

December 1982

Hardy's "Fellow-Townsmen": A Primer for the Novels

Toby C. Herzog

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 18, no.4, December 1982, p.231-240

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.

Hardy's "Fellow-Townsmen": A Primer for the Novels

by TOBY C. HERZOG

FOR TOO LONG Thomas Hardy's short stories have suffered from critical indifference, perhaps, in part, because of the influence of assessments such as Irving Howe's that Hardy "seems to have regarded the writing of stories as mere journeyman's work by which to earn a living, and thus to have dashed them off with the casualness of purpose and desire to please a large audience."¹ More recently, however, Norman Page and A. F. Cassis have urged a critical reassessment of this body of work, basing such advocacy on the familiar claim that a study of the short fiction can serve as an introduction to the major novels.² They also argue from the less popular notion that many of Hardy's short stories are successful in their own right, both in content and structure. This article modestly supports such a plea for reconsideration, and more important, presents the profitable results of one such study.

My chance encounter (appropriate for Hardy) with the short story "Fellow-Townsmen" came when I was a harried graduate student doing research for a Hardy seminar. I read the story with casual interest, managing to extract some information on Hardy's pessimism. During the next seven years, as my interest in the novels evolved, I frequently returned to the story, intrigued by its precise structure. Gradually I discovered the source of this fascination: Hardy's intricate character geometry within "Fellow-Townsmen" not only aids our understanding of essential patterns of character interaction in the major novels, but also reveals his limitations in using these patterns within a short story.

In this story, as well as in the novels, Hardy's principal interest is to portray the relations of men and women within a social and natural environment. As J. Hillis Miller notes, these love relationships usually emerge out of physical attraction, a desire to possess. They progress through stages of mediated love, pairing, and frequent isolation. Miller refers to these character dynamics as a "dance of desire."³ Reading the major novels, we discover Hardy's use of a recurring structural device—a conventional love triangle—to shape much of the content and to pro-

1. Irving Howe, *Thomas Hardy* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicholson, 1968), p. 73.

2. Norman Page, "Hardy's Short Stories: A Reconsideration," *Studies in Short Fiction*, XI (1974), 78-84. A. F. Cassis "A Note on the Structure of Hardy's Short Stories," *Colby Library Quarterly*, X (1974), 287-96.

3. J. Hillis Miller, *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1970), p. 163.

mote these character dances. In geometric terms the clearly delineated points and lines of direction in the simple triangle identify the possibilities for Hardy's character interactions and suggest the dramatic tensions inherent in a tripartite relationship. In the novels, Hardy develops these tensions by largely ignoring the romantic possibilities of love or the nature of love realized and, instead, focusing on the pursuit of love: the individual's quest to find a love mate, which results in vagaries and repeated disappointments. Building upon the dramatic features of the love triangle, he adds characters to and subtracts them from this configuration. The resolutions of these character dances range from the romantic marriage (tinged with deceit) of Dick Dewey and Fancy Day, through the wise companionship of Gabriel Oak and Bathsheba Everdene, to the widespread situation of individual isolation and unhappiness—Eustacia Vye, Henchard, Giles Winterborne, Tess d'Urberville, and Jude Fawley. The following lines from Hardy's poem "Neutral Tones" (1867) delineate the author's predominant view of love relationships forged on physical attraction rather than spiritual affinity:

Since then, keen lessons that love deceives,
And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me
Your face, and the God-crust sun, and a tree,
And a pond edged with grayish leaves.

At his best, Hardy uses the character geometry to heighten dramatic conflicts, to explore philosophical questions of stoicism and fatality, and to develop individual characters. Over the period of writing the major novels, he changes his use of this underlying structure to mirror his evolving vision of cosmic isolation within a universe ruled by "The President of the Immortals." At his worst, Hardy uses the structure as a mere plot device to arrange character interaction. In these moments the architect at work becomes much too obvious, as craft dominates creation and hinders rather than promotes the study of character, relationships, and ethical questions. The skeleton, not the flesh, becomes the principal feature of the work.⁴

The brief summary of the important role of love relationships in Hardy's novels suggests that to appreciate fully the craft and content, we need to understand the basic features of character geometry, especially the dynamics of the love triangle. In "Fellow-Townsmen" we can study Hardy's use of this structure on a limited scale. The skeleton becomes quite apparent in this short story, one in which the author notes: "The triangular situation . . . was the one clear thing."⁵

Since this story is not one of Hardy's most popular and has even been

4. For a further discussion of Hardy's use of the triangle as a structural device, see my article "The Grand Design of Hardy's Major Novels," *Studies in The Novel*, VI (1974), 418-38.

