

Far from Convincing - Character Misconstruction in Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*

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Abstract: The present paper discusses the question of character construction in what is considered to be Thomas Hardy's first successful novel. By pointing some structural peculiarities we distinguish between primary and the supportive plot and make distinction between the characters in the each. Using the definitions of E.M. Forster for flat and round characters we also discuss the main characters in terms of their motivation and development. The general conclusion is that the author has not succeeded in building convincing characters but had rather used them to serve as a means to reach the intended story ending.

Key words: flat, round, character, development, motivation, plot, construction, primary, supportive

INTRODUCTION

When we speak about characters the first distinction that should come to our mind is the one made by E. M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel*. He distinguishes between two major types:

- Flat characters, who are concentrated around a single feature and do not change with the progress of the narrative
- Round characters, who are multi-dimensional and try to imitate live (but by no means necessarily concrete) people and who are altered by circumstances.

The first type was very widely used till about the middle of the nineteenth century by authors such as Dickens and Thackeray – for example Mr. Micawber and Amelia Sedley, to point a few – although in their later works they both tend towards the second type. This is, however, very natural as for their generation the social issues were much more important than the individual and insights into human psychology were not very topical at the time they lived. The English society had other, more immediate, issues at hand. With the advancement of the nineteenth the focus of interest began to shift from the more general, social to the more individual, private problems. Thus society begun to be viewed as comprising of separate members whose different worlds were reflecting the bigger universe outside. Novelists like George Eliot began to appear for whom characters themselves became plot and this required the construction of a more realistic and broad models, which not only served to carry an idea or a general concept but contained various, sometimes even controversial features.

MAIN BODY

When Eliot's major novel – *Middlemarch* came out in 1871 Hardy was making his initial attempts at novel writing with his first published novel *Desperate Remedies*. It was very much influenced by the dominating vein of the sensational novels popularised by Wilkie Collins at the time. It was too derivative and critics generally remained unimpressed. *Far from the Madding Crowd* was his fourth published work and is known to be his first major success. It is there that we can see the inception of his fictional region Wessex, which provides the settings for most of his later works and gave grounds to some critics to call him a regionalist. We can, as well, trace some features inherent to his previous novels and peculiar to most of his later writings:

- The novel structure based on a main and supporting plot where the second one contributed to the understanding of the first. In this particular case the love trepidations of Bathsheba Everdene take place on the background of rustic characters through whom the action is reflected sometimes.

- The love triangle so peculiar to all his prose works. We have a variation here of three men in love with one woman and fighting for her heart each in his different way.
- The two types of love: the steady, more covert type of loving, which proves to be more rewarding at the end (e.g. Gabriel Oak – Bathsheba Everdene) vs. the more passionate, more overt type of loving that is getting exhausted very quickly (e.g. Sergeant Troy – Bathsheba).

Although, as I have stated, these features can be found in most of Hardy's later and more mature works, *Far from the Madding Crowd* is still the work of an apprentice not of a master.

The main shortcoming of the novel, according to me, is the cardboard construction of characters from both the primary and the supportive plot. We would expect a much more realistic characterisation in a novel that is about human relations. Most of these misconstructions were well visible to Hardy's contemporaries who reviewed the novel at the time of its first publication:

"He is evidently a shrewd observer of the talks and habits of the Somersetshire rustics and yet he puts such expressions in their mouths as "Passably well put", "Every looker-on's insides shook with the blows of that great drum, to his deepest vitals, and there was not a dry eye throughout the town", and so on – expressions which we simply cannot believe possible from the illiterate clods he describes" [2, page 19] – said an unsigned review in the *Athenaeum* on 5 December 1874.

The secondary characters are mere ghosts. They don't have any features to distinguish them from one another at all. It is quite impossible to distinguish whether Joseph Poorgress or Jan Cogan is talking. Such characters don't have individuality at all. They are more like the presence of the chorus in Greek tragedies that provided summary information to the viewers rather than living figures. Even characters like Fanny Robin, who have some contribution to the action, have no distinct features of their own. They just serve as means to ends – nothing more.

