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## THE RHETORICAL/TEMPORAL TRAP IN *JUDE THE OBSCURE*

TOM SULLIVAN

In the preface to *Jude the Obscure*, Thomas Hardy writes, "The story is set in a world of the past, but it is a story of the present." This statement, which appears to be a simple declaration of the novel's historical setting, is in fact a complex statement about the relationship between the past and the present. Hardy is suggesting that the past is not a static entity, but a dynamic one that is constantly being re-created and re-interpreted in the present. This is the "rhetorical/temporal trap" that Hardy is referring to. It is a trap because it is a trap that we all fall into. We are constantly being pulled into the past, and we are constantly being pulled into the present. We are constantly being pulled into the future. We are constantly being pulled into the past, the present, and the future. This is the trap of the past, the present, and the future. This is the trap of the rhetorical/temporal trap.

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Many studies have been devoted to Hardy's thought. In fact, had the early scholars been able to see into the future with the Malthusian vision of Sue Bridehead, they would have been properly horrified by so many "Shapes like our own selves hideously multiplied."<sup>1</sup> Hardy's concept of natural law, for example, has been looked to for an explanation of his optimism as well as, of course, for his pessimism, for his meliorism and for his determinism.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, as a literary theorist, Hardy scoffed at the concept of the artist as thinker and referred to the 'use' of ideas in literature for aesthetic ends. He noted in his preface to *The Dynasts* that in order to make an action plausible in a narrative some sense of the relationship between man and the universe was necessary, i.e. that the reader needed to see the action in relation to some orderly concept of causation, but that he merely chose to use those concepts which were prevalent in his time, not necessarily because he believed them to be true or false, but simply to make his work cohere.<sup>3</sup> In 1917, in a reply to an article in the

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, Wessex Edition, Vol. III (London, 1929). All page references will be to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> William Newton argues that Hardy was a naturalist although he did not use the realistic manner of presentation associated with the naturalist movement. J. F. Holloway notes in Hardy's novels the presence of metaphors which establish a relationship between man and the smaller animals, and between man and the rest of nature, a relationship stressed by the post-Darwin view of man. Phillip M. Griffith sees Hardy's concept of natural law in "The Image of the Trapped Animal in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*". Frederick P.W. McDowell argues that the extensive use of imagery suggestive of sexual impulsion in *Jude the Obscure* demonstrates Hardy's belief in natural law as Darwin had described it. Professor McDowell's argument was amplified by Myron Taube. Such studies were adumbrated by earlier efforts, such as those by Pierre d'Exideiul and Albert P. Elliott.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Dynasts* (New York, 1919), viii.

Fortnightly, Hardy insisted once again on his use of idea only as framework for fiction. He argued then that his works of art should not be treated as "scientific systems of philosophy," but as "seemings," or "impressions" which were "used for artistic purposes because they represent approximately the impressions of the age, and are plausible till somebody produces better theories of the universe."<sup>4</sup> Hardy's nihilism, it would seem, had elements in common with the ideas of Oscar Wilde.

Hardy did indeed "use" the ideas of his time to inscribe characters and to control the reader's attitudes toward characters in *Jude the Obscure*. Since the penumbra of ideas surrounding natural law—in all its various manifestations—was quite familiar to Hardy, as well as to his readers, he could use allusions to that set of ideas as a means of creating reader response to characters. Such is one demonstrable rhetorical function of concepts about evolution in *Jude the Obscure*. Through allusion to the ideas of heredity and sexual impulsion, and through explicit, as well as metaphoric, comments on the power of natural law, Hardy excuses his hero—and almost all of the other characters as well—from moral responsibility. Paradoxically, by emphasizing the strength of natural law Hardy characterizes the strength of Jude's rebellion against his plight and creates a tragic hero. Jude is made to be dealing, not with just an idealistic coquette, in Sue, or with a sexy tramp in Arabella, but with various manifestations of natural law. When he fails it is not just because of the admissions policy at Christminster, nor because of the divorce laws current in late nineteenth century England, but because of a force operative throughout nature. Finally, Hardy's use of ideas associated with the science of his day incorporates those ideas within the text but does not affirm them as scientific, and therefore official, truth. For one thing, he suggests similar patterns for thought drawn from folk wisdom and mysterious and unnamed forces, scarcely sources for scientific truth.

