‘Shades of the Prison House’: Religion, Children and Tragedy in Some Novels of Thomas Hardy

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Abstract

In Hardy's vision of tragedy, man is subject to the Immanent Will; and any attempt to overcome his tragic circumstances, often ends in futility. Though accused of being pessimistic, Hardy's real objective in his novel is to highlight the injustices and oppressions that the people were subject to, in the Victorian age. In most societies, children often become the worst sufferers of such systemic religious and societal oppression, and rural societies in the Victorian age were no different. This study attempts to analyse how Hardy presented children in his tragic narratives: he veers away from the convention of associating children with images of positivity, and instead, places them squarely within the framework of his deepest tragedies. In fact, in addition to being passive victims, children often become agents of tragedy themselves in these narratives. Hardy wishes to highlight how institutionalised religion and callous parenting were often responsible for these tragedies, and thus, in his presentation, he re-presents children with an unconventional idea of childhood.

Key words: baptism, children, Christianity, loving-kindness, meliorism, oppression, Victorian.

Born in 1840, and an avid reader since his childhood, the novelist Thomas Hardy greatly idolised the Romantic poets and their worldviews. Though influenced chiefly by the works of Shelley and Keats, Hardy had also deeply imbibed the views of the other Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Blake. In the visions of Blake, especially in his *Songs of Innocence*, Blake emblematises the state of Innocence of the human soul through images of happy and innocent children. In these descriptions of children, Blake often visualises childhood as a divine state of being, unsullied by the corruption and rigour of the world of adults. This is a perception of childhood shared by Wordsworth, who believed that children retain their divinity, ‘trailing clouds of glory’[1] when they are born. However, he also shows awareness, as in The Chimney Sweeper Poems, of how some children may not be as privileged as others. These are children belonging to poor families, children who have to earn their own living, or even earn

money to feed their families. In his poems, Blake makes it clear that children suffer because of the oppressive nature of institutions such as the state and religion. In his novels, Hardy, too, argues that institutionalised religion can be an instrument of oppression, and this is best illustrated in his representation of children in his tragic novels.

In the grim picture of life that he presents in his tragic novels, the positive imagery usually associated with birth and children hardly finds a place. The few children that are found in Hardy's novels often die during the course of the novel, and their role is primarily to heighten the tragedy of the novel. There are definitely some instances where children simply play their part as children. However, even these descriptions are not without a connotation of sadness. The second chapter of *Under the Greenwood Tree* introduces us to the family of the tranter, Reuben Dewy. Charley, his youngest son, is found to be in 'much grief,' pausing in the midst of his tears to observe the reflection of his weeping face in the mirror.[2] Charley's sister Bessy stands close by, glancing under the plaits of the frock she wore, 'to notice the original unfaded pattern of the material as there preserved, her face bearing an expression of regret that the brightness had passed away from the visible portions.'[3] A sense of melancholy is immediately perceived in this observation, as though a shadow of the adult world has been cast on the purity of the joy of childhood. Thus, neither child escapes sadness, even though the atmosphere in their home is a happy one. Similarly, although Thomasin's child is saved from tragedy, a discordant note is struck in her name, for she is christened Eustacia Clementine Wildeve, after her uncle Clym and his wife Eustacia. Her name is announced to Clym right after Eustacia has left him, prompting this reaction: 'What a mockery!' said Clym, 'That this unhappy marriage of mine should be perpetuated in that child's name!'[4] Hardy names the child after three characters in the novel who suffer severe tragedy, and the reader cannot help but feel that the shadow of tragedy already looms over the child's future.

Children are never really isolated from tragedy in Hardy's novels, and often, we find that Hardy links the theme of baptism with children who suffer tragic destinies. Baptism is the first important step in the life of a baby in a Christian family. In his work which examines the history and practices of the Church of England, Albert William Eaton – a Canon of

