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A NOTE ON THE STRUCTURE OF HARDY'S  
SHORT STORIES

By A. F. CASSIS

"CRITICISM OF Hardy's short fiction is shamefully sparse," wrote Helmut E. Gerber in 1967.<sup>1</sup> Even though George Wing, Richard C. Carpenter, and Irving Howe have examined Hardy's short stories with varying degrees of insight and enthusiasm, the tendency to ignore them continues. Two of the four major works on Hardy published in 1971, make little or no mention of Hardy as a short story writer,<sup>2</sup> the third classifies the short stories as "minor fiction . . . which is perhaps, a polite way of saying Hardy's less successful fiction,"<sup>3</sup> and the fourth traces the "counterpoint between narrative and poetic impulse" in Hardy's "tales" showing how they suffer from overbalance of one or the other.<sup>4</sup> As for articles, apart from Alexander Fischler's "Theatrical Techniques in Thomas Hardy's Short Stories,"<sup>5</sup> there has been no study that examines any one aspect of Hardy's craft as a short story writer. Our purpose in this paper therefore, is to attempt such a study by examining the structure of one group of short stories, pointing out both merits and defects.

In his short stories, Hardy follows the two distinct traditions outlined by Beachcroft in *The Modest Art*:<sup>6</sup> the tradition of the conscious, artistic literary short story, that of the *écrivain*, and the tradition of the *raconteur*, the narrator who simulates a spoken story in print, or as Donald Davidson put it, "an extension in the form of prose fiction of the traditional ballad or tale."<sup>7</sup> Our examination will be confined to the literary short stories which are grouped in *Wessex Tales*, with the exception of "A Tradition of 1804," and in *Life's Little Ironies*, with the

1 Helmut E. Gerber, *The English Short Story in Transition 1880-1920* (New York, 1967), 508.

2 Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy, His Career as a Novelist* (London, 1971); F. R. Southernington, *Hardy's Vision of Man* (New York, 1971).

3 J. M. Stewart, *Thomas Hardy, A Critical Biography* (London, 1971), 147.

4 Jean R. Brooks, *Thomas Hardy, The Poetic Structure* (London, 1971), 143-149.

5 Alexander Fischler, "Theatrical Techniques in Thomas Hardy's Short Stories," *Studies in Short Fiction*, III (Summer 1966), 435-445.

6 T. O. Beachcroft, *The Modest Art* (London, 1968), 4-5.

7 Donald Davidson, "The Traditional Basis of Hardy's Writing," *Southern Review*, VI (Summer 1940), 168. Centennial Edition.

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exception of "A Few Crusted Characters." The volume, *A Changed Man*, is evenly divided between the two traditions. *A Group of Noble Dames* belongs to the tradition of the spoken story in print: a cross between the ballad and the convention of the personal narrator who vouches for the truth of the story with all its problems of viewpoint and limitations of the chosen characters.

Hardy's short stories are carefully structured to express an "idea," an image, or to use his own words, "seemings or provisional impressions." In the stories, the "seemings or provisional impressions" are confined to the relentless irony that dogs man, particularly "man embracing woman both literally and figuratively,"<sup>8</sup> and reveal, more often than not, his frustrations rather than his fulfillment. The stories — beginning, middle, end, and incidents — are so closely cast around these "seemings" that irony runs through them, as Richard G. Lillard has aptly put it, like a "Wagnerian *leit-motif*."<sup>9</sup> The irony may be in the basic situation of the story as in "The Three Strangers"; or the "frame" encasing "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions," as H. E. Gerber pointed out;<sup>10</sup> or seen in retrospect by both reader and protagonists as in "The Waiting Supper." Suffice it to say that it is well nigh impossible to single out a short story of Hardy's which is not structured with a view to bring out irony; in fact, one may go so far as to say what suffering is to tragedy, irony is to Hardy's short stories. This "thematic sameness" — and I borrow the term from Richard C. Carpenter — may contribute, in part, to make Hardy's short stories palatable in small doses only, even though they are pleasantly free from metaphysical speculations and explanations, and have great variety of situations.

