

# Colby



## Colby Quarterly

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Volume 7  
Issue 6 June

Article 4

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June 1966

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### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 7, no.6, June 1966, p.264-268

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THOMAS HARDY'S EYE IMAGERY

By GEORGE O. MARSHALL, JR.

THE title of Thomas Hardy's third novel, *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, is one of the many evidences of Hardy's life-long obsession with eyes, human and otherwise, as numerous references in his notebooks, novels, and poems make clear. The number and importance of these references far exceed what we might expect, even granting that Hardy's themes often called for a description of the human features. In his frequent cataloguing of the features and figures of women, the eyes get an extraordinarily large amount of attention. In *A Pair of Blue Eyes* there are 176 references to eyes, 171 in *The Return of the Native*, 131 in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, 190 in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, 158 in *Jude the Obscure*, and 246 in his poetry. This interest in the eye had been forecast in *Desperate Remedies*, Hardy's first novel, in which a crucial part of the rather complicated plot involved the attempt to identify a woman by the color of her eyes. Eye color is also a factor in the plot of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, in which the baby's eyes are described as black (p. 6), while the eyes of Elizabeth-Jane (supposedly the grown-up "baby") are described as aerial-grey when she has the initial interview with Henchard on behalf of her mother. (p. 78)<sup>1</sup>

Hardy's predilection for referring to eyes manifested itself in a variety of other ways besides that of being an element in the plot. His novels are full of extended, detailed descriptions of eyes, as when, in introducing the heroine of *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, he describes the blueness of Elfride's eyes as "a misty and shady blue, that had no beginning or surface, and was looked *into* rather than *at*." (p. 2) "Eyes in eyes," Stephen at one point murmurs playfully to Elfride. (p. 60) In describing Elfride's physical appearance Hardy notes that her eyes

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<sup>1</sup> Howard O. Brogan observes that one of Hardy's early hints that Elizabeth-Jane is not really the daughter of the mayor of Casterbridge is that Susan's child by Henchard has eyes that differ in color from those of the child she had by Newson ("Visible Essences" in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *ELH*, XVII, [1950], 316, n37). Page numbers refer to the Library Edition published by St. Martin's Press. The type is that of the Wessex Edition.

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were her only impressive feature: "In them was seen a sublimation of all of her; it was not necessary to look further: there she lived." (p. 1)

Often a Hardy character will gaze into the eyes of another in order to determine details, as when Elizabeth-Jane is depicted "regarding the irises of Lucetta's eyes as though to catch their exact shade" (*Mayor*, p. 247), or when Angel, looking into Tess's eyes, "plumbed the deepness of the ever-varying pupils, with their radiating fibrils of blue, and black, and gray, and violet." (*Tess*, p. 218) It is no wonder that Angel felt compelled to gaze, considering Hardy's later description of Tess's "flower-like mouth and large tender eyes,"<sup>2</sup> neither black nor blue nor gray nor violet; rather all those shades together, and a hundred others, which could be seen if one looked into their irises — shade behind shade — tint beyond tint — around pupils that had no bottom." (p. 114) It is Tess's eyes that link her to the "second Tess," 'Liza Lu, at the end of the novel when all that Hardy says about 'Liza Lu's features is that she had the same beautiful eyes as Tess. (p. 506)

Alec D'Urberville was also impressed with Tess's eyes. In calling her a "dear damned witch of Babylon," he blamed her eyes and mouth for making him give up his vocation as a preacher. (p. 411) Clym Yoebright has a similar response to Eustacia's eyes. He testifies to their power when he says to her, "Don't look at me with those eyes as if you would bewitch me again!" (*Native*, p. 389) Hardy introduced Eustacia by devoting several pages to characterizing her through description of her physical features. In this catalogue the paragraph devoted to her eyes is especially effective in revealing Eustacia's essential nature:

She had Pagan eyes, full of nocturnal mysteries, and their light, as it came and went, and came again, was partially hampered by their oppressive lids and lashes; and of these the under lid was much fuller than it usually is with English women. This enabled her to indulge in reverie without seeming to do so: she might have been believed capable of

<sup>2</sup> The size of Tess's eyes came from one of the three girls on which she was modelled, who had "large innocent eyes" (Carl J. Weber, *Hardy of Wessex* [New York, 1940], 121). Elfride, Thomasin, and Lucetta also had large eyes, which Hardy considered a desirable feature. In commenting on the women at a social occasion Hardy observed that a certain lady "and her great eyes" was "the most beautiful woman present" (*ibid.*, 165).