The ideas he chose to use, to suggest a metaphor which will seem appropriate later on, also trapped Hardy as a novelist and forced him to write a work which, although full of events,

remains static, without temporal progression. Up to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, which immediately preceded *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy's characters and plots progressed in time, albeit time measured in eons. Such characters as Gabriel Oak, in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, and Diggory Venn, in *The Return of the Native*, cause their environments to change and achieve change within themselves, but such change, Hardy insists through imagery and comment, can only be achieved because the two men relate to the geological time scheme of the earth from which they gain their living. Such novels affirm the concept Hardy called *evolutionary meliorism* in which he professed to believe earlier in his life. Perhaps, after writing *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy realized the ideas he chose to use to give coherence to his last two novels did not allow for a form based on any concept of temporal progress, however slow—such as *evolutionary meliorism*.

After *Jude the Obscure* Hardy no longer wrote novels. Except for *The Dynasts*, a long narrative poem which, like his last two novels, presents characters and events in a spectacle without progression, Hardy wrote short lyrics which caught static moments in time.

According to the evolutionists of the day, sexual selection enabled certain members of a species to survive or fail. Thus the power of sex as a determinant in human affairs was underscored by the concepts surrounding evolution. The power of sexual impulse justifies Jude's actions. A force quite beyond Jude causes his relationship with Arabella. His attraction to her, to use the romantic language of sex education manuals, is *purely physical*. He sees her as a "complete and substantial human animal" (42). He singles her out for "no reasoned purpose of further acquaintance, but in commonplace obedience to conjunctive orders from headquarters, unconsciously received by unfortunate men when the last intention of their lives is to be occupied with the feminine" (43). As he talks to her he is obeying "The unvoiced call of woman to man, which was uttered very distinctly by Arabella's personality, [which] held Jude to the spot against his intention—almost against his will..." (44). When he tries to read, to continue his studies, after meeting Arabella, he finds it impossible. Hardy's narrator comments on his plight as follows:

<sup>4</sup> Florence Emily Hardy, *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy* (New York, 1930), 103.

In short, as if materially, a compelling arm of extraordinary muscular power seized hold of him —something which had nothing in common with the spirits and influences that had moved him hitherto. This seemed to care little for his reason and his will, nothing for his so-called elevated intentions, and moved him along, as a violent schoolmaster a schoolboy he has seized by the collar, in a direction which tended towards the embrace of a woman for whom he had no respect, and whose life had nothing in common with his own except locality. (48)

The indirection of the elaborate euphemism for Jude's sex drive, "commonplace obedience to conjunctive orders from headquarters," which sounds a bit as if the speaker should be winking and poking the reader in the ribs with his elbow, underscores the power of sex over the behavior of Jude, but also makes him little more than the butt of easy humor. As such the narrator greatly diminishes Jude. However, the comparisons between Jude and a small animal caught in a trap and between Jude and a schoolboy caught in the hands of a tough teacher who can 'compel' with 'extraordinary muscular power' marks considerable disparity between Jude's power and the power of the force compelling him along. To rebel against great strength is much more heroic than to rebel against an equal. As we shall see, the force characterized as a schoolmaster or an animal trap —Jude's sex drive— is associated through the comments of the narrator with natural law. The joke on Jude cuts in two directions: it diminishes him as hero yet elevates the force controlling him to a supernatural level and saves him from the reader's giggle.

