

The Tragic Waste of Evolution – Repercussions of the Theories of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer on Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*

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Abstract: *The paper discusses the influences of Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection and Herbert Spencer's theories of social evolution had on the novels of Thomas Hardy and more precisely the development of his conception of male and female characters in relation to these theories. By outlining the props of the above theories against the background of Hardy's life, his gradual loss of religious faith and placing them in context of history and time, we seek to underline the basic character traits in his fictional works.*

Key words: *Thomas Hardy, Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Evolution, Social, Disillusionment, Loss.*

INTRODUCTION

Christian faith was one of the pillars of Victorian society. In Mid-Victorian England it was considered appropriate to attend church, be charitable and read religious books. On Sundays all members of a household would go to a sermon. Church buildings were often restored or maintained by the proprietor of the manor or the landlord. Gothic houses were associated with Christianity, strict belief and pursuit of knowledge and truth. On the whole, the Christian religion gave meaning to the life of many people during the early and middle Victorian period. The good faith in universal benevolence, in omnipotent and omni-caring God was the basis of society, culture and politics.

When *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* was published in 1859 it produced controversial reactions in Britain. While some sought to reconcile the new vistas of knowledge it opened with the then dominant doctrine of the church by claiming it was an instrument of God's design or saw it as noble conception of Deity, others dismissed the theory expounded therein as heresy. Whether accepted or denied at the time, it is without a doubt nowadays that this book together with *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) made a turn in the minds of the Victorians at the time. The concept that there is no divine design for people but rather that population growth is restrained by survival of those who are best adapted to the environment, and that this is an event sometimes of arbitrary character, caused a gradual but irrevocable break of religious faith on which Victorian society was found to a large extent. The theory of evolution was easily applicable as far as plants and animals were concerned but when it came to the human race it posed more difficult issues. Darwin himself confessed that "the high standard of our intellectual powers and moral disposition is the greatest difficulty which presents itself" [1, p. 633].

The theory of evolution had a great effect on various branches of science. The term "social Darwinism" was coined to denote a social theory that applied the law of the survival of the fittest to society the major proponent of which was Herbert Spencer. He extended the evolution into ethics and sociology and gave it a new meaning. He used Darwin's work on natural selection on which he based some of the ideas fundamental to his Synthetic Philosophy, the first principle of which states that everything can be explained by means of natural laws and that they led to certain progress. Applied to sociology the principles of biological evolution led him to conclude that society evolved from lower to higher forms like the biological evolution. Man's mind, according to him, had developed from automatic responses as with the low life forms, to reasoning and thinking and he made a distinction between knowledge gained by the personal experience and knowledge learned unconsciously which he termed as inherent experience of the race.

As far as ethics was concerned Spencer concluded that the evolution was aimed at producing the perfect man in the perfect society, where humans will be completely

adapted to social life. However, in order to achieve this, the humans had to experience the natural consequence of their conduct. Thus, charity had to be limited since it could break relation between the conduct and the consequence, which he thought was in the basis of development from lower to higher stages of development. He proclaimed that humanitarian impulses had to be resisted and nature's law should be left to govern the process of evolution.

MAIN BODY

The theories expounded by both Darwin and Spencer spread quickly in Britain and abroad and influenced all branches of science and arts in the late nineteenth and beginning of twentieth century. It is not surprising that novelists and poets alike were quick to react to the new development in science and disillusionment with religion in authors like George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Alfred Lord Tennyson and Mathew Arnold is evident. As a result of the shift of belief and views, most of the late nineteenth century works centre around religious and self-doubt. By whatever accumulation of reading and thinking it came about by 1866 Hardy was no longer writing in his prayer book, neither was he going to church regularly.