Leicester Cathedral – notes the reasons for baptism according to Christian doctrine: 'It is part of God's plan for the spiritual growth of every child… We baptise because it is a good thing.[5] In *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Fanny Robin's unnamed love-child dies at birth in a union house at Casterbridge, and is not baptised. The lack of baptism of Fanny's child thus becomes, by implication, a 'bad thing' according to the Christian doctrine – and Hardy seems to link common Christian belief to the tragic fate of the child, for Fanny Robin's child is "damned" in its death. The child is never again mentioned through the course of the novel, and in a significant scene, Gabriel Oak rubs out the letters 'and child' from the coffin of Fanny, to save Bathsheba the immediate anguish of discovering that the child had been fathered by her husband Troy.[6] The child's very existence thus becomes a cause of tragedy for the protagonist Bathsheba and, even after it has died, there is an attempt to erase its existence, as a means of averting tragedy. Although granted a Christian burial by a kind parish priest, the child's illegitimacy causes the mother and child to be buried in the 'reprobates' quarter of the graveyard, called in the parish 'behind church.'[7] Though Fanny is later given a grand gravestone, erected in her honour by a repentant Troy, the baby is neither mentioned on the gravestone of its mother, nor later, on the gravestone of its father. The act of the obliteration of the child begins with its lack of baptism, and is completed in its burial. It is not clear whether Hardy intended such an overtly Christian point of view, but one can almost sense a significant connection between the child's lack of baptism and the erasure of its existence.

Hardy adopts quite a different perspective in his later novel, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, where he seriously questions the Christian belief of the damnation of a child due to its lack of baptism. Like Fanny's child, Tess's baby is illegitimate: born because Tess had been violated. The birth of the child is not mentioned; the reader is informed about it only after some time has lapsed in the narrative, and Tess is discovered to be feeding a child in the midst of her work in the fields. Thus, the child is a reminder of the first tragedy in the novel, and the baptism and the subsequent death of the child become a turning point in Tess's religious life.

The birth of her child transformed Tess's state from that of a young girl into a mother, and the baptism of the child seems to transform her in the eyes of her siblings into an almost divine figure. When Tess realises that her baby would definitely die, she is suddenly afraid, for she realises that

her baby has not been baptised. Her appeal to send for the parson is rejected by her father, who is ashamed of Tess and her illegitimate child. Her fear of her child’s passing away from this world is replaced by the fear of what would happen to the child, without a baptism, regularly planted into the minds of uneducated country folk by the agents of religion. Desperate for the child’s baptism, she is filled with fearful images of what happens to unbaptised children after death:

> She thought of the child consigned to the nethermost corner of hell, as its double doom for lack of baptism and lack of legitimacy; saw the arch-fiend tossing it with his three-pronged fork, like the one they used for heating the oven on baking days; to which picture she added many other quaint and curious details of torment sometimes taught the young in this Christian country.[8]

It is only when her fears have reached a zenith that she takes matters into her own hands, and baptises the baby herself. The name that she chooses for her dying baby is also significant: ‘Sorrow.’[9] She chooses the name from a phrase that she remembers from *Genesis 3:16*, where God curses the woman (Eve) for her act of disobedience in partaking of the forbidden fruit. The woman must henceforth carry her child in sorrow, and in sorrow must she bring forth children. Like Eve, Tess had borne her child in sorrow. The christening of the child significantly encapsulates the story of Tess thus far. Yet Tess had acted out of faith and belief in Christian doctrine, and had tried to secure for her child what is promised in doctrine – the blessing of God and the kingdom of Heaven[10] The fact that Hardy’s narrator considers this baptism as acceptable is proved not only in the way that he describes Tess, but also in the words that he uses to describe her baby. Initially, the words describing the baby’s existence are shrouded in negativity. The baby has been ‘an offence against society in coming,’ and is described as a ‘little prisoner of the flesh’ whose hour of emancipation had drawn near due to a sudden illness.[11] However, the metaphor changes just before the baby dies: he is called a ‘fragile soldier and servant.’[12] The words ‘soldier’ and ‘servant’, when read in the context of a baptism, are almost always preceded by the words ‘Christian,’ or ‘God’s,’ as the purpose of a baptism is to commit the child into the Christian religion. By using these words, therefore, the narrator seems almost to imply that the baptism is complete in all respects, and that through her actions, Tess has

committed her child to Christianity.

