

Accounting for Taste: From Thomas Hardy to Robin Hardy

Simon O. Lesser in *Fiction and the Unconscious* asserts that “[Reading fiction] transports us to a realm more comprehensible and coherent, more passionate and more plastic, and at the same time more compatible with our ideals, than the world of our daily routine, thus providing a kind of experience which is qualitatively superior to that which we can ordinarily obtain from life” (39). Fiction helps me to come to terms with my own experiences. Reading a dozen novels of Joseph Conrad in a graduate seminar more than forty years ago led me to examine my personal identity, my view of myself, and to figure I needed to change that view. Those works that make sense of my life, whose view I espouse, have more appeal to me than those whose picture of life I find foreign. Even the New Critics, despite their disclaimers, preferred works with whose worldview they sympathized, and related reading fiction to coping with life. Cleanth Brooks, John Thibaut Purser, and Robert Penn Warren in *An Approach to Literature* write,

Even in childhood we begin the attempt to make some sense of our lives, to think of some pattern of cause and effect, to try to see ourselves in significant relation to other people; and the older we grow, the more the part of life already lived challenges us to make sense of it, the more it resembles . . . “a tale told.” Long before life is finished, however, and the tale is told, we yearn to understand the logic, the meaning . . . of our individual lives, just as we thrust on, in reading a story, to understand the logic inherent in it, and the theme that in the end brings that logic to focus. (4)

Because the worldview espoused in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* does not ring true to me, I dislike those novels, but I really like Robin Hardy’s work, especially *Streiker’s Bride* and *His Strange Ways*. In deciding what I want to read and reread, I choose paradox rather than straightforwardness, identification and sympathy with the main characters rather than dislike and distancing, hope rather than despair, beauty rather than ugliness, sacrifice rather than selfishness, truth rather than falsehood.

Forty years or more ago I read Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). At that time I determined never to read them again and never to assign them to any student. As my major field in graduate school was the Victorian Period, I have repeatedly taught the works of Thomas Hardy but have managed to teach *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *The Return of the Native* (1878), or *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874). You all know Thomas Hardy, whose *Jude*, *Tess*, and *Return of the Native* I had in front of me in Norton Critical Editions as I wrote. Presumably most of you have never heard of Robin Hardy, who lives near here in Dallas. True to my resolve, I did not reread *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* again until writing this paper, but I never forgot some of the wretched details.

Some of you may never have read *Tess* and *Jude*, or perhaps you have forgotten the stories. *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* tells the story of a pretty country girl who is hired to take care of the chickens of a rich, sensuous young man, who rapes her. The resulting child dies in infancy, but the novel being set around 1880, Tess is a ruined woman, any possibility of happiness having been destroyed. She falls in love with Angel Clare, who, on their wedding night, asks for forgiveness because he has already lost his virginity. When Tess confesses her own past, because she no longer fits his image of the ideal woman, Angel deserts her. She eventually kills the man who raped her and dies in the hangman’s noose. Lionel Johnson sums up the plot: “the fate of Tess was a prolonged caricature of justice, ending in the supreme jest of her violent death”

(391). I grant that rape and murder are a part of life and that reputations are destroyed unjustly; however, I do not accept Thomas Hardy's premise that Tess's end is simply her fate or that her worth is negligible in the accidents of Nature: "Not quite sure of her direction Tess stood still upon the hemmed expanse of verdant flatness, like a fly on a billiard-table of indefinite length, and of no more consequence to the surroundings than that fly" (89). I reject the notion that Tess Durbeyfield is akin to a fly. Genesis 1 indicates that she is made in God's image, and Jesus cautions in the Sermon on the Mount, "Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns: yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?" (Mt. 7.26). Tess's plight is not the result of blind fate but of human selfishness and fallen nature. Tess comes into the reach of Alec d'Urberville through her father's drunkenness and her mother's aspiration. Tess is victimized not by an uncaring nature but by the sins of those around her who should protect and care for her. I don't think *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* tells the truth about life because I have found that there is hope, all is not selfishness, there is forgiveness, and God is in control.

Jude the Obscure has more horrors per page and more hopelessness and despair than any other novel I can think of. Jude Fawley, a laboring stone mason who studies Greek and Latin at night, longing to become a student at Christminster (Oxford), is tricked into marriage by Arabella Donn, a sensuous wench, who, with premeditation, seduces him, knowing him to be an upright, moral young man, and then claims she is pregnant. Discovering soon how unsuited they are for one another, Arabella leaves Jude to accompany her parents to Australia, but by Victorian marriage laws the two are bound inextricably. Jude falls in love with Sue Bridehead, a much more suitable match, but as he is unavailable, she marries the older school teacher with whom she works, only to discover that she loathes the physical aspects of marriage with him. Before long Sue leaves Mr. Phillotson to live with Jude, with whom she eventually has two children. One cold rainy morning Arabella and Jude's depressed son hangs his two half siblings and then himself. Sue feels such guilt after the tragedy that she returns to the abhorrent embrace of Mr. Phillotson. The consumptive Jude deliberately kills himself by going to see Sue one last time in the cold and rain. First, life has enough troubles without my wanting to read a series of horrors piled one on another. Second, Sue lacks passion and for years rejects sexual contact with Jude even though she lives with him. I neither like her nor identify with her. I want to sympathize with the heroine, and I don't think Sue is worth dying for. Third, the sort of romantic love Jude has for Sue is infatuation, a longing for what one does not have, which fades away when the sexual desire reaches consummation. For me, the novel does not tell the truth about life, certainly not about love. Paradoxically, life has hope in the midst of difficulties if we know that God reigns.