As Hardy himself confessed in his autobiography "As a young man he had been among the earliest acclaimers of *The Origin of Species*" [4, p. 158]. It is not that Darwin actually caused the waning of Hardy's faith in God. More properly Darwin's theory gave firmer grounds for his commencing crisis of faith. That he adhered and believed to the new evolutionary theories is evident from the biting epitaph he wrote to the fellow novelist and Christian apologist G. K. Chesterton:

*Here lies nipped in this narrow cyst
The literary contortionist
Who prove and never turn a hair
That Darwin's theories were a snare.....¹*

The shifting belief of the central place humans held in the universe is reflected in the reduction of man's significance, loss, instability and disorientation that is so typical of the major characters of his fiction.

Most of Thomas Hardy fiction is about the rural regions. As such, it was describing ways of life that were already in decline and dying, thus he was concerned more with those who were unfit in the light of the evolutionary theories. The concept of family unity that was so precious for the Victorians is nowhere to be found in his novels. Family as a unit was a special care for the middle and late Victorian society. The character of its members would often surface in their style of living, which depending on their level of humanity and charity would often be a topic of discussion while failure to comply with the society manner and concept of good breeding would often result in harsh disapproval.

When he was reworking the material from his *Too Late Beloved* to create *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* one of the significant changes he made was to highlight the ancestral origin of the heroine. There were only three references to it in the first manuscript. Generally, evocation of the past is frequent in the work. Beginning with the May Day dance at the beginning of the novel where "the banded ones were all dressed in white gowns – a gay survival from Old Style days, when cheerfulness and May-time were synonyms – days before the habit of taking long views had reduced emotions to a monotonous average" [3, p. 34] to one of the final words that "the D'Urberville knights and dames slept in their toms unknowing" [3, p. 373].

By this constant emphasis on things past and gone he put Tess in a tragic context which she could not evade. It is from this helplessness the sense of loss and disintegration

¹ All poems are cited according to *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*, ed. James Gibson, 1976

come. Her passivity is a result of spent energies of her ancestry. She is unable to repel the sexual assault of Alec, while at the same time she is also not capable of defending her rights to be forgiven and loved by Angel. The passivity in which this loss of energy results all the time hinders her fight for individuality. Throughout the novel she is hurled by circumstances rather than governing her own fate. What heightens the tragic effect is her total resignation, like for example in her rejection of learning:

Because what's the use of learning that I am one of a long row only – finding out that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me, and to know that I shall only act her part; making me sad, that's all. The best is not to remember that your nature and your past doings have been just like thousands and thousands, and that your coming life and doings'll be like thousands and thousands.

[3, p. 137]

Her inability to successfully fend for herself leads us to the corollary that, as Roger Robins says “Through Tess Hardy makes an assertion that has been repeated by many twentieth – century novelists – that the individual must fight for the individuality of existence with every breath” [5, p. 141].

In a later poem from 1916 – *The Pedigree* Hardy described a speaker looking himself in a mirror who is reflecting that his life has been predestined and there is no escape from it.

*And then did I divine
That every heave and coil and move I made
Within my brain, and in my mood and speech,
Was in the glass portrayed
As long forestalled by their so making it;
The first of them, the primest fogleman of my line,
Being fogged in far antiqueness past surmise and reason's reach*

Like Tess here the speaker seems to be trapped by his heredity. However, she is not only predestined to be victimized because of her family history and also because she accepts it to be so. She never succeeds to recover from the trap Alec sets for her in the seduction scene. She does not even try but just accepts the facts and carry this stain patiently like she is not a personality but looking like the speaker of the poem in a mirror and not capable of retaliation. She also does not resist the attempts Angel makes to stereotype her and never fights back.