The narrator uses the same concepts to excuse Sue Bridehead from sexual sin. Although Jude thinks of Sue as transcendental, her impulse to buy the statues of Venus and Apollo is certainly of an earthy nature. Troubled, after she buys them, she hurries to her private room and "unrobed the divinities in comfort" (111). While working for Phillotson she subtly flirts with him, demonstrating considerable sexual energy. She admits, after she and Jude have lost their three children, that she had been suffering, in her relationship with Jude, from that "inborn craving which undermines some women's morals almost more than unbridled passion —the craving to attract and captivate..." (426). The idea of sexual

impulse explains Sue's motivation when she draws Phillotson into marriage with her, and of Jude when he marries Arabella. Since sexual selection is fundamental to natural law, Sue and Jude are made, by referring their actions to the idea of a compulsive, universal force, to seem to be free from responsibility for their actions.

Throughout the novel the characters refer to a mysterious, hereditary unsuitability of the Fawley family for marriage. Arabella mentions the hereditary difficulty during her squabble with Jude after their first marriage. Jude questions his Aunt Drusilla concerning the family marriage difficulties, and his aunt tells him:

...the Fawleys were not made for wedlock, it never seemed to sit well upon us. There's sommat in our blood that won't take kindly to the notion of being bound to do what we do readily enough if not bound. (81).

Jude takes his aunt at her word, and later, when musing over reasons why he and his cousin Sue cannot get married, recalls that, "even were he free, in a family like his own where marriage usually meant a tragic sadness, marriage with a blood relation would duplicate the adverse conditions, and a tragic sadness might be intensified to a tragic horror" (105). When he does finally speak of marriage with Sue, he tells her that "it was always impressed upon me that I ought not to marry —that I belonged to an odd and peculiar family— the wrong breed for marriage" (201). Sue notes that her father had told her the same. Reunited briefly after the death of their Aunt Drusilla, Sue and Jude discuss their mutual heredity again, noting that Drusilla was always opposed to marriage for members of their family. Jude is convinced that the old woman was right: "She said we made bad husbands and wives. Certainly we make unhappy ones. At all events, I do, for one!" (251). When Jude and Sue are freed from their unfortunate first marriages, the subject of their own marriage comes up, but Sue is afraid that "an iron contract should extinguish your tenderness for me, and mine for you, as it did between our unfortunate parents" (311). Thus Jude and Sue's marriage problem is referred to an hereditary disability.

However, the references to heredity and sexual compulsion do not *merely* serve to take away responsibility from Jude and Sue for their condition. Hardy's problem with Jude as hero was, in some ways, similar to his problem with Tess. On the surface, Jude does not look like much of a hero. Judged outside the context of the novel, he appears to be nothing more than a weak, obscure stone cutter with some big ideas. It was necessary that such a hero be made to seem important. One means by which Hardy makes him seem important is, as in the analogy above between Jude's sex drive and the compelling arm of the schoolmaster, by characterizing the force against which Jude rebels as awesome in its power and mystery. Hardy develops the idea of hereditary weakness in the Fawley family in such a way as to associate it, not with the science of his day, but with a mysterious fatality which those characters who are not materialistic can intuit but not explain. Those who speak the most about the hereditary fault do not speak as scientists; they are either rustics, who fatalistically assign material events to supernatural power, or, in the case of Sue Bridehead, a transcendentalist. As has been indicated, Hardy introduces the problem with the comments of that most scientifically unreliable source, Arabella. He reiterates the theme first through Aunt Drusilla, then through Mrs. Edlin, both of whom would seem to be overly superstitious. The note is sounded again by Sue Bridehead, who, though she can repeat much of J.S. Mill, is not intellectually consistent enough to give what she says *scientific* credibility. Jude and Sue's hereditarily determined marriage problem is associated with a mysterious fatality, not a scientific idea current among the best thinkers of the day. There is, of course, no reason why folk wisdom should not concur with scientific knowledge or ideas extracted from such science. However, by expressing the idea of hereditary weakness as folk wisdom Hardy does not authorize it in the same way that he authorizes, with the 'scientific' language of his narrator, the concept of 'sexual selection'. It would seem that by introducing the idea as folk wisdom Hardy does indeed want to *use* the idea without affirming it as scientific truth.