5. Thomas Hardy, *Wessex Tales and A Group of Noble Dames*, ed. F. B. Pinion (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 101. All further references to this work appear in the text.

ignored by Page and Cassis, a brief synopsis seems appropriate.⁶ The forty-four page piece, a kind of miniature novel, has as its principal characters George Barnet, a gentleman burgher of inherited wealth and position in a Wessex community; Charles Downe, a struggling young lawyer and an acquaintance of Barnet; and Lucy Savile, an artisan from the lower class. Hardy begins with a plodding contrast between Barnet's hasty marriage to a "haughty lady [a London aristocrat] . . . before he had quite forgotten a nice little girl" [Lucy] (p. 92) and Downe's domestic happiness promoted by his devoted wife and three little girls. The plot quickly develops through a sequence of reversals of fortune. Mrs. Barnet and Mrs. Downe are involved in a boating accident, resulting in the latter's death and Barnet's successful efforts to revive his wife after a local doctor pronounces her dead also. Within a few months of her recovery, Mrs. Barnet leaves her husband and takes up residence in London, where she soon dies, leaving Barnet free to marry Lucy. But, characteristic of Hardy's fiction, unforeseen circumstances dash Barnet's plans; Lucy has agreed to marry Downe. After the wedding, Barnet quickly concludes his business affairs and departs from the community, allowing Downe to assume Barnet's eminent position and his residence. Twenty years later Barnet returns to the town; and upon hearing of Downe's death, he asks Lucy to marry him. She refuses, but the following day reconsiders, only to discover that Barnet has once again departed.

Within a short space Hardy constructs an obviously elaborate plot that in its content and structure echoes earlier works and anticipates later novels (*The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Jude the Obscure*). Readers familiar with Hardy can quickly compile a catalog of typical characters (the intruder, the stoic hero, and the agent of fate) and themes (inescapability of the past, missed and second chances, unhappy marriages, class distinctions, and the influence of linear and cyclical time). Unfortunately, the cluttered plot, superficial characterization, and excessive irony of circumstance and character support Jean Brooks' general assessment of the short stories: "The sensational happenings and coincidences that embody Hardy's sense of the cosmic Absurd become less credible in a crowded synopsis unprepared for by poetic atmosphere."⁷ But for readers able to put aside these elements of Hardy at his worst, the distinctive character dynamics and their resolution hint of Hardy at his best, in the novels. As in his major fiction, the story's central conflict emerges from human interaction structured around a conventional love triangle (Barnet, Downe, and Lucy). Hardy's portrait of the characters' love dances and of their inevitable isolation within an

6. In April 1880, "Fellow-Townsmen" appeared in *New Quarterly Magazine* and also *Harper's Weekly* (five installments). After some revision of the first and second parts, Hardy included it as one of the five short stories in the first edition of *Wessex Tales* (1888). See Richard Little Purdy, *Thomas Hardy: A Bibliographical Study* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1954), pp. 30-31, 58, 59.

