

## Choice and Fate in ‘Fellow-Townsmen’ and ‘an Imaginative Woman’

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### Abstract

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This paper focuses on two short stories from Hardy’s vast body of work and thus attempts to point to variation in understanding particular topics within Hardy’s work. The analysis of the short stories in this paper will show that the narratives do not simply provoke sympathy for the characters but also invite the reader to participate actively in the decisions that would shape their lives and futures. In ‘Fellow-Townsmen’ and ‘An Imaginative Woman’, the narrative voice used by Hardy invites the reader to overcome life’s circumstances (which seem fated by social convention and religious dogma) through the use of personal choice by pointing to the tragedy and loss of faith experienced by the characters. Rather than a conventional approach of labelling ‘Fellow-Townsmen’ and ‘An Imaginative Woman’ as pessimistic short stories, this paper seeks to explore the complexity of the character’s experiences which in turn point to the complexity of the human mind suggesting a dynamic interplay of the forces that shape our actions and desires.

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**Keywords:** Thomas Hardy, Short Story, Choice, Fate

While Thomas Hardy’s melancholy and inability to resolve grief has sometimes been presented by critics, such as F.B Pinion (1968) and Norman Page (1968; 1995) as pessimism, a deeper exploration of two of his short stories offers a different narrative voice. While it seems clear that ‘Fellow-Townsmen’<sup>2</sup> and ‘An Imaginative Woman’ depict uncertainty, a degree of bitterness, and an attitude of melancholy towards life’s circumstances and a ‘whimsical god’ (Hardy, 1988, p.112) that is loved but whose merciful side we could not find, a more intricate review of the two short stories conveys to the readers the importance of individuals taking responsibility for their choices and looking toward a time when religion and convention would not dictate their fate rather than a completely disillusioned and pessimistic depiction of life and religion. This paper focuses on two short stories from Hardy’s vast body of work and thus attempts to point to variation in understanding particular topics within Hardy’s work. The analysis of the short stories in this paper will show that the narratives do not simply provoke sympathy for the characters but also invite the reader to participate actively in the decisions that would shape their lives and futures. This invitation has the potential to startle readers and focus their attention on more radical possibilities for the individual and prompt them to face the challenge of overcoming the conventional, social or religious beliefs that seek to limit and control the individual’s choice and dictate their fate according to a narrow framework of rights and wrongs.

Hardy’s short story ‘Fellow-Townsmen’ condemns Christian morality. The religion that dictates Mr Barnet’s fate by not allowing divorce cannot give him the happiness he craves. In this short story, Hardy contrasts the sad realities of the ‘grimy’ (Hardy & Millgate, 1990, p.102) features of life to human desire for love and fulfillment. Religion is portrayed as uncaring and as unable to help people sort their way through the complex demands of real life. Although in a letter to Lady Jeune in November 1895 Hardy emphasized that such sad realities were ‘fated’ (Hardy & Millgate, 1990, p.102) on his characters, this does not mean that they had no choice; how the characters react to and deal with their realities indeed indicates a realm of choice.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Fellow-Townsmen’ was published in the *New Quarterly Magazine* (April 1880) and the *American Harper’s Weekly* (five instalments, April-May 1880), and later collected in *Wessex Tales*.

In 'Fellow-Townsmen', religion and conventions of the time limited the characters' choices, creating their fate, yet it is the individuals' *choice* to surrender to the convention and adhere to the religious norms that creates that very fate. For example, forbidden to divorce his wife by religion, Barnet chooses to adhere to those norms and conventions and continues his miserable marriage and as a result loses several opportunities to marry Lucy.

At the same time that Barnet receives news of his wife's death and feels rewarded for his good deed in earlier saving her from drowning, he also receives a letter from a friend, Mr Down, inviting Barnet to his wedding with Lucy. Barnet's good deed in finding Lucy a position in Down's home and his noble conscience are never rewarded. The narrator describes the effects of cruel fortune on Barnet and blames this on a 'whimsical god' or 'blind circumstances':

'Barnet was a man with a rich capacity of misery, and there is no doubt that he exercised it to its fullest extent now. The events that had, as it were, dashed themselves together into one half-hour of this day showed that curious refinement of cruelty in their arrangement which often proceeds from the bosom of the whimsical god at other times known as blind Circumstances. That his few minutes of hope, between the reading of the first and second letters, had carried him to extraordinary heights of rapture was proved by the immensity of his suffering now ... his eyes, of a light hazel, had a curious look which can only be described by the word bruised; the sorrow that looked from them being largely mixed with the surprise of a man taken unawares.' (Hardy, 1988, p.112).

