minority, mainly strangers, would look long at her in casually passing by, and grow momentarily fascinated by her freshness, and wonder if they would ever see her again: but to almost everybody she was a fine and picturesque country girl, and no more. (TD, p. 13-4)

This physical beauty, not spiritual beauty, has Tess inherited from her mother. Hardy explains it in the following statement:

*There still faintly beamed from the woman's (Mrs. Durbeyfield's) features something of the freshness, and even the prettiness of her youth; rendering it probable that the personal charms which Tess*
could boast of were in main part her mother's gift. (TD, p. 20)

One who has ever read the novel might note that much of her unhappiness has been caused by her physical beauty. It is her freshness and prettiness that have become the "unvoiced call" to both Alec and Angel. When Tess visits the bogus d'Urbervilles, she meets Alec and takes lunch with him tête-à-tête in the tent. Then Hardy comments:

(Tess) had an attribute which amounted to a disadvantage just now; and it was this that caused Alec d'Urberville's eyes to rivet themselves upon her. It was a luxuriance of aspect, a fullness of growth, which made her appear more of a woman than she really was. She had inherited the feature from her mother, without the quality it denoted. It had troubled her mind occasionally, till her companions had said that it was a fault which time would cure. (TD, p. 48)

Time, however, would not seem to cure what Hardy calls her "fault". When Tess meets Alec later on, who has now turned to be an itinerant preacher after the seduction, he confesses "that the sight of you has waked up my love for you, which, I believed, was extinguished with all such feelings" (TD, p. 404) and still later on that "I assure you I had not been thinking of you at all till I saw you that Sunday; now I cannot get rid of your image, try how I may!" (TD, p. 408) Her very eyes that she has turned upon him come to him day and night and he finally gives up preaching. Even his "religious mania" is now over.

Tess's fine features are traceable even in the portraits of the ladies of the d'Urbervilles in the ruined manor house where Tess and Angel have come to spend the honeymoon and where she has confessed her past experience with Alec. Hardy explains that these paintings represent women of middle age, of a date about two hundred years ago. Looking up at one of the two d'Urberville dames, whose portrait is over the entrance to Tess's bedroom, Angel feels sinister designs lurk in the woman's features, "a concentrated purpose of revenge on the other sex." (TD, p. 300) It might be natural that he should think so, for she still looks absolutely pure: "Nature, in her fantastic trickery, had set such a seal of maiden-
hood upon Tess’s countenance that he gazed at her with a stupefied air.” (TD, p. 304) He suspects that her heart is not indexed in the honest freshness of her face. Now she looks like “the woman in the guise of an innocent one.” (TD, p. 129) To him “nothing so pure, so sweet, so virginal as Tess had seemed possible all the long while that he had adored her, up to an hour ago; but ‘The little less, and what worlds away!’” (TD, p. 301)

Whatever harm she may have done upon Alec, Angel and herself, Tess is not responsible for any actions she has taken. Her inherited beauty has become the cause of Alec’s seducing, backsliding and marrying her before Angel returns home from Brazil. It has made both Angel and herself at once most happy and most miserable, but who could say she is responsible? Hardy seems to defend even the villain hero, Alec, for his seduction by saying that some of Tess d’Urberville’s mailed ancestors rollicking home from a battle had committed the same crime on the peasant girls of their time and that “to visit the sins of the fathers upon their children may be a morality good enough for divinities.” (TD, p. 91) Hardy also defends Tess for her murder by telling us the legend of the d’Urberville coach in which some beautiful woman of the d’Urbervilles killed a man who had abducted her.

In connection with accidental inheritance, Hardy emphasizes the important role of Sex to show us his fatalism in the novels. Though Tess is not responsible for the fact that she was born beautiful, it has become her “unvoiced call” to Alec and Angel, as has been mentioned, in spite of her asexuality in her first appearance in the novel, and has made her tremendously unhappy. Even after the seduction, Angel is made to say “what a fresh and virginal daughter of Nature that milkmaid is!” (TD, p. 154) But it is true that her heart-rending sighs are not wrung out only in the personal distress. “It is neither Tess herself nor Jude himself who moans in the very sighs of Tess and Jude, but the superb-individual Sex. Far from suspecting it, they take all responsibilities upon themselves for the acts which they can’t ultimately be accused of.”

8Mamoru Osawa, Studies of Thomas Hardy’s Literature (Tokyo, Kenkyusa, 1956), p. 472.
The “Power over them”, as Sue calls in *Jude the Obscure*, deceives Alec, Angel and Tess, and leads their love and marriage to tragic ending. It works through everyone of the four dairymaids and tortures each of them on Sunday night when Angel has carried all of them through the pool. Hardy’s philosophy concerning Sex is best revealed in the following:

The air of the sleeping-chamber seemed to palpitate with the hopeless passion of the girls. They writhed feverishly under the oppressiveness of an emotion thrust on them by cruel Nature’s law—an emotion which they had neither expected nor desired. The incident of the day had fanned the flame that was burning the inside of their hearts out, and the torture was almost more than they could endure. The differences which distinguished them as individuals were abstracted by this passion, and each was but portion of one organism called Sex. (TD, p. 187)

On the basis of this philosophy, we can hardly laugh at the girls at the dairy, all in love with Angel, as Frank Harris did. They realize the ‘Power over them’ works through themselves against their will. They can not help it. Therefore, we can assume that they are not responsible for their love of being loved and for its consequent misery.

III

In *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* we can observe how important a role Time plays in bringing about tragedy. It appears that Hardy identifies Time as evil. After Tess’s first visit to Alec, Hardy comments: “In the ill-judged execution of the well-judged plan of things the call seldom produces the comber, the man to love rarely coincides with the hour for loving.” (TD, p. 49) A little later he goes on to say that “enough that in the present case, as in millions, it was not the two halves of a perfect whole that confronted each other at the perfect moment: a missing counterpart wandered independently about the earth waiting in crass abtruseness till the late time came. Out of which maladroit delay sprang anxieties, disappointments, shocks, catastrophes, and passing strange destinies.” (TD, p. 49)