Henry James also joined in with a review at the *Nation* from 24 December 1874: "We learn about Bathsheba and Gabriel, Farmer Boldwood and Sergeant Troy what we can rather than what we should." [2, page 28] "Farmer Boldwood is a shadow, and Sergeant Troy an elaborate stage figure. Everything human in the book strikes us as fictitious and insubstantial; the only thing we believe in are the sheep and the dogs." [3, page 31]

To do Hardy justice here we should say that generally his main characters have a concept to support them. Gabriel is a nearly stylised pastoral figure living in the same breath as nature. Bathsheba is the country minx, but who should also stand for the new woman type. Farmer Boldwood is the representation of Freud's repressed man, as Rosemary Sumner has pointed out in her wonderful *Thomas Hardy – Psychological Novelist*, while Sergeant Troy should be the embodiment of the good-for-nothing flirt. Having said that, I should stress that this makes the main characters too easily definable. This sums up all their features and most of them, with the exception of Troy, remain static from the beginning to the end.

Bathsheba has no development at all, although her circumstances change all the time – we see her at the beginning as an ordinary country girl, while later she becomes a prosperous self-made farmer. She does not get any wisdom from her experience which is very implausible. It seems that she accepts Oak at the end only because there isn't anybody else standing and not for his own merits – just the same as previously with Troy and Boldwood. She is a completely flat character. Nearly all her features have been built around her incessant hunger for attention. Although she turns out to be one of the largest farmers in the district (and quite probably the only woman farmer around), as well as very good at the trade at the village market, we see her always hunting for pity for being a

woman. If we should make up a single sentence to sum up her existence it would be "Oh, you should mind me for I am only a woman". While all the time she thwarts Gabriel's wooing at the moment he wants to leave for good, but decides to stay, she says "It was very cruel of you, considering I was the first sweetheart that you ever had, and you were the first I ever had, and I shall not forget it." [3, page 383] This makes her very cynical.

She is very inconsistent too. Instead of acting herself she expects others to act for her, which is very much in contrast with her wish to be considered equal to every man. The one notable exception is the saving of the ricks chapter, where we see her at her best. However, most of the time we only feel her desire to be pitied for being but only a woman. In spite of her being the female character dominating the narrative with her attractiveness and supposed intellect, her servants are more prescient in lots of occasions, which makes her very unworthy of her position sometimes. One of the problems is that we as readers don't feel with her but rather for her, as we don't see real desire to find a suitable solution for her internal dilemmas and get out of the scrapes she herself creates.

Gabriel is made of cardboard too. With all the positive features, Hardy tries to present him with, he remains very unconvincing. His nobleness seems to be motivated entirely by his impossible love for Bathsheba, which he turns into even more unconvincing self-denial. He is a man near to the middle age, supposedly with enough experience but falls in love with a woman only because of her appearance. This would have been much more credible for a boy in his youth. Even if we admit that this can indeed happen sometimes his desire to help her no-matter-what goes much too far and we began to feel even more uncertain about his existence. His description as an introvert and philosophically-inclined villager just don't correspond to his actions and make him even more unreal.

Actually, we know very little about him apart from his love for Bathsheba. We see he is a respected shepherd and manager of the farm but we are left entirely in the dark as to the other sides of his character. All the time he seems too good and ideal to be real. Flute playing shepherd belonged to different centuries and other genres. He is made to look very romantic and remains much unmotivated in all his actions which served the author to push on his plot rather than for the construction of a full-blown character.

While Oak's love for Bathsheba is a very steady one Farmer Boldwood's feelings are very passionate. They are strong to the point of madness and yet remain hardly credible too. The idea that a stray Valentine can kindle such feelings in a man of Boldwood's position is very far-fetched. There is nothing besides this that takes place between them and they have hardly spoken to each other before the misfortune with the greeting card. Again we have feelings more suitable for a schoolboy than of a mature man. He is a middle aged man, living alone in his farm, the rumour has it because of a former disappointment, which surely indicates he should have had enough experience in the relations with women in stock already. The mere idea of him jumping into such affair and humiliating himself again seems preposterous.