Either as folk wisdom or scientific dogma, through reference to heredity Hardy made the novel more than just a

polemic against laws governing divorce in 1895. Certainly, the critique of the marriage laws is a major concern of the novel. We are told again and again by Sue that the marriage laws of the time are not in accord with nature. Nevertheless, as Robert B. Heilman notes in his introduction to the 1966 Perennial Classic edition of *Jude the Obscure*, if the book were solely a polemic against legal and social matters prevalent in 1895, its impact would be diminished when those legal and social conditions were changed. It is now relatively easy in a great part of the world to dissolve a marriage, but by associating their problem with a hereditary fatality, Jude and Sue cannot be blamed for mere foolish unconventionality when they refuse to marry.

But simply being at odds with natural law would certainly not make Jude a hero. Were Jude unaware of the force with which he is combatting he might appear ludicrous. His knowledge of the cruelty of nature echoes late nineteenth-century man's concept of struggle as an inherent law of nature. His sensitivity to that cruelty, and his sympathy with the victims, reflects a character type which some hoped would be the product of the process of natural law, that is, a truly altruistic man. Hardy either shared such a hope with men such as Leslie Stephen and Herbert Spencer, popular philosophers of the day, or, as he claimed, chose to use their ideas for aesthetic ends in his fiction.<sup>5</sup> The first revelation of Jude's sensitivity to the cruelty of natural law occurs when, as a boy, "sympathetic with the bird's thwarted desires," he refuses to make noise to keep birds out of Farmer Troutham's field (11). He is punished and dismissed by the farmer. Hardy's narrator has this to say:

Though Farmer Troutham had just hurt him, he was a boy who could not himself bear to hurt anything. He had never brought home a nest of young birds without lying awake in misery half the night after, and often reinstating them and the nest in their original place the next morning. He could scarcely bear to see trees cut down or lopped, from a fancy that it hurt them; and late pruning, when the sap was up and the tree bled profusely, had been a posi-

<sup>5</sup> Leslie Stephen, whose intellectual influence Hardy acknowledged more than once, argued in *The Science of Ethics*, that altruistic behavior in man would be the product of evolutionary development.

tive grief to him in his infancy. This weakness of character, as it may be called, suggested that he was the sort of man who was born to ache a good deal before the fall of the curtain upon his unnecessary life should signify that all was well with him again. He carefully picked his way on tiptoe among the earthworms, without killing a single one. (13).

The solemn tone seems silly out of context, but Hardy lets us know that he is quite serious when he lets Jude muse rather precociously to himself that "Nature's logic was too hurried for him to care for. That mercy towards one set of creatures was cruelty towards another sickened his sense of harmony" (15). Hardy inscribed Jude's character by reference to the notion of the possible development of sensitive and intelligent people who would perceive the cruelty in nature and yet refuse to acquiesce to that cruelty.

The scene also looks forward to much of what is to follow in the novel. We see the same characteristic of Jude revealed once again in the pig killing scene. Arabella, who is totally at ease with natural processes, advises Jude that he must let a pig they are about to butcher bleed to death slowly in order to assure the best quality meat. Jude, true to his sensitive self, and oriented ethically toward all living things, refuses, stabs the pig in order to kill it quickly, and damages the quality of the meat. Arabella becomes extremely angry. The next day, because of the quarrel, she leaves Jude. By focusing their marital difficulties on disparate attitudes toward cruelty toward animals, which by then has become a synecdoche for referring to the entire concept of natural law and the cruelty inherent in that law, Hardy emphasizes the importance of Jude's sensitivity.

Such sensitivity to nature's cruelty is recorded again and again in the novel, not only as an aspect of Jude's character, but also as characteristic of other sympathetic figures. Jude mentions it again after he sees Sue and Phillotson off on a train as a married couple. Evidently he thought it would be a cruel fate for Sue to be required to have sex with the middle aged Phillotson, for he longs to think of her as having children by some sort of immaculate conception. "And then he again uneasily saw, as he had latterly seen with more and more frequency, the scorn of Nature for man's finer emo-

tions, and her lack of interest in his aspirations" (212). Sue laments, more than once, "O why should Nature's Law be mutual butchery! (371). Phillotson comments, "with biting sadness," that "cruelty is the law pervading all nature and society; and we can't get out of it if we would!" (384). Jude, Sue, and Phillotson are all aware of the nature of the Law —Jude, perhaps, more than the other two. Such awareness contrasts with Arabella's insensitivity. Such awareness, because it calls to mind a pattern of ideas of great importance to late nineteenth century men, makes the sympathetic figures in the novel appear larger to the reader than their actions and social condition would seem to suggest.