The use of terms such as 'whimsical' and 'blind' reflect a sense of bitterness and loss of faith towards the merciful side of God due to the lack of meaning and order in the circumstances that are "fated" on the characters stemming from religious dogma and conventions; conventions that no longer meet the complex demands of real life.

Hardy's work in 'Fellow-Townsmen' stimulates the reader to think and conclude for themselves while providing messages and implicit assertions. The short story points to how if individuals were more responsible for their choices and less affected by religious prescription, they could change their fate. For example, if Barnet had chosen to announce his wife's death, Lucy may have decided not to marry Mr Down. When Lucy meets Barnet years later and learns that her marriage to Down was the cause of Barnet leaving, she replies, 'I have always been under the impression that your wife was alive at the time of my marriage. Was it not stupid of me?' Fate plays its part in having Lucy's marriage to Down occur on the same day that Barnet becomes free to re-marry, but it is Barnet's choice to act out of conscience and the kindness that 'he almost owed Down' (Hardy, 1988, p.112), in not announcing his wife's death before Lucy's wedding. The reader is thus led to conclude that as much as fate has brought these letters together in Barnet's hand, it was up to him what course of action to choose. Years earlier, Barnet had felt unable to marry Lucy because of her lowly class status (constrained by social conventions) and later because of his inability to divorce his wife (constrained by religion) and yet, again he *chooses* to keep quiet, be a good Christian, and depart. The narrator ironically describes Barnet's action as 'heroic and grand' (Hardy, 1988, p.123).

Years pass, Lucy's husband dies, and Barnet comes back to the town in his old age still hoping to win Lucy's hand. Lucy hesitates because she is opposed to the idea of marrying a second time. Rather than fate, it is choice based on dogmatic beliefs here that leads to her unhappiness. Lucy's response causes Barnet to leave once more and even when she reconsiders her decision, because of her intense feelings towards him, it is too late; 'she did wait – years and years – but Barnet never reappeared' (Hardy, 1988, p.124). This melodramatic sentence ending the story of the two lovers emphasizes the importance of the individual's choice in determining his or her destiny. As Deborah L. Collins argues, Hardy's characters 'pity themselves as victims of fate' (Collins, 1990, p.102) and do not recognize their own susceptibility to self-destruction, their 'bankruptcy of free will unlighted by intellect' (ibid). That is why for Collins, Hardy shows, through his stories, that enduring the 'random events and natural determinism' of life is viable 'if heart and intellect are united and balanced' (ibid, p.103). For example, if Barnet had combined his intellect with his heart his destiny would have been different. Hardy's characters seem trapped by their religious beliefs and social conventions which limit and control their choices based on a narrow framework of what is right and wrong.

A lot of the circumstances that seem fated on the characters are the result of the dogmatic religious beliefs and social conventions of the time. The characters' inability to use the power of choice to free themselves from such limitations created a sense of bitterness towards religion leading to doubt and loss of faith (as discussed above in the case of the "whimsical God"). The issue of doubt and loss of faith in religion is mirrored in the way the characters deal with the experience of loss of love. For example, in 'Fellow-Townsmen', we see Mr Down, who had been very attached and loyal to his wife, marry Lucy a mere year after his wife's death. Down is a man who needs to be emotionally attached and needs to replace his loss with the kind of love that provides a sense of attachment.

He goes as far as changing his mind about asking an architect to design an extravagant headstone for his wife after he finds Lucy and decides to marry her. The architect says, 'He has so reduced design after design that the whole thing has been nothing save wasted labour for me; till in the end it has become a common headstone which a mason put up in half a day.' (Hardy, 1988, p.109).

