

CHAPTER II

THE SYNCHRONY OF EDUCATION IN FICTIONAL AND REAL WORLD

I thought to myself: 'They may laugh at me for my ignorance; but that was father's fault, and none o'my making, and I must bear it. But they shall never laugh at my children, if I have any: I'll starve first!' Thank God I've been able to keep her at school at the figure of near a hundred a year; and her scholarship is such that she had stayed on as governess for a time. Let 'em laugh now if they can: Mrs. Charmond herself is not better informed than my girl Grace. --Thomas Hardy, The Woodlanders (27)

So boasts Mr. Melbury, recounting his sad childhood memories to explain his determination in educating his daughter Grace Melbury well. In order to prevent his daughter from being humiliated for her ignorance, the timber merchant spends a fortune on his child's education. Mr. Melbury is not alone in his preoccupation with education. His concern is shared with a lot of other characters in Thomas Hardy's novels as well as with people living in the Victorian age. As Johnson noted: "the education of the poor was one of the strongest of early Victorian obsessions" (Johnson 2). From the early 1830s to the end of the nineteenth century, education for the lower-class persisted as a top concern in British society: discussions, legalization, and enforcement of policies related to extending universal elementary education to the poor never ceased. Thomas Hardy, a novelist who witnessed the reforms and social changes of the time, presented in his novels diverse characters from different classes and their various experiences with education: there are lucky students such as Clym Yeobright and Grace Melbury, who are sponsored to get an upper/middle education and an opportunity of class ascent; hard working autodidacts such as Gabriel Oak and Jude Fawley who read extensively beyond their limited schooling in hopes of making a better living; and ambitious parents such as Mr. Melbury and Michael Henchard, who wish to cultivate their daughters into upper class ladies through education. Every character highlights a different aspect of Hardy's views on education, as well as an insight into the nineteenth century educational system. The most comprehensive work so far in analyzing the theme of education in Hardy's novels is Jane Mattisson's book *Knowledge and Survival in the Novels of Thomas Hardy*. Examining Hardy's

fourteen novels, ranging from his early works such as *Desperate Remedies* and *Under the Greenwood Tree* to the late ones *The Well-Beloved* and *Jude the Obscure*, Mattisson tackles the complexity of the multi-faced theme of education in Hardy's novels. Applying historical and sociological theories to analyzing the texts, Mattisson categorizes characters in Hardy's novels into three groups according to their social class and educational background—group one is lower-class laborers referred to as “the rustics,” group two is lower-middle class people with limited education, and group three is upper-middle class people who have a higher social position than the rest of the society because of their education and social connections.

Most other existing studies focus on one or two novels, drawing partial conclusions that may not apply to other novels of Hardy, and sometimes they contradict one another. One of the most important aspects of Hardy's exploration of education is the potential of education to bring social mobility. Focusing on Hardy's later novels *The Woodlanders* and *Jude the Obscure*, Keith Jones sees Hardy's novels as a social critique of nineteenth century liberal educational reformers' claim that education in the nineteenth century served as a means of individual improvement and social mobility. Analyzing the failure of Grace, Jude, Sue, and Phillotson in their attempts at self-improvement and class ascent through education, Jones concludes that education is useless in improving the lives of lower-class people and lifting their social status:

Education increases knowledge or perception, but does not alter character; by changing consciousness, education creates or exacerbates feelings of alienation, lifting a character out of traditional identity, but not into a new, comprehensible or practicable one. Education fails as an agent of improvement, and of social mobility in these novels, and this failure contradicts the frequent liberal nineteenth-century claim (made, for example, by Jeremy Bentham, James Mill, and others) that education, by promoting individual improvement, could lead to overall social improvement.

This argument accurately identifies the cultural disturbance and socio-economic disadvantages that lower-class people face when they try to lift their education.