7. Jean R. Brooks, *Thomas Hardy: The Poetic Structure* (London: Elek, 1971), p. 44.

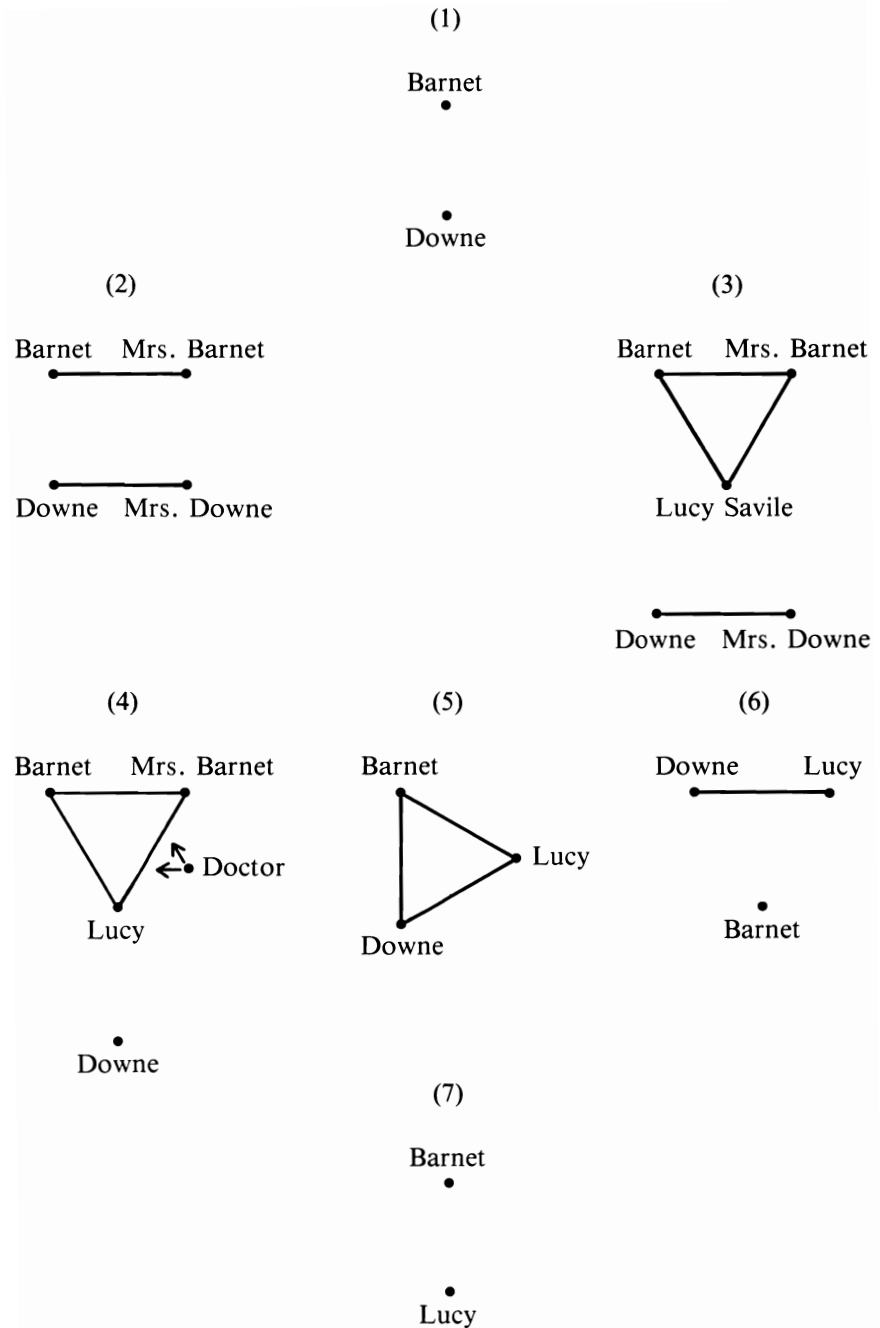
indifferent universe is advanced by this triangular pattern and the tensions inherent in such a geometric relationship.

As noted in the synopsis, Hardy does not begin the story with the basic triangular relationship of Barnet, Downe, and Lucy. Instead he develops the progression and depth of the story by gradually moving to and eventually away from this central relationship. In the "Fellow-Townsmen" 's character geometry, Hardy begins with individuals, proceeds to couples and conventional love triangles, and then reverses the process. A simple schematic diagram of the narrative movement will aid in illustrating this pattern and provide a reference for the rest of this discussion. Basically, there are seven stages of character interaction marked by shifting positions, contrasting fortunes, and a conspicuous cyclical pattern viewed against the backdrop of changing seasons and past, present, and future time (see fig.).

In the first of the nine sections of the story, Hardy slowly advances the plot and character dynamics through a contrast of the two men (stage 1) and their marriages (stage 2). Barnet envies Downe's marital good fortune, for he finds his own wife (an intruder from London society) indifferent about his happiness or his feelings. She has even ordered a house built in opposition to her husband's wishes and named it (Château Ringdale) after a former suitor. Although Barnet realizes that his marriage is doomed, he accedes to his wife's whims merely to preserve peace in the household.