The structure of stories to bring out "life's little ironies" results in the choice of strange, uncommon and sensational incidents. "This love of sensational plots," says Lord David Cecil in a footnote, "makes him [Hardy] succeed better in a novel than in a short story."<sup>11</sup> Hardy's choice of sensational plots is

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8 George Wing, *Hardy* (1963, 1966), 2 pt., 26.

9 Richard G. Lillard, "Irony in Hardy and Conrad," *PMLA*, L (March 1935), 316.

10 Helmut E. Gerber, "Hardy's 'A Tragedy of Two Ambitions,'" *The Explorator*, XIV, 9 (June 1956), No. 55.

11 *Hardy the Novelist*, 53.

deliberate, because he believes that if the "uncommon" were absent from a story, the interest would be lost. "The Uncommon," says Hardy, "must be in the events, not in the characters; and the writer's art lies in shaping that uncommonness while *disguising its unlikelihood*, if it be unlikely."<sup>12</sup> To him fiction is not "accidentally but essentially true." Hence, his statement in 1886: "It is not improbabilities of incident but improbabilities of character that matter . . ."<sup>13</sup>

A common pattern "uncommonness in the events" and "improbabilities of incident" take, is coincidence like the convergence of characters in "The Three Strangers;" the arrival — from Bath — of Humphrey Gould, Phyllis's fiancé, at the same time and in the same spot where Phyllis is to elope with Matthaus Tina in "The Melancholy Hussar"; Mrs. Marchmill, alias John Ivy, the poet, in "An Imaginative Woman" taking over the rooms of Mr. Robert Trewe, whose verses appeared alongside hers in the same paper. Or again in "Interlopers at the Knap," the arrival of Farmer Charles Darton at Ham-Hill house coincides with the arrival of Philip Hall from Australia, Sally's brother, and his wife, Charles Darton's earlier love.

Another pattern "uncommonness of events" and improbabilities of incidents" take in Hardy's short stories is the untimely resurrection, from the protagonist's viewpoint, of some nightmare of the past, some secret alliance, the appearance of a lover or a husband. Cases in point are Mr. Milborne in "For Conscience Sake," the father in "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions," and Mr. Bellston in "The Waiting Supper." Some violent incident is generally introduced close to the end of a story: the shooting of Matthaus Tina in "The Melancholy Hussar," the death of Gertrude Lodge from shock in "The Withered Arm," the suicide of Mr. Trewe in "An Imaginative Woman," the death of the broken-hearted Sophy in "A Son's Veto," the death by drowning of the father in "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions," the death of Captain Joliffe and his sons in "To Please His Wife" and Mr. Bellston's drowning in "The Waiting Supper."

It is not so much the use of the sensational in the short stories that takes away from Hardy's stature as a short story writer as

12 Florence E. Hardy, *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy* (London, 1928), 194. (My italics)

13 *Ibid.*, 231.

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Lord David Cecil would have us believe, but, Hardy's own attempts at "disguising [the] unlikelihood." Unable to restrict his romantic imagination to the normal and the probable, Hardy tries to convince the reader of the credibility of the uncommon, to make the events that surprise us seem part of the inevitable course of things. To achieve that end, the architect in him resorts to "construction"; to *justifying* the coincidence, or the untimely resurrection of some secret, or the violence, by making it seem as one event in a concatenation of events. This reliance on causality as a justification for improbabilities accounts for the surplusage, the description, the lengthy explanation at the beginning of his stories which is often deadly to the swift launching of the plot in a short story. It takes Hardy, for example, five paragraphs to locate the time and setting of "The Three Strangers," another three to describe the guests, one for Shepherd Fennel and his wife, and two more for the fiddler, Elijah and the dancing, i.e., over 1500 words before mention is made of the first stranger. Those of us educated in the tradition of Sean O'Faolain expect immediate, intimate contact in the first paragraph and will probably find this exasperating, to say the least. But this lengthy description is necessary to establish both mood and atmosphere, and to pinpoint the isolation of Shepherd Fennel's cottage; hence, the inevitability of the convergence of the three strangers on it. In other words, it is essential to the conflict, to the sequential and progressive action that follows.