Her efforts are, however, rudely crushed by the subsequent events that take place. Tess had anxiously pondered on the acceptability of her act of christening, wondering if it was 'doctrinally sufficient to secure a Christian burial for the child.'[13] However, the village parson uncharitably denies the baby a Christian burial, citing unspecified 'reasons,' in spite of an impassioned appeal by Tess. It is significant that the narrator does not attribute his views to a rigid conservatism of ideas, but rather implies that the parson was behaving pettishly, when it was within his legitimate power all along to allow Tess's baby a religious burial. This lack of charity and loving-kindness is in sharp contrast with the Christian burial of Fanny's baby, because of the kindness of Parson Thirdly. The importance of social conventions has overtaken the value of human kindness, and thus Tess's baby is buried 'in that shabby corner of God's allotment where He lets the nettles grow, and where all unbaptised infants, notorious drunkards, suicides, and others of the *conjecturally damned* [italics mine] are laid.'[14] Hardy's narrator seems to suggest that if the concept of damnation be a matter of conjecture, then infants cannot be marked as sinners, since they remain unbaptised through no fault of their own. The groups identified as the 'conjecturally damned' are also equally important, for innocent infants are buried in the same corner as those who have consciously committed immoral acts. Through the voice of his narrator, then, Hardy seems to suggest that there is something very wrong in the practice of religion that punishes innocent infants in their deaths by equating them with morally corrupt adults. The (denial of) burial of Sorrow is further important because it shatters Tess's faith in religion, and she rejects the Church in a simple, but strong statement to the parson: 'Then I don't like you!' she bursts out, 'and I'll never come to your church no more!'[15]

The question of the necessity of baptism in order to secure a Christian burial for children is revisited in *Jude the Obscure*. Jude's son was born to Arabella, and brought up in Australia by her parents, after Arabella and Jude were separated. The child was nicknamed Little Father Time because he had an unnaturally serious and aged look on his face, and he never smiled. He seemed to have experienced the tragedies of life, the marks of which were evident on his face. The reason for his name is found out by Sue with some surprise:

> 'His face is like the tragic mask of Melpomene,' said Sue. 'What is your name, dear? Did you tell us?'
> 'Little Father Time is what they always called me. It is a nickname; because I look so aged, they say.'
> 'And you talk so, too,' said Sue tenderly … 'But what were you christened?'
> 'I never was.'
> 'Why was that?'
> 'Because, if I died in damnation, 'twould save the expense of a Christian funeral.'[16]

This conversation is startling, not only because of the content, but because the words are spoken by a very young child. He is obviously repeating words that have been told to him, or have been spoken about him in his presence, and they are indicative of the non-religious, and materialistic, atmosphere in which the child has been brought up – where a baptism is deliberately avoided in order to save the expense of a religious funeral. When contrasted with Tess's situation, this neglect appears particularly horrifying, especially as Little Father Time was the legitimate son of his parents Jude and Arabella, and accepted by Jude as his child. Thus, while Tess's baby was denied a Christian burial because of his illegitimacy, Little Father Time is ironically denied a baptism in spite of legitimacy, thereby proving how the denial of burial of Tess's child was based on weak reasons.

Jude and Sue are surprised at the neglect of the child, and Jude is particularly disappointed that the boy has not been christened after his father Jude, as was the custom. 'We'll have him christened,' said Jude; and privately to Sue: 'The day we are married.'[17] Although we are told that Little Father Time had been formally named Jude, there is no indication in the novel that Little Father Time was ever baptised, especially since Jude and Sue did not marry. Thus the child is denied baptism by two sets of families, an instance that shows us how little the children themselves are culpable for their lack of acceptance by the Church.

The view of life that Little Father Time had been subjected to as a child has naturally coloured his outlook on life, and he views the world from a tragic perspective. He cannot find joy in flowers like other children; instead, he can only think of their eventual withering and decay.[18] When Jude fails to find lodgings for his family at Christminster, the boy feels responsible. The sense of not being wanted by a family, which had been

deeply implanted in him by Arabella's parents, returns to haunt him as he witnesses how Jude and Sue are refused lodgings because they are a family with children. His misgivings transform into conviction after Sue and the children are to be turned out of the room that they have secured by next morning, and the boy believes that the children are somehow responsible for the parents' suffering. A despondent Sue morosely discusses the adversities of life, and agrees with the child's perception that 'It would be better to be out o' the world than in it,'[19] little realising the effect that it would have on the child.