With the introduction of Lucy Savile (stage 3), the plot and character interaction take on a new complexity. Lucy and George Barnet were once in love. But because Lucy had not written to Barnet after a misunderstanding, he foolishly married an aristocrat. Now, when his marriage has become particularly intolerable, Barnet attempts to find solace in the past by visiting Lucy at her nearby cottage. The meeting appears to rekindle their past love, even though Lucy in typical Hardy fashion maintains a reserved coyness throughout the interview. Aware that Lucy is the woman he ought to have married, Barnet leaves the meeting resigned to not seeing Lucy again and resolved to make the best of his intolerable marriage. This submissiveness to fate is typical of Hardy's stoic heroes.

With the completion of this incident, Hardy has developed the third stage of the structural progression. He has introduced the five major characters and has established the initial triangular relationship involving the Barnets and Lucy. At this point Hardy turns his attention from a surface presentation of characters and relationships. He moves to a deeper but still limited probe of the characters' thoughts and actions through a series of dramatic events that alter relationships. The drowning of Emily Downe initially isolates her husband outside any relationship (stage 4). His reaction is a complete reversal of his earlier decisive nature: "Barnet took him gently by the hand and proposed to



start at once; he quietly acquiesced, neither uttering any further word nor making any effort to repress his tears" (p. 99). Indeed, long after his wife's death, Downe continues to indulge his hysterical grief—devising grandiose plans to build a tomb for his wife. Barnet has suddenly assumed the role of supporter, urging Downe to stop living in the past and to begin living in the present.

Barnet's wife was also with Mrs. Downe when the boat capsized. Her apparently lifeless body is brought to the Barnet home where Doctor Charlson, aware of Barnet's unhappy marriage and intent on doing the husband a favor, conveniently pronounces her dead.⁸ Hardy gradually develops the dramatic tension of this situation and allows Barnet's inner character to emerge. Barnet believes his wife can be revived; however, as he gazes out the window, his eyes fix on Lucy Savile's cottage. Once again the opportunity to marry Lucy presents itself. Ironically, this time to achieve his goal, Barnet must not act but submit to the present circumstances arranged by the unlikely agent of chance, Dr. Charlson. This visual presentation of the triangle—Barnet, his wife's body, and Lucy's cottage—represents his conflicting thoughts: "The triangular situation—himself—his wife—Lucy Savile—was the one clear thing" (p. 101).

Barnet acts! He revives his wife, giving up deliverance from unhappiness and marriage to Lucy. Yet in this indifferent universe, his noble deed leads only to more unhappiness. His reward is to be four months of continued strife with the "stiff, erect, and now restored" Mrs. Barnet: "It was for this that he had gratuitously restored her to life, and made his union with another impossible" (p. 103). Barnet's stoic acceptance of suffering is again tested, but not for very long; Mrs. Barnet soon leaves her husband for the more agreeable company of London society.

With this opportune departure, only three major characters and a shadow of the fourth remain (stage 5). Hardy, beginning to develop the dynamics of the central triangle, creates a complexity and tension within this relationship through a series of changing fortunes and the resulting shifts of position. He commences by focusing on the resumed familiarity between Barnet and Lucy. During a chance encounter in which Barnet offers to help Lucy secure employment, he makes his interest known: "I wish I *could* go abroad, anywhere, everywhere with you, Lucy, and leave this place and its associations for ever!" Lucy's reply seems to repulse yet encourage Barnet's interest: "'If ever I think you *can* do anything, I will take the trouble to ask you.' The tone of her latter words was equivocal, and while he remained in doubt whether a

8. This role as a catalyst or agent of destiny is found in many of the major novels. A minor character placed outside the character groupings influences changes among the character relationships. His or her actions to bring about change usually supersede the efforts of the individuals within the groupings. Examples of this character type are Mrs. Yeobright (*The Return of the Native*), the furmity woman (*The Mayor of Casterbridge*), and Mr. Melbury (*The Woodlanders*).

gentle irony was or was not enwrought with their sound, she swept lightly round and left him alone" (p. 105). Barnet recognizes the futility of the situation: he is still trapped by the past—his marriage. Soon after this meeting, the third member of the triangle, Mr. Downe (still in the midst of a "second-class lament" over the death of his wife) is introduced into this relationship through Barnet's benevolent act of helping Lucy become the governess of Downe's three children.