A classic example of "construction" can be seen when we compare the two versions we have of "The Waiting Supper": the story as it appears in *A Changed Man* and the earlier version of December 25, 1890 called "The Intruder" in the *Dorset County Chronicle*. Here are the opening paragraphs of "The Intruder":

It may not be generally known that the quaint old building which is now the office of this paper was the scene of a singular event during its occupancy as a private dwelling, scores of years ago, by a pretty young creature known as Mrs. Belland, the widow.

It was the twenty-third of December and the eve of her second wedding. Nathaniel Arden, her intended husband, had arranged to visit her that evening, to see that everything was ready; for her life was lonely, and he had already begun to look after her domestic affairs, and to lighten as much as possible the duties of her housekeeping.

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He was to come to an early supper, which she had arranged to take the place of breakfast the next day. Mrs. Waye, the landlady and housekeeper, had laid the table, assisted by the widow herself, who greatly enjoyed preparing for Nathaniel's arrival with her own hands.

Immediate, intimate contact is established by plunging the reader into the action of the story just before the climax. No preamble or introductory information is necessary. The passage is self-explanatory because every epithet carries out its function satisfactorily communicating the necessary information in a most economic manner and the reader is geared to move to the climax. There is vigorous compression and brilliance. Hardy incorporates this story in "The Waiting Supper." The very words are used except that Mrs. Belland has become Mrs. Bellston, Nathaniel Arden Nicholas Long and Mrs. Waye changed to Mrs. Wake (the name is ironical and suggestive in the second version). But where does the whole episode resurface in "The Waiting Supper?" In part VII, of an eight-part story, i.e., after forty pages of narrative — in reality a long explanation leading to the initial situation of "The Intruder."

This tendency towards explanation and construction to convince the reader of the probability of what is to follow makes Hardy's plots in the short stories seem cumbersome and sometimes leads to slow openings characterized by generalizations more proper to the novel than the short story. Hence, the slow openings of "The Three Strangers," "The Melancholy Hussar" and "For Conscience Sake."

If we speak of beginnings we must also speak of endings at the risk of offending Chekhov! Sometimes, Hardy does not terminate his stories with the culmination of plot at the highest point of emotional crisis but works towards a neat, well-rounded conclusion. At times, the conclusion is so neat and complete that the illusion of continuity is almost dispelled. Take the ending of "The Melancholy Hussar": after the two deserters have been shot, Hardy sums up:

Their graves were dug at the back of the little church, near the wall. There is no memorial to mark the spot, but Phyllis pointed it out to me. While she lived she used to keep their mounds neat; but now they are overgrown with nettles and sunk nearly flat. The older villagers, however, who know of the episode from their parents, still recollect the place

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where the soldiers lie. Phyllis lies near. (pp. 65-66)<sup>14</sup>

Sometimes Hardy does not seem to realize when he has said enough but has to give that extra paragraph or two that explains the obvious to the reader. The oft anthologized "The Three Strangers" is a case in point. Not only does Hardy describe the chase for the escaped prisoner, the apprehension of the third stranger, the magistrate's cross-examination, the release of the third stranger, and the rumors about the mysterious escape of the first stranger, but also summarizes, giving us the following two paragraphs:

In brief, the bass voiced man of the chimney-corner was never recaptured. Some said that he went across the sea, others that he did not, but buried himself in the depths of a populous city. At any rate, the gentleman in cinder-gray never did his morning's work at Casterbridge, nor met anywhere at all, for business purposes, the genial comrade with whom he had passed an hour of relaxation in the lonely house on the slope of the coomb.

The grass has long been green on the graves of Shepherd Fennel and his frugal wife; the guests who made up the christening party have mainly followed their entertainers to the tomb; the baby in whose honour they all had met is a matron in the sere and yellow leaf. But the arrival of the three strangers at the shepherd's that night, and the details connected therewith, is a story as well known as ever in the country about Higher Crowstairs. (pp. 28-29)

Explicitness, statement and restatement leave little to be subtly inferred — even though in this instance the cinematic element in his writing comes out forcefully.