The next morning, Sue discovers that Little Father Time has killed the two younger children of Jude and Sue, and had hanged himself as well – meeting the worst fate possible for a child. The lack of baptism and acceptance in Church for Little Father Time thus becomes symbolic of the rejection that he had suffered at the hands of his first family, and this rejection becomes the primary cause for his tragedy. The narrative does not highlight the funeral of the children, and does not clearly state whether they were granted a *Christian* funeral or not. There is no clear description of the burial in Part Six, Chapter Two. The children are buried in coffins in a common grave for all three, and the scene of the burial serves rather as a setting for an extremely tragic moment in the novel, as Sue is seen standing in coloured clothes (instead of mourning) in the half-filled grave, expostulating and requesting that she be allowed to see her children one last time.[20]

In a society where the rigidity of Christian doctrine oppresses adults, and causes many of the tragedies in the novels of Thomas Hardy, it is indeed especially interesting to note how Hardy saw children as the worst victims of the system. In his chief tragic novels, children are rarely present – and if they are, they are not associated with images of light, joy or happiness, as is the norm. In fact, the very method of presentation of children deviates from convention, because Hardy casts children in accordance with his tragic vision. Children echo the tragedy experienced by the adults, and carry with them an atmosphere of melancholy. Thus Hardy, though not a Romantic in the strictest terms, definitely allied himself with the idea of the Romantics, that the world of adults and institutionalised systems, form the 'shades of the prison-house'[21] that slowly but surely begin to close upon growing children, and destroy their innocence. In all his novels, Hardy was appealing for a more humane society. In his 'Apology' to *Late Lyrics and*

Earlier he notes:

> [...] whether the human and kindred animal races survive till the exhaustion or destruction of the globe, or whether these races perish and are succeeded by others before that conclusion comes, pain to all upon it, tongued or dumb, shall be kept down to a minimum by loving-kindness...[22]

In expressing the plight of children in an adult world of tragedy, Hardy could only narrate how the lack of love, compassion and kindness – or, loving-kindness[23] – was responsible for much of the grief in man's life. In his works, Hardy laid stress on loving-kindness as a virtue to be held up and praised in all human interactions. Despite the sufferings and struggles in their lives, his characters soldier on in their individual life journeys, yet they retain their essential values of charity, sympathy, compassion and labour. Hardy continually valorized these qualities in his characters, and suggested that love and compassion between fellow-beings could be an alternative value-system, instead of the conventional, dogmatic religious practice. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, we hear Tess echoing the author's sentiments: 'Why, you can have the religion of loving-kindness and purity at least, if you can't have – what do you call it – dogma.'[24] Hardy felt that the contemporary practice of religion had become meaningless, as it had become devoid of the very qualities that it was supposed to have enshrined. Hardy believed that the dogmatic practice of religion in the Victorian era was responsible for much of the tragedy in human lives – and his portrayal of children exemplifies just how far innocent children had become victims of an unsympathetic religious practice.

Endnotes :

1. William Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,' F.T. Palgrave ed. *A Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language* [1861], (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp.308-313, p. 310.
2. Thomas Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree* [1872], 'New Wessex Edition' (London: Macmillan, 1975), p.36.
3. Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree,* p.36.
4. Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native* [1878], 'Wessex Edition' (London: Macmillan, 1912), p. 393.

[5] Albert William Eaton, *The Faith, History and Practice of The Church of England: A Concise Guide* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1957), p.112.

[6] Thomas Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd* [1874], 'New Wessex Edition' (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 301.

[7] Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, p.327.

[8] Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented* [1891], 'New Wessex Edition' (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 121.

[9] Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, p.122.

[10] Eaton, *The Faith, History and Practice of The Church of England*, p.113.

[11] Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, pp.120-121.

[12] Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, p.123.

[13] Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, p.124.

[14] Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, p.125.

[15] Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, p.125.

[16] Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* [1895], 'Wessex Edition' (London: Macmillan, 1912), p. 337.

[17] Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, p.337.

[18] Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, p.358.

[19] Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, p.402.

[20] Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, pp.410-411.

[21] Wordsworth, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,' p. 310.

[22] Thomas Hardy, 'Apology', *Late Lyrics and Earlier: The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy* ed. James Gibson, 'New Wessex Edition' (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 556-562, pp. 557-558.

[23] In the Book of Psalms, the Hebrew word 'chesed' is used to describe the love of God when it is expressed through acts of kindness, and 'chesed' was first translated into English as 'loving-kindness' in the Coverdale Bible of 1535.

[24] Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, p.353.