This idea can also be connected to the issue of religious loss, from which most of Hardy's characters suffer. J. Miller (Hillis & Miller, 1970,) suggests that in *The Well-Beloved* Jocelyn Pierston loves not so much the woman herself as the Goddess momentarily incarnated in her person. He loves the divine power which temporarily inhabits her form. Miller concludes that the religious dimension is integral to the theme of love throughout Hardy's work. Hardy's fictional lovers make a God or Goddess of the person they love and endow them with divine powers. For Miller, the effect of love is like that of a religious vision; both cause a sudden transfiguration of the lover and the world around them. The world has a focus and the loved one has the creative power of a deity, which re-creates the self of the lover. The lover's whole inner self is filled with hope and a vision guaranteed by his desire. The beloved is like the divine because of his or her capacity to organise reality and give meaning. Everything comes to life because of the beloved's living spirit; houses, furniture, clothes and landscapes, as if they declare the beloved's presence in the world (ibid,p.183).

In Barnet's case as well, love is like a religion that changes his life, filling his dull existence with new excitement and hope. Love replaces the unhappiness carried in meekly following Christian law. The transfigurative power of love replaces religion, and Lucy is his redeemer. When the doctor announces, mistakenly, that Barnet's wife is dead, it opens new possibilities for Barnet – hope that he might be free to unite with his love, Lucy. Even nature reflects the glow and warmth in Barnet's heart,

'Long orange rays of evening sun stole in through chinks in the blind, striking on the large mirror and being thence reflected upon the crimson hangings and woodwork of the bedstead, so that the general tone of the light was remarkably warm.' (Hardy, 1988, p.97).

Lucy's chimney is also described as 'red' and 'smoking cheerily'. Similarly, when later Barnet finally gets the real news of his wife's death in London, and again his hope of marrying Lucy is revived, it affects the choice of the wall-paper he has in his hand at the time:

'They had all got brighter for him, those papers. It was all changed – who would sit in the rooms that they were to line? He went on to muse upon Lucy's conduct in so frequently coming to the house with the children; her occasional blush in speaking to him; her evident interest in him ... All the papers previously chosen seemed wrong in their shades, and he began from the beginning to choose again.' (Hardy, 1988, p.111).

Miller's point becomes clear when we observe how Barnet is possessed of a longing for God, or something like God, to give order and meaning to his world. Barnet thinks that he can find this power in Lucy. His love is, as Miller would suggest, a 'covert religious quest' (Hillis & Miller, 1970, p.183). However, Miller emphasises that Hardy's characters, eventually discover that their beloved is no God and they cease to be at the centre of their world. When Hardy's characters recognise that they have been 'duped by love' (ibid), they go through a process of detachment, distancing themselves from life; a detachment that robs them of their choice. They find themselves in a state of nonchalance, seeing everything – the beloved, the world, and the victorious opponent – with a sense of detachment; a detachment that pushes them to passivity and thus rips them of their choices. Miller refers to Henchard, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, who at the end of his life gives up all attempts to involve himself with other people; he becomes 'an outcast', 'despised by all'. In 'Fellow-Townsmen' Barnet also chooses isolation and detachment, leaving the town twice: once, when Lucy marries Down, and again, when she refuses to marry him despite them both being free to marry.

This isolation and detachment that originated from the loss of faith leaves the characters helpless and without choice where they can no longer see beyond the limitations of the facts and reality prescribed on them to the liberation and empowerment that the "truth" behind these facts may give them. Angelique Richardson in relating Hardy's work to science further elaborates this argument. She concludes that Hardy invites the reader through his characters to pay attention to 'truth' rather than 'facts'. She explains that for Hardy, knowledge, which mainly comes from science, cannot be separated from the truth and spirit of things. For example, the knowledge that Tess has pushed on her 'cannot touch her purity, and the knowledge that Angel has of the facts of Tess's life does not save him from his essential priggishness, until it is too late' (Richardson, 2004, p.175).

