

Naturalistic Elements in Thomas Hardy's Selected Novels *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*

B.A.Thesis

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This thesis is a serious and thoughtful exploration of naturalism in Hardy's novels. In its theoretical part it describes the characteristics of naturalism, shows its relationship to realism and then turns to look at Hardy's Dorset and Wessex and makes some observations on the qualities of the major characters in his Wessex novels. In its practical part it focuses on the presence of naturalistic elements in the novels *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*.

The theoretical part draws on a number of good secondary sources to explore the characteristics of naturalism, though also contains the weakest part of the work, i.e. an unnecessary section of biographical material, which does not add to the argument of the thesis at all, and also a general commentary on Hardy's characters that rather clouds the focus on naturalism. For example, in discussing the trajectory of Hardy's characters' from innocent naivety to tragic experience she overstates the case for the family, especially in the light of her emphasis on heredity as being a defining characteristic of naturalism as opposed to realism. On p.11 she talks about the family as 'the safe space of their up to now refuge' and states that the 'tragic characters' were not deceived until they left 'the safe environment of homeland and in the society of their family and closest relatives', further stating that "Hardy stressed the function of the family and also the importance of one's home's safe environment". Is the family in Hardy really depicted as a safe haven? In later discussing the novels the author demonstrates the extent to which the family circumstances of both Tess and Jude in fact help to determine their fates. Further in this section, "Characters of Wessex Novels", she writes that (p.11) "Once the tragedy or some kind of irreversible deed was done, the characters understood that there was no coming back. This aforementioned tragedy/deed/mistake or misuse was usually committed by someone else and the fact that the characters were fooled originated from their lack of experience or knowledge". To which novels is the author specifically referring here? Jude's seduction by Arabella could certainly be considered as a result of his naivety – but what about, for example, Michael Henchard, the Mayor of Casterbridge? In short, the sections on Hardy's novels are far too general and unfocused, and raise issues that are at variance with the exploration of naturalistic elements in the two selected novels.

Underlying this blurring of focus is, I suspect, the author's awareness that Hardy's novels, whilst reflecting naturalistic elements, also contain many others. She writes "Even though Hardy used the same method, he felt evidently more sympathy with his individuals than the naturalists – Hardy never let the characters fall into such moral cesspit as the naturalists did". (p.11) (some specific examples would have been useful here!) and at the very end of her conclusion she states, "However, naturalism is not the only literary style that is visible in these novels... It is the stylistic and thematic diversity that makes these books still interesting." (p.33). The author may have feared that in focusing on naturalistic elements she is denying the existence of others, and a clearer statement of the extent to which she feels Hardy can be described as a

naturalist (bringing to bear his concept of fate, the influence of Greek tragedy on his work, his use of fateful coincidence) might have usefully been made earlier in the thesis to avoid the lack of focus in the theoretical section born of this fear.

Overall this is an impressive piece of work, thoughtful, well written and wide-ranging. The author displays a great sensitivity to the novels under discussion and also marshals a great deal of relevant secondary material with aplomb. I am therefore happy to recommend that if it is defended well it should be given the highest classification.

Bernadette E. Higgins MA

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