And that knowledge pervades Robin Hardy's fiction. Thus I find that she tells more truth than Thomas Hardy even though his fiction is extreme realism, even naturalism, while some of hers is neo-medieval fantasy about an imaginary kingdom. *The Annals of Lystra—Chataine's Guardian* (1984), *Stone of Help* (1985), and *Liberation of Lystra* (1994)—tells the story of Roman, a Christ figure, who takes the punishment for Deidre, a wayward spoiled young woman he is assigned to protect. In the first novel of the trilogy he is whipped and condemned to hang because of her misbehavior (he escapes because a criminal is hanged in his place). In the second of the novels Deidre's true father ventures into enemy territory to find and rescue her after she has been enslaved. When offered her freedom in exchange for his life, he accepts the bargain and is hanged so that she can be free. Hardy says on her website that the theme she attempts always to develop is redemptive love. The novels abound in adventure, paradox, hope, and beauty.

Though they nowhere say they are about the Christian story, they show Christ's sacrificial love in Roman and Galapagos and man's rebelliousness and ingratitude in Deidre.

In *Liberation of Lystra*, the final novel in the trilogy, Roman confronts and defeats the forces of hell, being branded on the chest with a cross and then tied to a pole on the roof, his strength coming from total obedience to his High Lord (as Christ was totally obedient to his Father). Later Roman disappears and is thought dead, but is resurrected after his funeral barge is lit. At the end of the novel disloyal armies meet on the plain to annihilate each other, suggesting Armageddon. This novel on the surface seems a pseudo-medieval fantasy, but one conversant with the New Testament sees its story transmuted. The episodes repeatedly illustrate the paradoxes of the Christian story. Out of selflessness and obedience come victory and deliverance. Robin Hardy seeks "to portray life as it is in the real world to demonstrate that the power of God can cleanse and heal real suffering caused by real evil" ("Online" 9). No matter how dark a situation may appear, there is hope in God.

Robin Hardy has added four even more adventurous novels in the series that she has called the *Latter Annals of Lystra*—*Nicole of Prie Mer* (2003), *Ares of Westford* (2004), *Prisoners of Hope* (2005), and *Road of Vanishing* (2006). These novels return to Lystra a hundred years later with Ares, a lineal descendant of Roman and Deidre and the rightful king, though he has a terrible scar running down his face, received from a usurper when he was a child. Ares's description seems to be taken from Isaiah's prophetic description of the Messiah—"As many were astonished at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man" (52.14); "he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him" (53.2). Our society today would like to make everything relative, glossing over the difference between good and evil, but these novels maintain that distinction.

Robin Hardy's most important work to date, the Streiker trilogy—*Streiker's Bride* (1993), *Streiker the Killdeer* (1993), and *Streiker's Morning Sun* (1995); as Robin Hardy says on her website, they concern earth, heaven, and hell, respectively)—is an obvious allegory of Christ and his bride the Church. Adair Weiss, the vessel of consciousness, accepts a *dare* to marry billionaire Fletcher Streiker sight unseen after perusing a folder filled with clippings and letters about things he has done, talking with others about him, and conversing with him on the phone, reminiscent of conversations with God in prayer. The folder, obviously a stand-in for the Bible, helps Adair understand Fletcher's character. Fletcher represents the risen Christ, and his relationship with Adair suggests the relationship between Christ and the Church. One day after their marriage he leaves her on urgent business, which turns out to be the necessity of allowing her space to grow up and make decisions. Adair feels deserted as sometimes we Christians feel that our prayers are unheard and that God has deserted us. Eventually, "Adair realized how unreliable her feelings were. . . . Her love for Fletcher had nothing to do with her feelings. He was coming back at some point regardless of how she felt about it. All she had to do was be ready to greet him . . ." (233), and this has been the hope of Christians for two thousand years. The surface level of *Streiker's Bride* sounds like a fairytale romance, but the parabolic level truthfully points out the everyday relationship between God and His church.

Much of the second novel of the Streiker trilogy takes place in Hawaii, Fletcher's birthplace, site of his beautiful home, and heaven in the cosmos of this trilogy. In *Streiker's Bride*, as Adair looks over the material in the original folder she was given at the initiation of Fletcher's wooing, she sees "a picture of her future, and it was Paradise" (232). That Hawaii is heaven seems an understated backdrop for the story that develops in the novel of Fletcher's

assumed four-year-old son, whose mother has taught the child to hate Fletcher (who claims him even though he did not father the child). Adair sees her role: “[T]hat’s what he chose me for—to help Daniel see that his father is not the monster he’s been led to believe. That’s my job, and that’s what I’m going to do” (165). On one level Daniel represents the Jews as God’s chosen people, but on another he represents all the lost, for Christians, symbolized by Adair, are God’s representatives to show the love of Christ to a dark world.

