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Darkness and Discord at Marygreen: A Note on the Opening Chapters of Jude the Obscure

by GERALD P. MULDERIG

WE'VE NEVER had anything to do with folk in Christminster," remarks Drusilla Fawley to her nephew in Chapter 2 of *Jude the Obscure*, "nor folk in Christminster with we."¹ With brutal casualness Jude's aunt thus acknowledges Marygreen's isolation, which the boy had felt so painfully earlier in the day when Mr. Phillotson, the village schoolmaster, left for the university town. But Phillotson's departure and Drusilla's matter-of-fact provinciality are not alone responsible for the sense of absolute separation between Marygreen and Christminster that pervades the opening chapters of the novel. It is defined and affirmed on a figurative level as well by important images of light and darkness, music and discord.

Images of light are central to each of Jude's early glimpses of the far-off university town. Seated on the roofers' ladder at the edge of Marygreen, he sees Christminster for the first time just as the setting sun's rays reflect off the "vaned, windows, wet roof slates, and other shining spots" so that "points of light like the topaz gleamed" (p. 19). Jude, in contrast, appears in these early pages of the novel as a figure from a world of darkness. The very shop windows of his aunt's house, where he lives, have oxidized and darkened, "so that you could hardly see the poor penny articles exhibited within" (p. 20). Significantly, when he turns away from his first view of Christminster glittering in the distant east, the boy finds himself standing in a place "grown funereally dark," where "near objects put on the hues and shapes of chimaeras" (p. 20). The same contrast is part of Jude's view of the city several weeks later, when he stands against a black sky to gaze at Christminster's "halo or glow-fog," created by innumerable but indistinguishable city lamps. Jude, a lone figure in the darkness, wonders about "the exact point in the glow where the schoolmaster might be" (p. 21).

Then, as the wind from Christminster sweeps over him, Jude hears music from the distant city. "Surely it was the sound of bells, the voice of the city, faint and musical, calling to him, 'We are happy here!'" (p. 22). The boy's life at Marygreen, on the other hand, has been characterized by the distinct absence of music. "Growing up brought responsibil-

1. *Jude the Obscure*, Wessex edition (London: Macmillan, 1912), p. 14. Citations in the text are to this edition.

ities, he found. Events did not rhyme quite as he had thought. . . . That mercy towards one set of creatures was cruelty towards another sickened his sense of harmony” (p. 15). For Jude, the concrete embodiment of this lack of harmony in the world was his clacker, the “mean and sordid” noisemaker with which he had been supposed to frighten hungry birds—“the only friends he could claim”—from the planted fields of Farmer Troutham (p. 11). The carters who pass by now as he gazes at the glowing spot in the east confirm his impression that the sound of bells he heard came from the far-off city. “As for music,” says one, “there’s beautiful music everywhere in Christminster. You med be religious, or you med not, but you can’t help striking in your homely note with the rest” (p. 23). In the university town, unlike the discordant world Jude knows, society is rooted in spontaneous and contagious harmony.²

Only when he is much older will Jude discover how elusive and insubstantial this vision of Christminster actually is. As a youth, however, he is tortured by his isolation from a community—indistinctly but brilliantly characterized by light and music—that seems to embody the meaning and order he finds utterly lacking in his life at Marygreen. By surrounding Jude with images of darkness and discord, Hardy figuratively intensifies that separation between the boy and this exotic city—a gap, to be sure, that Jude will never be able to close.

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2. For a discussion of the way music is used to characterize events at Christminster later in the novel, see Frederick P. W. McDowell, “Hardy’s ‘Seemings or Personal Impressions’: The Symbolical Use of Image and Contrast in ‘Jude the Obscure,’” *MFS*, VI (1960), 238.