In *Far From the Madding Crowd*, education also has little beneficial effect on the survival of inhabitants. While Troy's education only makes him an irresponsible and unsuccessful farmer and lover, Bathsheba's education gives

her more vanity than real benefit. When Gabriel Oak first proposes to marry her, she refuses because she feels that she is better educated than him:

“you are better off than I. I have hardly a penny in the world—I am staying with my aunt for my bare sustenance. I am better educated than you –and I don’t love you a bit: that’s my side of the case” (Far 16).

From Bathsheba’s perspective, she should marry a man better than Gabriel, despite his wealth and love, because she is well-educated. As the plot reveals, Bathsheba’s education does not help her either in marriage or in her career. She suffers from her marriage to Troy, and cannot manage the farm on her own without relying on Oak, who, though not as well educated, knows more about farming. Although the rural world in the two novels is highly resistant against urban civilization and educational models aimed at class ascent, it allows for education that is targeted at the survival of rural laborers within the social environment of lower-class communities. Through the case of Gabriel Oak, Hardy shows that there are possible ways for lower-class people to live a better life through an education that combines national school education with a set of skills and moral education which are essential to survival within the rural community. In *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Hardy presents Gabriel Oak as the model of an educated lower-class man who thrives in rural society and beats his higher-class competitors in love. Oak is a shepherd’s son. Beyond his national school education, which only teaches reading, writing, and some basic arithmetic, Oak reads extensively. In the novel, Hardy lists the books Oak chooses for himself to read:

“The Young Man’s Best Companion, The Farrier’s Sure Guide, The Veterinary Surgeon, Paradise Lost, The Pilgrim’s Progress, Robinson Crusoe, Ash’s Dictionary, and Walkingame’s Arithmetic”(Far 33).

This book list, although not comprehensive, contains several important types of knowledge crucial to the survival of the lower class in rural society: there are practical books about his profession such as *The Farrier’s Sure Guide* and *The Veterinary Surgeon*, books related to social conventions and religions such as *The Young Man’s Best Companion* and *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, literary works featuring radical masculine protagonists such as *Paradise Lost* and *Robinson Crusoe*, and reference books such as *Ash’s Dictionary* and *Walkingame’s Arithmetic*. As Hardy describes, the books constitute an important core of Oak’s education because Oak “had acquired more sound information by diligent

perusal than many a man of opportunities has done from a furlong of laden shelves” (33).

As a result, these books instill in Oak merits that distinguish him not only from his lower-class peers, but also from educated people of higher social standing. As one of the three suitors for Bathsheba, Oak beats his higher-class competitors, Troy and Boldwood, with his professional skills and balanced morality. As an expert shepherd and farmer, Oak is the biggest help for Bathsheba managing her farm and saving her stock: as an expert vet, Oak is the only one in the neighborhood who can save Bathsheba’s sheep when they get ill (Chapter 21), and the only one who thinks about Bathsheba’s wheat stacks and helps her thatching in the storm. In this way, the professional skills Oak obtained from his education enabled him to make a good living above the average rural lower-class, and support Bathsheba’s farming.

In contrast, characters who receive more formal education lack training in practical skills, and can hardly support a family without inherited wealth. Troy, for instance, is a soldier who receives his education from Casterbridge Grammar School. Grammar schools of the time, according to historical studies and also suggested by the novel, typically offer an education covering Latin and Greek classics, modern languages, arithmetic and literature (Gillard 2). Lacking a solid base of moral education and professional training, this education encourages Troy to become a frivolous young man without any sense of responsibility and means to make a living.