But these are the exceptions to the rule. Even though the endings of the stories are unmistakably clear, the illusion of continuity is generally maintained. This is true of the ending of "The Imaginative Woman" when Marchmill discovers the resemblance of his son's features to the dead poet's and comes to his erroneous conclusion; or "On the Western Circuit" when Charles resigns himself to life with Anna even while discovering his only happiness in Edith's letters; or the ending of "The Tragedy of Two Ambitions" when the two brothers recognize their father's walking stick in the sedge, close to the spot where he was drowned. In all these endings, there isn't what Sean

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<sup>14</sup> Quotations from text are from *The Library Edition: Wessex Tales* (London, 1960), *Life's Little Ironies* (London, 1962).

O'Faolain calls a "sense of bump" or "disjunction";<sup>15</sup> the reader carried away the image in his thoughts for the episode seems more than a mere episode. The ending of "To Please His Wife" surpasses them all in this respect. Six years after the brig *Joanna* had sailed, in "a drear-nighted December" as Keats would have it, Joanna wakes up at two in the morning having heard her husband and her sons calling at the door of her grocery shop.

The wretched woman walked wildly up and down with her bare feet — there was not a soul. She returned and knocked with all her might at the door which had once been her own — they might have been admitted for the night, unwilling to disturb her till the morning. It was not till several minutes had elapsed that the young man who now kept the shop looked out of an upper window, and saw the skeleton of something human standing below half-dressed.

'Has anybody come?' asked the form.

'O, Mrs. Joliffe, I didn't know it was you,' said the young man kindly, for he was aware how her baseless expectations moved her. 'No; nobody has come.' (p. 161)

The episode may have ended but the nightmare of Joanna continues.

Long expositions and slowness of movement, common features in the beginning of Hardy's short stories are symptomatic of his elaborate structure. The action is almost always sequential and progressive and once it gets moving, it gathers speed and moves rapidly to a climax and a resolution of the conflict. This can best be illustrated from "To Please His Wife," a story not often read, and rarely, if ever, anthologized. After setting the stage for the action to follow — Captain Joliffe's dramatic entry into the church, public thanksgiving for his safe return, Joanna and Emily falling in love with him — the action is triggered off by the rich Joanna deciding to marry Captain Joliffe to spite the poor Emily. As chance would have it, Emily marries well and Joanna's fortunes steadily decline as Emily's rise. Joanna's ambitious hopes for her two sons are foiled by her poverty. Jealous and envious of Emily's fortune, she prevails upon her husband to return to sea in an effort to get rich. He does and returns with a canvas bag "full and rotund" says Hardy, "as the money bag of the giant whom Jack slew . . ."

15 Sean O'Faolain, *The Short Story* (New York, 1964), 155.

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and empties the bag in Joanna's lap. Her simple reply is a masterpiece of suggestiveness and compression. " 'It's a lot of gold, indeed,' she said. 'And — is this *all*?' " To please his wife, he consents to return to sea, this time with his two sons in order to make their fortune quickly. They never return and Joanna drags out the rest of her days in abject poverty and misery living on the charity of Emily.

Hardy lets the story speak for itself and takes the attitude of the detached narrator contemplating the pitiable lot of Joanna. In spite of her jealousy, envy and hatred, Hardy is never impatient with Joanna; he is simply understanding, and consequently, enlists the reader's sympathy for her by his silence which, in turn, makes the short story gain in brevity and force.

"The Son's Veto" is perhaps the only short story where Hardy begins at a point closer to the climax than to the initial situation and works his way back in time using the "flashback technique." The opening sentence of this sadly neglected story is a worthy example in Hardy of the "shorthand convention of abrupt openings."<sup>16</sup> Sophy, Mrs. Twycott, in a wheelchair attending a charity concert. Beside her is her son and his first words tell us all we should know about him. " 'Has, dear Mother — not *have!*' exclaimed the public school boy, with an impatient fastidiousness that was almost harsh. 'Surely you know that by this time!' " As the mother falls into a reverie, we move back in time to scenes of her life in her native village, Gaymead: life as a maid in the vicarage after the death of the first Mrs. Twycott, Sam Hobson's courtship, the accident that nearly crippled her and her subsequent marriage to Mr. Twycott, the vicar, and their moving to London. These are brought to the reader in "a series of scenes of the past and present mixing in and out of each other" with a minimum of narration. "The next time we get a glimpse of her," says Hardy, "is when she appears in the mournful attire of a widow." The old acquaintance with Sam is accidentally renewed and she feels a greater kinship with Sam's world than the middle class milieu of her son with what seemed to her its artificial tastes. Hardy's sympathy and understanding come through when his style becomes extremely simple, swift and eloquent as when Sophy remarks to Sam: " 'No, I am