A new novel, published this spring, again portrays allegorically and ably God’s dealings with His people. A sequel to *Padre*, the 1994 story of love and adventure in Big Bend National Park, *His Strange Ways* (2007) connects with the Streiker trilogy as Fletcher Streiker miraculously finds Paul Arredondo, the Padre figure, in the parking lot of a mall in Dallas to direct his path. The novel has unseen forces setting up a place for Paul to sleep, providing a place for him to eat, directing him to a job where he can make a difference, and restoring his marriage. The cameo appearance of Fletcher Streiker shows that Christ is at work in Paul’s life, and the steady provision can only be attributed to God. The inexplicable providence in the story reminds me of God’s involvement in my life. While earning the money he needs on the temporary job he happens into, Paul educates the foreman on how to load delivery trucks expeditiously. When God manages an episode, it benefits all involved. The human tendency is to assume that there is a scarcity, not enough for you if I have enough. God owns the cattle on a thousand hills, so in His economy there is abundance for us both. God is here orchestrating the conjunctions in our lives, but we don’t see him with our physical eyes.

I must admit that I like *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* now better than I did when I read them as a young woman. *Tess* teaches that society’s rejection of unmarried women with sexual experience (even in the case of rape) and acceptance of male sexual experience is unjust. *Jude* teaches that the Victorian system of providing education for only the rich needs overhauling and that the mores which require a married couple to remain together for a lifetime when they are unsuited to one another bring unnecessary human suffering. As Thomas Hardy puts it in a preface to the novel, “a marriage should be dissolvable as soon as it becomes a cruelty to either of the parties” (7). Fortunately our society has come a long way in the last hundred years on all three issues. In the sense that these are moral tales, and Thomas Hardy says he intended them to be so (Preface to *Jude*, 6), they do provide truth about Victorian mores, strictures, and laws. However, I find their approach to life faulty. We are not at the mercy of nature, accident, and fate.

I find Robin Hardy’s novels more enjoyable than Thomas Hardy’s because to me they portray a more accurate picture of life. Though Thomas Hardy’s work is intended to be realistic in the extreme, even naturalistic, his understanding of the meaning and reality of life is faulty. Robin Hardy’s work shows an everyday walk with God and an understanding of His paradoxical ways. We often don’t see His presence in our day-to-day experiences, but He is here. We are not alone in despair even in this fallen world. We are not without hope even with wars and rumors of wars, for God is involved in our lives. I can enjoy the fantastic adventure in Robin Hardy’s work and not worry because even when the situation looks dire, I can expect a happy ending ultimately. But isn’t the Christian life like that. Job says, “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him” (Job 19.25). Knowing that truth, after I retire, I’ll still read Robin Hardy, but I’ll be finished with Thomas Hardy.

Mimosa Stephenson, University of Texas at Brownsville, Mimosa.Stephenson@utb.edu

Works Cited

- Brooks, Cleanth, John Thibaut Purser, and Robert Penn Warren. *An Approach to Literature*. 5th ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975.
- Hardy Robin. *Ares of Westford*. Dallas: Westford P, 2004
- . *The Chataine's Guardian*. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984.
- . *His Strange Ways*. Dallas: Westford P, 2007.
- . *Liberation of Lystra*. [First published as *High Lord of Lystra*.] Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994.
- . *Nicole of Prie Mer*. Dallas: Westford P, 2003.
- . *Padre*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994.
- . *Prisoners of Hope*. Dallas: Westford P, 2005.
- . *Road of Vanishing*. Dallas: Westford P, 2006.
- . "Robin Hardy Online." 21 April 2006. <<http://www.robinhardy.com/Feedback/feedback.htm>>.
- . *Stone of Help*. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985.
- . *Streiker the Killdeer*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993.
- . *Streiker's Bride*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993.
- . "Streiker's Bride Q & A." <http://www.robinhardy.com/Meditations/Streiker_s_Bride_Q_A/streiker_s_bride_q_a.htm>.
- . *Streiker's Morning Sun*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995.
- Hardy, Thomas. *Jude the Obscure: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*. Ed. Norman Page. New York: Norton, 1978.
- . *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: An Authoritative Text, Hardy and the Novel, Criticism*. Ed. Scott Elledge. New York: Norton, 1965. 1-330.
- Johnson, Lionel. "[The Argument]." *The Art of Thomas Hardy*. London, 1895. pp. 245-56, 262-64, 267-69, 274-76. Rpt. in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: An Authoritative Text, Hardy and the Novel, Criticism*. Ed. Scott Elledge. New York: Norton, 1965. 389-400.
- Lesser, Simon. *Fiction and the Unconscious*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1957.