He asks himself why he had not judged Tess by the 'will' rather than the 'deed'. The truth behind Tess's deed makes her a pure woman. The parallel of Angel to Jesus before his accusers becomes evermore apparent; Jesus refused to tell the truth about his divine nature, and there is a sense in which 'for all his rational thinking', Angel could not see the truly important thing and thus privileges appearance above spirit (ibid). Implementing Richardson's interesting analysis on 'Fellow-Townsmen', one sees that if Barnet had not judged the 'fact' of Lucy's opposition to marrying him a second time as a personal rejection, he might have understood what lay behind her refusal; the "truth" being that Lucy was trapped in her conservative beliefs. If Barnet had examined his passed experience of Lucy, that 'she is rather stiff in her ideas of Barnet', he would have realised she needed encouragement to leave her beliefs behind. Lucy is also worried that his proposal is based on her physical beauty, though when she looks in the mirror in old age and remarks that not much of her former beauty remains, she realises his proposal is honest, rising from 'an old feeling of him' which deserved tender consideration (Hardy, 1988, p.123). A state of doubt and loss of faith in the conservative religious values leaves the characters unable to peacefully surrender to the "fate" prescribed by social and religious values, yet they also cannot see the truth behind the facts to act towards breaking those social and religious values.

Barnet and Lucy's inability to see the truth behind the facts of the conservative values within them and around them can again reflect the doubt and loss of faith that deprives the characters from choice. Timothy Hands's (Hands & Esbester, 1989) analysis of Hardy's own loss of faith gives insight into Barnet and Lucy's predicament. Hands sees Hardy as someone who, in his early years of faith, experienced doubt, and in his later 'years of doubt' could feel the 'continuation of his faith' (ibid, p.35). That is why he concludes by describing Hardy as an agnostic. He refers to the 'Apology' in *Late Lyrics and Earlier*, in which Hardy directly states that his writings can be described as a questioning, as 'frank recognition' and as an 'exploration of reality' (ibid, p.34-5). To Hardy, what is important is 'the right of the individual to deviate from religious norms' (ibid, p.34); the investigation of truth is up to the individual, as is the choice of whether or not to embrace it and live life according to that truth, as is observed in the case of Barnet and Lucy.

Moving on to another short story we see how the theme of tragedy in Hardy's work highlights the question of fate and choice. In 'An Imaginative Woman', Hardy deals more directly with a woman's suffering – the emotional and intellectual anxiety Ella Marchmill experiences in an incompatible marriage. She is married to a gun manufacturer, and neither he nor society appreciates her literary aspirations. It is worth referring here to an important statement made by Ella in which she condemns God for her miseries. When she hears of the suicide of Robert Trewe, the man she loved only through reading his poems, she says regretfully:

'O, if he had only known of me – known of me – me! ... O, if I had only once met him – only once; and put my hand upon his hot forehead – kissed him – let him know how I loved him – that I would have suffered shame and scorn, would have lived and died, for him! Perhaps it would have saved his dear life! ... But no – it was not allowed! God is a jealous God; and that happiness was not for him and me!' (Hardy, 1988, p.397).

Ella, who bore her miserable life concealing her feelings then loses the man she might have loved, is eventually accused of infidelity. The little infant, whom Ella dies giving birth to, is despised by its father. He believes the child resembles the dead poet and is convinced she is that man's daughter. That Ella, the 'impressionable, palpitating creature', had to live this life and suffer ignominy even in death provokes sympathy in the reader. One understands that other lives might be led like this, full of financial anxiety, marital problems, illness and loss. The sympathy for Ella readers feel must lead them to question whether the God they worship is a just one. Does He know what justice is? The tragedy in the short story is not merely to provoke sympathy, but to encourage readers to take an active role in their own lives and those of their fellows, thus highlighting the individual's choice. In her work *Tragedy in the Victorian Novel*, Jeannette King explains that the tragedy Victorian characters experience is not that life is short but that the individual is unable or unwilling to live his or her life to the full. There is a gap between the opportunities a character is presented with and their "imagination and ambition"; a gap which may be the result of the circumstances of life or the character's choices. Implementing King's arguments on 'Fellow-Townsmen' and 'An Imaginative Woman', the 'tragedies' in the short stories are not a reflection of pessimism, but rather stem from an awareness of the importance of informed choice in determining one's own future and thus narrowing the above-mentioned gap through the elements the characters can control: their choices.