<sup>16</sup> Beachcroft, 115.

not a lady,' she said sadly. 'I never shall be. But he's a gentleman, and that — makes it — O how difficult for me!'" and the scene ends! When the curtain rises next, as it were, she is on her way to sit beside Sam, in his vehicle, to deliver a half load of cabbages to Covent Garden — in direct contrast to the following scene: the cricket match at Lord's between the public schools in which her son is taking part. Later, when she broaches the question of marriage to Sam with her son, he is outraged for such a marriage would degrade him "in the eyes of all the gentlemen of England!" She gives way and he makes her swear not to marry Samuel Hobson without his consent. Sophy's heartache for Sam is effectively suggested in the words: "Why mayn't I say to Sam that I'll marry him? Why mayn't I?" she would murmur plaintively to herself when nobody was near..." Hardy seems to perceive that he has said enough: anything more would be redundant and obvious; and so, with remarkable restraint he moves directly to the last scene — her funeral described in one short paragraph:

Some four years after this date a middle-aged man was standing at the door of the largest fruiterer's shop in Aldbrickham. He was the proprietor, but today, instead of his usual business attire, he wore a neat suit of black; and his window was partly shuttered. From the railway station a funeral procession was seen approaching: it passed his door and went out of the town towards the village of Gaymead. The man, whose eyes were wet, held his hat in his hand as the vehicles moved by; while from the mourning couch a young smooth-shaven priest in a high waistcoat looked black as a cloud at the shopkeeper standing there. (p. 52)

Such "suggestion with compression,"<sup>17</sup> to use the words of Sean O'Faolain, where the telling is reduced to a minimum and the dramatic presentation of the story in a series of scenes where the directness and simplicity of style are remarkable, make "The Son's Veto" a worthy precursor of the modern short story and particularly in its apparent lack of structure.

Like all great works of art, Hardy's short stories are carefully structured around some "idea" — life's little ironies which lend themselves readily to a short story; but Hardy's obsession with irony, his attempts to justify and make it seem inevitable result in an elaborate structural pattern. Though Hardy makes no explicit statements about life's little ironies in his short

17 O'Faolain, 217.

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stories, they are there, nonetheless, indirectly made through the structural design and sensational incidents which point in too obvious a manner to his views. Communicating views through structure is rather subtle and clever on Hardy's part. Unfortunately, the structural design is too obvious to leave much to be subtly inferred by the reader.



### THE TEMPORAL LEITMOTIF IN *FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD*

By TOM R. SULLIVAN

EFFORTS TO DEFINE Thomas Hardy's philosophical position go on, and on, and on. It has been argued by scholars, and repeated endlessly in seminar and term papers, that he viewed the world as a pessimist, a determinist, or a fatalist. Hardy himself did not want to be considered a philosopher,<sup>1</sup> but he did, on a less abstract level than suggested by the *isms* noted above, generalize about kinds of action which he thought best for men, and his generalizations do not imply the philosophic positions usually attributed to him. He chose to describe his own 'idiosyncratic mode of regard' in the following terms: "let me repeat, if way to the better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst: that is to say, by the exploration of reality, and its frank recognition stage by stage along the survey, with an eye to the best

1 Hardy disclaimed the role of the philosopher on various occasions. He argued that a novel is "an impression, not an argument" (*The Later Years of Thomas Hardy*, New York, 1930; 175). On another occasion Hardy argued that *The Dynasts* was "based on a tentative theory of things . . . whether it [the theory] was true or false little affected his object . . ." (*The Dynasts*, New York; 1919; viii). Still later, in reply to a 1917 article in the *Fortnightly* he argued 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" (*The Later Years*, 175).