As the triangular relationship develops, Hardy effects important position shifts through the convenient death of Mrs. Barnet. Suddenly Barnet feels rewarded for his patience and long suffering. Château Ringdale is almost completed, and it will have a new mistress. Once again peering out the window, he sees a familiar sight: "[Barnet] turned to the window and stretched his gaze to the cottage down the road, which was visible from his landing, and from which Lucy still walked to the solicitor's house by a cross path. The faint words that came from his moving lips were simply, 'At last!' " (p. 113). Yet, just as the door to Ringdale appears to open for Lucy, it is closed. Barnet's pleasant anticipations are dashed by a familiar Hardy agent—"the whimsical god at other times known as blind Circumstance" (p. 114). Lucy is to marry Downe that very day. With this piece of plot manipulation, Hardy significantly alters the positions in the relationship. Downe, who has been in a subordinate position, is suddenly thrust into the ascendant role of replacing Barnet; Lucy's ambiguous role is made clear; and Barnet is relegated to a position of isolation. As evidence of this complete change of fortune, Downe and Lucy are to become the owners of Château Ringdale.⁹ Thus, the triangle dissolves, and the sixth stage of the structural pattern begins.

Placed in a position of isolation, Barnet faces a condition previously confronting Downe and, to a limited extent, Lucy. Such a character dance characterizes Hardy's fictional techniques. His view of character groupings, in particular the triangle, as dynamic rather than static is central to the dramatic development of his fiction and allows for a greater depth in characterization. These position shifts from ascendancy within a relationship to isolation outside a relationship have important artistic and philosophical implications. Hardy concentrates on a principal character's reaction to his or her isolation—violence, an attempt at returning to an ascendant position, or acceptance of this fate with a measure of stoic dignity and defiance.¹⁰

Within "Fellow-Townsmen" a limited comparative study of these reactions exists. Lucy's period of isolation began prior to the time of the story. After the breakup of her relationship with Barnet, she passively accepted her situation, choosing to live in seclusion with her father.

9. Note the similarity to the Henchard-Lucetta-Farfrae relationship in *The Mayor* (1886).

10. An example of this stoic dignity and defiance is Henchard's response to his isolation (*The Mayor*).

Downe spends his period of isolation after his wife's death in an excessive lament, which through the efforts of Barnet he eventually overcomes. With his marriage to Lucy he is no longer isolated and has apparently achieved happiness, although Hardy does not describe the couple's marital life. The conduct of Barnet during his isolation is Hardy's prime focus. He reacts to his ironic situation in a manner typical of such Hardy stoic heroes as Gabriel Oak, Diggory Venn, and Giles Winterborne: "Barnet was a man with a rich capacity for misery, and there is no doubt that he exercised it to its fullest extent now" (p. 114). Passively accepting his fate, only momentarily does he display the immensity of his suffering. In one of the most ironic passages of the narrative, Barnet, not telling anyone of his wife's death, enters the churchyard to offer his congratulations to the couple whom he unintentionally brought together and who have apparently destroyed his last opportunity for happiness. The dissolved triangle is graphically presented:

A feeling of sudden proud self-confidence, an indocile wish to walk unmoved in spite of grim environments, plainly possessed him, and when he reached the wicket-gate he turned in without apparent effort. . . . Seeing Downe about to look around, Barnet averted his somewhat disturbed face for a second or two; when he turned again front to front he was calm and quite smiling; it was a creditable triumph over himself, and deserved to be remembered in his town. He greeted Downe heartily, offering his congratulations.

It seemed as if Barnet expected a half-guilty look upon Lucy's face; but no . . . there was nothing whatever in her bearing which showed a disturbed mind. . . . She shook hands with him. (p. 115)

Within a few days of this scene the bruised and shaken Barnet ends this portion of his life, disposing of his property and departing Port-Bredy.