The incident in Farmer Troutham's field —very early in the narrative— inscribes Jude's character as a boy as one who sees an equation between himself and small things of the earth, like the birds he refuses to drive from the seed and the earthworms he so carefully avoids stepping upon. His character never really grows or changes; the images associating him with trapped animals serve to underscore his defining character trait which remains constant throughout the narrative. The trap of the cruel marriage laws is, we are told, like the trap of the gin used to catch animals. When Sue and Jude meet at the funeral of their aunt, Sue confesses that her marriage to Phillotson was a terrible mistake. Immediately after Jude and Sue have separated for the night they hear the sounds made by a rabbit caught in a trap. Both Sue and Jude, of course, go out to free the rabbit, both associating themselves with the small animals of the world struggling to free themselves. On another occasion Jude, lamenting that his marriage to Arabella prevented him from his scholarly aims, cannot see why "he deserved to be caught in a gin which would cripple him... for the rest of a lifetime" (70). We see the image again when Sue, lamenting that she has allowed Jude to post banns for their union, protests that marriage is but "a sort of trap to catch a man in" (326). After Sue and Jude have been forced by public disapproval of their ostensibly unwed state to sell their things and move, Sue, saddened because two pet pigeons were sold to a butcher, releases them from their cage.

The characters are not the only ones caught in a trap, for the concept of natural law traps the novelist as well. The concept of natural law, established at the beginning of the narrative and sustained by repeated image patterns, allusions and explicit commentary, tends to diminish the sense of sequentiality in the fiction; time is simple time for adventure, for events which will sustain the metaphor. The image traps the narrative in time. Things happen to Jude; he runs into a wagon, Arabella throws a pig's penis at him, he wanders here and there having children with Sue Bridehead, but nothing happens within Jude to make him a different person from the boy we see stepping so carefully among the earthworms. The concept of nature's cruel law, and his rebellion against that law, completely inscribe Jude's character in the reader's mind, while proscribing any change in Jude's character during the course of the narrative.

The concept provides, in the guise of Little Father Time, the motivation for the grotesque murder and suicide which serves as the tragic, distorted, *maimed* climax of the book. The horrible event seems to belong to the pages of a cheap, sensational newspaper and not to a work of art. The conceptual frame Hardy chose to use for his novel did not allow for sequential development, but rather for imagistic and exemplary illustrations. Since the fiction had to have a turning point which would have the force of a climax, Hardy evidently felt impelled to use the most sensationalist incident imaginable in order to announce to the reader, in the loudest possible voice, the idea he was using to give coherence to his fiction.

Little Father Time's knowledge of the terrors of natural law motivate his horrible act, i.e. the murder of the other two children and his own suicide. When Sue laments to Little Father Time, after releasing the two pigeons, that Nature's Law is "mutual butchery" the boy asks intently, with ominous seriousness, if such truly be so (371). On the night before the murder/suicide Sue tells him that people have children because it is a "law of nature," and that, in spite of the fact that their own family already has money problems, she is pregnant once again. Little Father Time's suicide note, cryptic enough but with the Malthusian synecdoche embedded, reflects the strength of his reaction to knowledge of the cruelty

the cruelty of natural law. "Done because we are too menny," he wrote, and the reader knows that he refers again to the idea of 'Shapes like ourselves hideously multiplied' (405).