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sleeping without closing them up. Assuming that the souls of men and women were visible essences, you could fancy the color of Eustacia's soul to be flame-like. The sparks from it that rose into her dark pupils gave the same impression. (p. 76)

Hardy also uses the eyes to reflect emotions felt on certain occasions, as in his description of the weird nocturnal dice game on the heath between Wildeve and Venn: "Apart from motions, a complete diorama of the fluctuations of the game went on in their eyes. A diminutive candle-flame was mirrored in each pupil, and it would have been possible to distinguish therein between the moods of hope and the moods of abandonment, even as regards the reddleman, though his facial muscles betrayed nothing at all." (*Native*, p. 274) Through this "diorama" Hardy is able to suggest that the outcome of the gambling has consequences that extend much further than the money being bet. The results will echo in the lives of others besides the two actually throwing the dice. It is interesting to see Hardy in a later novel remembering the candle-flame in his description of Tess as she baptized Sorrow "while the miniature candle-flame inverted in her eye-pupils shone like a diamond." (*Tess*, p. 120)

References to the eye Hardy also found useful in a passage that approaches dramatic irony. Before Clym's eyes began to fail, his literal blindness was forecast figuratively when his mother said to him, in an attempt to discourage his interest in Eustacia, "You are blinded, Clym." (*Native*, p. 227) But because at this point the reader does not know that Clym will have trouble with his eyes, the Sophoclean shudder will come only to the person who is re-reading the book. Clym's actual blindness was a retroactive symbol of his figurative blindness in insisting on seeing Eustacia. At the end of the novel Clym, all passion spent, replying to a question why he is not interested in marrying Thomasin, quotes Job 31:1: "I have made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I think upon a maid?" (p. 472)

In critical discussions of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* the scene in which Knight has his brush with death while hanging on the cliff is frequently commented upon as an indication of Hardy's interest in geology. Though this passage is full of geological

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tidbits that reveal the young Thomas Hardy not wearing his newly-acquired learning very lightly, it is also the first of several occasions in which Hardy has unnatural eyes seeming to regard one of his characters in a moment of crisis: "By one of those familiar conjunctions of things wherewith the inanimate world baits the mind of man when he pauses in moments of suspense, opposite Knight's eyes was an imbedded fossil, standing forth in low relief from the rock. It was a creature with eyes. The eyes, dead and turned to stone, were even now regarding him." (p. 241) The fossil and Knight, in a mutual gaze, communicated the kinship of their perilous situation, though separated in time by millions of years.

In depicting scenes having to do with unfortunate passion Hardy often has inanimate eyes seem to regard one or both of the lovers. Of the numerous misalliances described by Hardy, surely one of the most disastrous is that of Jude and Arabella. Hardy uses eye imagery to accentuate the calamitous nature of Jude's infatuation. When Jude returned home after a Sunday afternoon with Arabella during which she made him feel that it was better to be a lover than a scholar, "There lay his book open, just as he had left it, and the capital letters on the title-page regarded him with fixed reproach in the grey starlight, like the unclosed eyes of a dead man." (*Jude*, p. 53) For Jude this was the point of no return. By so appearing, the capital letters represent the death of books in the life of Jude, who continued to be haunted by unnatural eyes. When he arrived at Christminster, the city of his scholarly dreams, it was too late for him to pursue the career from which Arabella had distracted him. The lamps of that city "winked their yellow eyes at him dubiously, and as if, though they had been awaiting him all these years in disappointment at his tarrying, they did not much want him now." (p. 91)

Another instance of inanimate objects seeming to be eyes looking on a scene of unfortunate passion occurs when Eustacia had gone to the dance on the heath to forget that she is married to a half-blind husband. Happening to meet Wildeve, she danced with him in the early evening — a time of day Hardy describes as dangerously promoting the tenderer moods. Though unrecognized by the other dancers, there are other eyes

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besides human: : In the dusk "the players appeared only in outline against the sky; except when the circular mouths of the trombone, ophicleide, and French horn gleamed out like huge eyes from the shade of their figures." (*Native*, p. 309) These eye-appearing objects are a reminder that illicit lovers cannot pursue their course with impunity: that is, without being found out. An interesting variation is Hardy's use of eye imagery to express protection of the privacy of pure lovers. Tess and Angel, together at last though Tess was a fugitive, took refuge in a house whose "shuttered windows, like sightless eyeballs, excluded the possibility of watchers." (*Tess*, p. 496)

Hardy uses non-human eyes to suggest that there is tragedy in other parts of the world besides Wessex. Despite the fact that all occasions seemed to conspire against Tess, and despite Hardy's celebrated comment in the last paragraph of the novel to the effect that the President of the Immortals had ended his sport with Tess, there is other horror in the world. This Hardy makes clear in his description of the strange birds from behind the North Pole who come to the nearly barren field at Flintcomb-Ash where Tess and Marian were working. Hardy pictures them as "gaunt spectral creatures with tragical eyes — eyes which had witnessed scenes of cataclysmal horror in inaccessible polar regions of a magnitude such as no human being had ever conceived . . . and retained the expression of feature that such scenes had engendered." (*Tess*, p. 367) It is through a recognition of what their eyes have seen that we realize that Tess's tragedy is not an isolated event, but is only one rather infinitesimal circumstance in a universe of horror. Tragedy is universal.

The passages above illustrate something of the range of Hardy's references to eyes and his use of them not only for decorative effects but also as a functional device in his novels. Because of Hardy's fascination with eyes, in literature and life, he tended to visualize the predicaments of his characters in terms of the eye. Though the sheer volume of references is not important in itself, an understanding of the way Hardy employed his eye imagery in enriching the significance of the immediate scene contributes to the critical appreciation of his artistry.