Barnet's return to this town after the passing of a generation (a cycle) marks the final stage in the progress of the narrative and completes the linear and cyclical pattern of the overall structural development. Just as the story begins with two characters isolated from each other—Barnet and Downe—the final stage (7) contains two characters in isolation—Lucy and Barnet. The latter makes one more attempt to immerse himself in the past and succeed in his love quest. "The newly-arrived gentleman . . . made some changes in his dress, shaved backed his beard to the fashion that had prevailed twenty years earlier when he was young and interesting" (p. 120). Lucy, now a widow, and Château Ringdale, covered with creeping vines, appear to be existing in a state of waiting—perhaps for Barnet. However, the meeting, though cordial, is unproductive, as Lucy refuses Barnet's marriage proposal.

The expected ironic twist to this story occurs the next day when Lucy reconsiders the situation and decides to invite Barnet for tea. But once again, Barnet has departed Port-Bredy, leaving Lucy futilely awaiting his return. Thus, the progression of relationships ends; two isolated figures remain. As a result of her indecision, Lucy is left in a comfortless isolation. In contrast, Barnet, also isolated, appears to have gained

a measure of wisdom in his suffering and to have achieved a stoic acceptance of this situation: "After having his long period of probation rendered useless by her decision he had shown no anger, and had philosophically taken her words as if he deserved no better ones! It was very gentlemanly of him, certainly; it was more than gentlemanly: it was heroic and grand" (p. 125).

Mercifully, Hardy saves us from any further ironies in this extended prose "Satire of Circumstance," and we are left to identify the merits of this short story. They lie, I believe, in the development of the geometric patterns that control the structure of "Fellow-Townsmen" and that underline Hardy's major thematic concerns in this story and in his major novels. Throughout the changes in the character groupings, an underlying cyclical pattern (time, plot, character relationships) unites these fellow-townsmen in a world ruled by blind circumstance. Within this world, an individual is judged by his or her response to misfortune, particularly in regard to love, and by the wisdom gleaned from this action, which is translated into a code of conduct. Downe, confronted by his wife's cruel death, indulges his grief and momentarily lives in the past. Eventually, he unheroically overcomes this condition and seeks happiness through his children and his marriage to Lucy. The latter fails to gain any wisdom from her moments of isolation. When Barnet finally proposes marriage and offers her a chance to leave a position of stagnation and isolation, the widowed Lucy fails to grasp the opportunity. Of the three major characters, George Barnet has gained the greatest wisdom as to the best means of facing the unpredictable fortunes of this world. When presented with one last opportunity to succeed in his love quest, he does exert his will. Still when rebuffed, he faces the situation with resignation: "'Well no harm has been done,' he answered with the same subdued and tender humorousness that he had shown on such occasions in early life" (p. 124). Such a response lacks the heroic defiance of Henchard or the tragic rebellion of Tess, yet the passive stoic dignity, which at times borders on the absurd, is consistent with Hardy's notion of a proper conduct and will appear again among Hardy's fictional heroes. Barnet has displayed the ethical responsibility, tolerance, and tragic acceptance of life that are important in Hardy's view of a meaningful existence.

Such a theme of the vagaries of love and human interaction leading to inevitable physical, spiritual, or cosmic isolation dominates the major novels, especially those written after this short story. In "Fellow-Townsmen" this theme appears in only rudimentary form, but the vehicle for its presentation—the character geometry, especially Hardy's use of the conventional love triangle—becomes the source of the story's merit and significance for readers of the major novels. Certainly other authors use love triangles and add or remove characters as the narrative proceeds, but Hardy deftly takes these conventional structural devices

and expands their role. He places characters in carefully controlled geometric patterns that facilitate a web of character interaction, heighten dramatic tension, and allow for character development and the study of character psychology. "Fellow-Townsmen" is not the fruition of but an introduction to this technique. Admittedly, the characterizations in this short story lack the depth of those found in the novels, and we find only a few examples of psychological conflict and of emerging character consciousness. Nevertheless, the elements of Hardy's sophisticated character strategy are present. We see the blueprint for his infusing conventional devices with a freshness and vitality that enhance his abilities as a storyteller and as a humanist. Thus, instead of being an obscure short story justifiably ignored, "Fellow-Townsmen" is significant as a concise primer to the themes and structure of Hardy's major novels.

Wabash College
Crawfordsville, Indiana