The sensational event subdues Jude and Sue but of course cannot change them nor any of the other characters. Indeed, the event seems to occur almost apart from the major characters in the fiction, so its relationship to the plot simply provides an excuse to end the story. It advances the action of the narrative but not for any logical reason; it simply allows Little Father Time to act out, in the most extreme terms, the behavior of Jude when, as a boy, he refused to frighten birds away from seed. Little Father Time's action must be pornographically violent in order to give the effect of some kind of progression in the narrative, since, in fact, the ideology Hardy chose to use did not allow for progression. Men, caught in traps, can scarcely develop and change their lives.

The event is, in all its horror, central to the impact the fiction has upon the reader. Hardy connects it with the cruelty of nature, but also, through his narrator, with one possible temporal extrapolation the idea he chose to use might allow. Father Time seems to know the future misery that will come to all. In particular, he knows of the future misery for Jude and Sue. When they discuss marriage his voice "rose from the shade of the fireside, as if out of the earth," to say, "If I was you, mother, I wouldn't marry father!" (340). After Sue and Jude have been enjoying the flowers at the Great Wessex Agricultural Show, Little Father Time comments: "I should like the flowers very, very, much, if I didn't keep on thinking they'd be all withered in a few days!" (358). His knowledge of the future is of the misery that is to come to man. Instead of viewing the festivities of Remembrance Day at Christminster with normal childish delight, Little Father Time associates the parade with future doom—to him "it do seem like the Judgement Day!" (391). He functions during the fifth part of the novel as a death's head hovering over Jude and Sue. His knowledge does not stem from scientific study, and thus he seems to echo the kind of superstition concerning the Fawley weakness in marital relations to which the old ladies refer. He is not a scientific source. He is almost totally abstract—perhaps a caricature—tied to ideology far more than to the

personal lives of the characters in the fiction. His presence announces the cruelty of natural law, i.e. "all creation's groan" (407). Sooner or later, the narrator suggests through Jude, all men will become like the preternaturally old little boy and will not wish to live.

Little Father Time exists—and exits—for ideological reasons. After his son has murdered his other two children and killed himself, Jude is perfectly capable of relating, in highly abstract terms, the meaning of the event:

It was in his nature to do it. The doctor says there are such boys springing up amongst us—boys of a sort unknown in the last generation—the outcome of new views of life. They seem to see all its terrors before they are old enough to have staying power to resist them. He says it is the beginning of the coming universal wish not to live. He is an advanced man, the doctor, but he can give no consolation to—... (406).

Little Father Time has few normal human attributes. He is not seen, for the most part, in relation to others. When he is on the train returning from Australia he is alone, unable to communicate with his fellow passengers, or to sleep as they sleep. He has no real past. All we know is that, in Australia, he was not even given a Christian name—something which would individualize and humanize him. His invariable pessimism, based on his knowledge of the cruelty of natural law, marks him indelibly. As such he is almost pure idea, the essence of modern views of life, those Hardy noted he wished to use in his fiction.<sup>6</sup> The Malthusian abstraction provides his motivation; the concept of evolutionary development (or, perhaps, retrogression) provides him with an identity. Hardy creates him by association with the ideas Hardy, and his readers, connected with natural law.

Little Father Time's story embodies the essence of Jude's problem as well as the essence of Hardy's problem with the novel form at that time in his career. Jude is what he is because of natural law manifested through heredity and sexual impulse. Born to be what he was, predestined, his character could not and did not develop in time. Hardy could only pre-

sent Jude, caught in first this trap and then another, over and over again. He could not use sequence in the novel to indicate change, but rather simply provide patterns of imagery to present a timeless condition. As a story teller Hardy must have felt frustrated. He had no experience with telling stories outside time, with, say, the technique of William Faulkner or of Mario Vargas Llosa. He was reduced to the use of sensational and violent events in order to create what novels of his time required—a sense of progression. The ideas which he said he chose to use simply because they were current among men of his time provide a framework of meaning for the novel and a rhetorical means of making Jude and Sue sympathetic and even heroic. They also trapped the narrator in a timeless narrative which, were it not for Hardy's often over-wrought prose and his sensational events, would simply be static.

<sup>6</sup> Florence Emily Hardy, *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy* (New York, 1928), p. 232.