In *An Imaginative Woman* Ella's lodgings in Solentsea and the beauty of the summer season by the sea did not help her to reduce her pain and entrapment in her incompatible marriage that was pushed upon her by her mother's advise 'to get life leased at all cost, a cardinal virtue which all good mothers teach' (Hardy, 1988, p.380). Rather, Ella used "reverie" and "day dreams" to escape from such circumstances; circumstances which were seemingly fatal but rather in truth stemmed from social conventions and religious dogma. Ella's lack of "courage" and "assurance" (Hardy, 1988, p.392) in the story do not allow her to break social convention to call upon Robert Trewe, the poet whom she found emotional and mental compatibility and extraordinary connection:

'She thought how wicked she was, a woman having a husband and three children, to let her mind stray to a stranger in this unconscionable manner. No, he was not a stranger! She knew his thoughts and feelings as well as she knew her own; they were, in fact, the self-same thoughts and feelings as hers, which her husband distinctly lacked... 'He's nearer my real self, he's more intimate with the real me than Will is'...' (Hardy, 1988, p.389)

She further did not allow herself to defend her actions and explain to her husband at the end that she didn't meet Trewe in real life due to the convention which made her subordinate to her husband, thus ending her life tragically. In most of Hardy's stories, suffering even carries over into the next generation. For example, Ella leaves her young infant behind to face a life blighted by her father's prejudice; Frances, in 'For Conscience' Sake'<sup>3</sup>, repeats her mother's mistake; and Lisa, who walks along with Angel after Tess's execution, indicates the repetition of her sister's agony with Angel. These stories display a pitying attitude towards life's tragedies, however they also celebrated human endurance and heroism in the face of affliction. Mistakes – born of an incapacity to take responsibility for one's own life – bring long-term consequences, yet the stories may inspire the reader to reflect on whether perhaps the cost of standing up to convention is indeed worth it. As A. Stanton Whitfield put it, if optimism is 'a belief in humanity's powers to love and endure, then Mr Hardy might be described as an optimist' (Whitfield, 1921, p.20). It is worth mentioning that critics such as Shete Shivraj and Malshette Trimvakrao (2012), who saw that fate or chance is responsible for a character's ruin, acknowledged how Hardy's pessimism was redeemed by his lofty view of human nature. Hardy said in January 1918 that he could not accede to the label 'optimist' if it meant 'to blind the eyes to the real malady, and use empirical panaceas to suppress the symptoms' (Hands & Esbester, 1965, p.383). Hardy explained this in the context of how his motto is to diagnose the 'human ills' and then find a 'remedy' for them rather than the use of 'panaceas to suppress' the ills.

Wordsworth writes about the reasons for depicting 'low and rustic life' in his poems: 'because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint and speak a plainer and more emphatic language' (Pinion, 1995, p.40). In 'Fellow-Townsmen' and 'An Imaginative Woman', the narrative voice used by Hardy invites the reader to overcome life's circumstances (which seem fated by social convention and religious dogma) through the use of personal choice by pointing to the tragedy and loss of faith experienced by the characters. Rather than a conventional approach of labelling 'Fellow-Townsmen' and 'An Imaginative Woman' as pessimistic short stories, this paper seeks to explore the complexity of the character's experiences which in turn point to the complexity of the human mind suggesting a dynamic interplay of the forces that shape our actions and desires. In an interview in 1901 with his friend William Archer, Hardy pointed to the complexity of the human mind:

'The human mind is a sort of palimpsest, I suppose, and it is hard to say what records may not lurk in it.' (Gibson, 1975, p.66).

The terms 'palimpsest' and 'records' suggest the mind as a text, to be read and deciphered like a book. This represents a kind of starting point for thinking about the human person: the unknowability of all of our hopes and passions, suggesting a dynamic interplay of forces that shape our actions and desires. By recognising the complexity of human experience and its complex sources, Hardy is offering an alternative to thinking about the constrictions of his society, an escape from the tragic lives his characters lived (thinking that their circumstances are fated on them), encouraging his readers to explore the boundless variations of human existence, highlighting the power of choice. Looking forward from our contemporary moment, Hardy's work might help the modern reader confront the challenges of the new Millennium, specially the question of loss of faith continues to define our period, albeit in more complex ways than in Hardy's time.

<sup>3</sup>'For Conscience's Sake' was published in the *Fortnightly Review* (March 1891) and collected in *Life's Little Ironies*. It was also written during the same period as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

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