By presenting Oak’s booklist and success, Hardy illustrates a beneficial education for the lower-class in the rural setting: an education that combines moral education and professional training, helping the lower-class to thrive in their social environment rather than fitting them into other social groups. Rural education should contain the practical skills that give the lower-class means to make a living, and the balanced moral education that instills traditional virtues as well as contemporary wisdom. It is noticeable, however, that the benefit of such education is stringently constrained within the social group of rural laborers. In other words, Oak’s success, or the success of Oak’s education, is heavily dependent upon the cultural resistance of the rural community which supports the survival of rural laborers. Regardless of education, Boumelha discusses Oak’s success as a result of the victory of a highly protective, stable rural society over the intrusion of outside culture—“a kind of sexual pastoral, in which the unshowy virtues of the hero represent the timeless qualities of a

stable rural society in the heart of nature, disrupted by the influence of city-dwellers and outsiders who bring with them inappropriate ideas, aspirations, and values threatening the survival of the locality". In the case of Oak, he can only benefit from his education and survive well as long as he remains a shepherd in *Weatherbury*. Once he aspires to lift his social class, become someone other than a shepherd or move to a city, he would only end up in failure and misery. In fact, before Oak moves to *Weatherbury*, he has tried to become a farm owner, and to find a job in the city of *Casterbridge*, and failed in both attempts. The social and cultural environment of the rural communities, therefore, only allow for lower-class men to be educated within their social group, and any education that attempts to bring urban culture or class mobility results in failure and tragedy.

The *Problem of Universal Education in the Early Stage* published in the first decade after the enactment of the 1871 Education Act which first made elementary education compulsory, *The Return of the Native* and *Far From the Madding Crowd* reflect on the difficulties of the early stage of universal education. In Hardy's novels, the major problem at this stage is the vast, wild, isolated, and stagnant rural world. The mass ignorant rural population does not welcome urban civilization, which in fact cannot bring them many benefits for their survival, or much possibility of class ascent. The education that benefits the rural population, which gives them practical skills and balanced morality, only helps them live a better life while staying in their original social context. Well-educated people in the community only survive the environment when they conform to the rural community and give up whatever kind of life or hope was enabled by their education, including bringing education to the rural world. Despite the national effort of educating the rural world, it was still unchanged and ignorant.

Corresponding to the different historical context, characters in Hardy's 1880s novels show entirely different attitudes towards education compared to those in *The Return of the Native* and *Far From the Madding Crowd*. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *The Woodlanders*, lower-class characters recognize the value of education: they see it as a route to make a better life, respect people who are well-educated, and worry about not having enough education. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is a novel set in the 1840s. Although Hardy notes in Chapter 1 that the story starts "before the nineteenth century has reached one-third of its span," scholars agree that the main part of the story is set in the 1840s with the social

structure and features mirroring the Dorchester of Hardy's childhood memories (*The Mayor* 5). In a critical introduction to this novel, Dale Kramer discusses the setting of this novel in detail:

The novel is principally set, however, in the Casterbridge of the late 1840s, a thinly disguised re-creation of the Dorchester of Hardy's childhood...A similar complexity and resistance to categorization lie at the heart of the novel's representation of Victorian society, not only the late 1840s of its primary setting but also by implication the mid-1880s of its first publication. (xiii-xvi)

This historical setting of the novel bears significant implications in our discussion. The 1840s were a time of drastic social and cultural change, from Hardy's perspective in the 1880s. As Kramer notes, Hardy repeatedly refers to Casterbridge as an "old fashioned" place. Casterbridge is depicted as a town isolated, traditional, and lagging behind its time. Yet unlike Egdon Heath and Weatherbury, which powerfully maintained their traditions despite the outside changing world, Casterbridge is open to changes brought about by modern influence.

Hardy presents in *The Mayor* and *The Woodlanders* an inevitably modernizing world where people, whether in cities or remote rural areas, start to recognize the importance of education and the life-changing opportunities it may offer. However, he also reveals the barriers people face when they try to climb the social ladder through education. In entirely closed rural communities that are resistant to modern influence like Egdon Heath, rural laborers can, through national elementary education and some level of self-learning, become experts in a rural trade and make a better living than their less educated counterparts, and sometimes even better than educated ones. When modernity starts to permeate and dominate the society, as in Casterbridge and Little Hintock, people coming from rural lower-class families are disadvantaged despite the new educational opportunities available to them. The first immediate drawback is the limitation and inferiority of the elementary education available to lower-class people.