Rosemary Sumner calls his character "a study of repression" and goes on to state that "Hardy calls Boldwood "a man trained to repression" and this aspect of him is of central importance to Hardy's whole conception of the character, however tentative and uncertain this may be. He depicts him as a man who has fiercely repressed his sexual instincts; he calls him "the bachelor", "the celibate", and stresses the rigidity of his demeanour as he passes Bathsheba on the road after the market ("The farmer had never turned his head once, passes as unconsciously and abstractedly as if Bathsheba and her charms were thin air."). He describes him as living in the "atmosphere of a Puritan Sunday lasting all the week". He is the "dignified stronghold" and contains within him "the perfect balance of enormous antagonistic forces" [4, page 47]

Thus Boldwood represents an idea, a concept rather than being a multi-dimensional character. He embodies the idea of the blasted balance that has gone out of control. From a very steady person, seemingly in harmony with himself, he turns into the exact opposite. From the proud Byronic hero we see at the beginning he turns into a pitiful sight merely

blackmailing Bathsheba and almost succeeds in pushing her to acceptance. However, this is out of pity rather than of love. Although that Boldwood changes radically from the beginning to the end of the novel this is almost everything which we can say about him. He is also not a round character because the change in him is not a result of motivated behaviour and thus is very unconvincing. All his other features are left in complete darkness.

The character which is best developed is that of Sergeant Troy in spite of him being the negative character. We see him in the whole spectrum of human emotions – from a beau to a remorseful lover, but when it is too late already. We see him being proud in the famous sword scene when he fascinates Bathsheba, but we also see him down to earth in the no-less famous scene with the gargoyle. He is a character that changes in time and the change is motivated by the circumstances unlike the rest of the figures in the novel. Troy does not just represent the single concept of the worthless good-for-nothing man but through his suffering for Fanny Robin we also see his more humane traces, his tendency to change and to think things over. We should note that he is the only convincing character in the novel.

Unfortunately, his return to Bathsheba at Boldwood's Christmas party seems to be too theatrical and artificial to be really intriguing. Having properly built his character Hardy utterly fails with the last stroke. It is hardly believable that a man who hasn't been home for years and everybody considered dead would just garishly pop out before the eyes of his fellow citizens in the midst of feasting. A real person would have definitely chosen a more intimate way to denote his presence to his family. Furthermore, he doesn't seem to repent anything of his former conduct towards Bathsheba which makes his return to her completely useless. This scene proves to be very convenient for Hardy's needs – it gives him an opportunity to get rid of both Troy and Boldwood at the same time, and in clear the way for the eventual union of Bathsheba and Oak which everybody is expecting. However, this quick and easy solution spoils greatly not only Troy's character but also the overall artistic effect of the whole novel. A more realistically motivated decision would have surely been more in place. We can only guess at whether this choice was made as a result of the pressure imposed by the technique of serial publication (the novel was first published in the *Cornhill* magazine from January to December 1874) that is to blame for many of Dickens' shortcomings or was because of Hardy's immaturity as a novelist and constructor of plots. Two of his novels prior to *Far from the Madding Crowd* were still very derivative. *Under the Greenwood tree* is the notable exception where his own style was very much visible.

CONCLUSION

Immature as he was, however, at that time we can still see the sparkling of a genius behind the cardboard characters. Bathsheba is actually intended to represent the new woman who has a central place in Hardy's mature work. She is a predecessor of Tess D'Urberville and Sue Bridehead. We clearly see with her the hesitant female nature which is a theme Hardy is very much interested in. Moreover, he is among the first to put a woman in the centre of the narrative. We also see the male nature exhibited to its innermost depths and showing men as capable of showing deep feelings but also prone to taking wrong decisions as much as women. In spite of the obvious misconstruction of the main characters we should note that the novel is a very important and brave step in the development of Hardy as a major late nineteenth century writer who will be the link to the literature of the early twentieth century.

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