Not only is Tess passive but as Spencer advised there was no real help for her. She is thwarted by the parish priest. The failure of religion to be the stronghold for its followers is clearly visible in the refusal of the parish priest to christen and properly bury Tess's dead baby. These are the first signs of the lack of benevolence towards the poor propagated by Spencer. Religion was not able to adapt and respond to the realities of the rapidly changing environment of the rural areas in the nineteenth century. Tess is also dismissed by Angel's family – or at least she thinks so, at first. She is not capable to adapt. Alec's love for her changes throughout the novel – from lustful, sexual attraction to a genuine, more sincere love. However, she is too biased and cannot recognize this shift in his feelings, thus goes on living with the illusions about Angel. Inability to adapt is Tess's major fault. She is always torn apart between what is considered right and who is considered righteous and the urges of her internal world. This according to Darwin's theory of natural selection makes her unfit in the struggle for survival and quite naturally she is doomed to not survive at the end of the novel. Her internal imbalance makes her commit a crime and the society to which rules she had tried to adapt condemns her to death.

As Roger Robison says about Tess she “suffers like Clym and Jude from the burden of over-evolved sensitivity. Her sense of guilt and her susceptibility to others’ miseries initiate each downturn in her own sad drama of alienation” [5, p. 140]. Having the experience of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *The Woodlanders* Hardy wrote a novel of the inner consciousness – *Jude the Obscure*. Arabella here takes the part of the outer circle of rustics in the earlier novels. She has an absolutely unreflecting acceptance of life and the place she takes in it: “Pigs must be killed” [2, p. 88] and “poor folks must live” [2, p. 88] is here philosophy of life. She lives entirely to these principles – mates, divorces, gives birth and gets rid of her offspring, re-mates and everything is done without the slightest trace of compunction. She accepts the reality of the struggle for survival as a routine without any pang of consciousness. The difference between Arabella and Jude is highlighted by the sympathy Jude feels for the slain pig and the complete indifference of Arabella.

The situation is totally different with him and Sue. Here the concept of over – evolution and sensitivity is taken to new heights. They not only suffer themselves but also suffer for other beings’ suffering. For example, in the scene with the trapped rabbit they both stay awake and suffer for the animal. This clearly shows the bond between them.

I haven't been able to sleep at all, and then I heard the rabbit, and couldn't help thinking of what it suffered, till I felt I must come down and kill it! But I am so glad you got there first.... They ought not to be allowed to set these steel traps, ought they!

[2, p. 231]

To a great extent the tragic of Jude, as a character, evolves from his sensitivity and sympathy. This is clearly recognized by Sue when Arabella reappears and appeals to Jude at Aldbrickham. His sensitivity makes him helpless. “An inconvenient sympathy seemed to be rising in Jude’s breast at the appeal.” [2, p. 278]

Through Arabella’s mockery of Jude as a “tender fool....just as he used to be about birds and things” [2, p. 283]. Hardy makes this even more explicit. Also in the discourse between Jude and Sue about their failed marriage they articulate that they are horribly sensitive. And here Sue’s answer illustrates the idea of Spencer that evolution can be achieved only through suffering.

Sue still held that there was not much queer or exceptional in them: that all were so. "Everybody is getting to feel as we do. We are a little beforehand, that's all. In fifty, a hundred, years the descendants of these two will act and feel worse than we. They will see weltering humanity still more vividly than we do now, as Shapes like our own selves hideously multiplied, and will be afraid to reproduce them."

[2, p. 299]

The same sensitivity that destroys Jude and Sue is even more grotesquely developed in Little Father Time. The boy without a name, he has no life of his own but rather embodies the extreme evolutionary pessimism. In this he differs from almost all of Hardy’s character – the boy is just a schematized idea.

CONCLUSION

The corollary from the close reading of the main characters in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* is that Hardy achieved to show us the version of Darwin and Spencer not through representing the embodiment of their concepts but rather the responses to the effects of those theories. He did not directly depict the theories of the two thinkers, but rather the aftermaths of their consequences. Hardy lived in a changing society in which most of what was considered stable in the past centuries has been scrutinised and in the process of being re-evaluated. Being an intellectual he combined his knowledge of the reaches of modern science with his intimate knowledge of the rural world

to create a broad and in depth picture of characters who will be unfit in the process of evolution and will be wasted on the way to “the perfect man in the perfect society”.

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