

1996

Thomas Hardy's Female Characters

Bernadette J. Fox

Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/amaranthus>

Recommended Citation

Fox, Bernadette J. (1996) "Thomas Hardy's Female Characters," *Amaranthus*: Vol. 1996: Iss. 1, Article 9.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/amaranthus/vol1996/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Amaranthus by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Bernadette J. Fox *Thomas Hardy's Female Characters*

In the course of his writing, Thomas Hardy presented his readers with many female characters. While he gave these characters differing personalities, they all thought and acted in a manner which I found believable. Hardy was able to write well from the perspective of a female. To some extent, I think Hardy comments on the nature of women in the dialogue which he writes in his short stories and in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. What is unique about this aspect of his writing is that, unlike many of his contemporaries, Hardy does not seek to find fault with his heroines or with women in general. In fact, Hardy is ahead of his peers because he is one of the first writers to take issue with the double standard which has been imposed upon the genders for centuries.

However, one thing which troubled me as I read *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* was the fact that Tess does not spend much time mourning her son once he is buried. While she baptizes Sorrow herself and asks that he be granted a Christian burial, there is little mention of him once he is laid to rest. The fact that Tess leaves the church over the denial of a Christian burial for her son is certainly significant. However, I am surprised that Sorrow is not in Tess's thoughts more often. The book says that Tess had wished that she and her son would both die rather than face a life of disgrace. Given this fact, I am surprised that Hardy did not focus more on Tess's feelings regarding this specific loss in her life. Perhaps Hardy was trying to paint Tess as being numb or in denial over the death of her baby. Or maybe Hardy was commenting on the fact that during the time period and in the society in which this story takes place, a child who was born as the result of a rape or out of wedlock was nothing more than a product of conception. Personhood was reserved for those babies whose conception had been planned by a married couple. I think that Hardy could see that these standards were very discriminatory. Still, given the fact that many women grieve deeply for an aborted, miscarried, or stillborn child, I think that Tess's sense of loss should have been more extensively developed.

The scene when Tess baptizes Sorrow really struck me because it reminded me of my mother. Between the time I was one and four years old, my mom suffered three miscarriages. Since she lost the babies within the first couple months of pregnancy, there were no bodies to bury. My mother miscarried a fourth pregnancy when I was ten. The body of this pre-born child was buried under a tree in our garden. The question of what has become of the souls of these siblings of mine has been an ongoing issue of concern for my mother. As a Catholic, my mom is worried that because they were not baptized, their souls must remain in a state of limbo for all of eternity. My dad says that since he and my mom would have had these children baptized had they been born at a later stage of development, they are saved through intent.

Many times, my own thoughts focus on my unborn siblings. I think of my living sister and my two brothers, and I imagine how my life would be different without any one of them. Then I wonder about my other brothers and sisters. What kind of people might they have been? Who would they have looked like? What sort of aptitudes and interests would they have had? Too often, I think people forget that every miscarried, stillborn, and aborted fetus is a potential human being. As one of my mother's friends put it, "Every conceived child is a part of eternity, whether or not he or she is ever born." I think this statement is important because human beings are not interchangeable. Every person is unique. That is why it upsets me when people think that a woman can erase the memory of a lost child by having another one. It just doesn't work that way.

I think that in the last ten years or so, our society has finally realized that it is normal to grieve over a lost child. In many hospitals, parents are encouraged to hold their stillborn infants and say good-bye. The babies are dressed in infant clothes and photographed so that the parents can have a memento of their child. Support groups exist which allow women who have miscarried or are suffering from post-abortion syndrome to hold memorial services for their lost babies.

Hardy was very successful at telling a story from a woman's point of view. He was able to capture a feminine perspective in much of his writing. However, I feel that for some reason, the emotions did not ring clearly in his writing on this topic.

Judith Boogaart *3 July 1995*

That blubber-cheeked,
moon-faced, big-bellied lecher
came waddling
around my house today.
I was prepared
for a grim, gaunt,
sepulchrous wraith,
not this bloated life-gulper,
death, staring in at me.
Intending to ramrod myself
with calm dignity
against the pain of loss,
instead I scrambled awkwardly,
slamming doors, sliding windows,
locking, bolting, frantically
drawing the curtains
to keep that awful grin
from stripping me naked,
leaving a huddle of dirt
and shame and fright.
In the end,
there was a door
with no lock
and the sound of fat,
flaccid feet slap-slapping
up my back stairs.

--for my father, Albert Mannes
4-30-16 to 7-3-95