Crisis in The Face of the Civilized, Modern World

As an historian studying the period concludes, "in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century there was much debate about the extent to which elementary schools could provide an adequate education for the more able children" (qtd. in Gillard 3). As more children received elementary education for extended years,

some of them showed talents for and interest in levels of education beyond the rudimentary education provided by elementary schools. For young people who passed Standard VII and wanted more education, “higher grade schools” were created in the 1880s. These higher grade schools received young people of 15-16 years old, usually children of farmers and manual workers, and provided a wider range of curricular offerings such as Latin, science, mathematics, and drawing. Secondary schools, established in earlier decades for middle/upper-class children, also began to accept students from the lower-classes. According to the Crowther Report by Her Majesty’s Stationery Office in 1959, a survey conducted in 1894 of secondary schools in seven counties of England showed that a quarter of students in secondary schools graduated from public elementary schools (qtd. in Gillard 3). Yet, this figure does not mean that it was easy for a lower-class student graduating from elementary school to get into a secondary school, given the huge population of public-school students. As also shown in the survey, only four or five in 1,000 public schools students could pass on to secondary schools (qtd. in Gillard 3). As for higher education, the chance for public-school graduates to get into a university is even slighter. According to the survey, of all 4,200 undergraduate students in Cambridge and Oxford in 1894, only 2% had studied in public elementary schools. As Crowther comments, the “door was not closed on a poor boy of talent, but it was not open very far” (qtd. in Gillard 3). The 1890s, when the last two novels *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1892) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895) were written and published, is a time marked by a well established universal elementary education system and the emergence of a group of educated lower-class young people seeking opportunities for higher education and other things that were once not thinkable for their class. Lower-class scholars in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* Corresponding to progress in the development of the universal elementary education system, lower-class characters in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* are better educated, having more educational resources to learn and know about the modern world. In *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, the protagonist Tess is an educated girl coming from a poor peasant family, whereas in earlier novels, the educated female characters all come from rich middle-class families who have paid for their expensive education or supported their self-study: Eustacia is a granddaughter of a captain who sends her to a boarding school, Bathsheba a farm owner’s heir, Elizabeth-Jane the stepdaughter of the genteel grain-merchant and mayor, and Grace a well-off timber merchant’s daughter. These female characters are economically

dependent on their familial wealth and capital, and the education they receive aims to cultivate them into fine ladies rather than giving them the means to make a living on their own. Before the late 1870s, women's education largely served this purpose.

Conclusion

we see the continuity and changes in Hardy's representation of the education of his time: different problems facing educational reformers and constituents arose at different stages of national educational reform, lower class people struggled hard to secure a place in the modernizing world with their limited education, yet hope also survived for generational progress and increased opportunities for the lower class. From this study we get a glimpse of how social development and policy reforms shaped people's lives as represented in literature, in this specific case how nineteenth century educational reforms affected Hardy's representation of education and lower-class people's lives. We must bear in mind, however, that this relationship between social development and literature, as well as Hardy's representation of education in the nineteenth century, is highly subjective—it is no more than a personal reflection on the time during which Hardy lived constrained by his experience, knowledge, and class. Many scholars have commented on this subjectivity, yet they have not reached any comprehensive conclusion about it. Sheila Cordner, for instance, suggests that Hardy's lack of formal higher education enables him to view the educational system as an outsider, offering insights that distinguish him from Oxbridge-educated authors and educators:

The shortcomings within Jude, Stephen, and Angel reflect British society's intolerance of their educational path. Hardy's self-education helped him question from an outsider's perspective pedagogical practices that went unchallenged by many educational reformers. At a crucial moment in the history of education in Britain, he explores what it would mean for British society to 'do without Cambridge.' (Cordner 79)