THE SUPERNATURAL AND THE FANTASTIC IN THOMAS HARDY’S *THE WITHERED ARM*

KAUSHIK HAZARIKA

Hardy employed the supernatural and the fantastic in works of prose and poetry throughout his long career. Hardy was not alone in this impulse; many other late nineteenth-century authors turned to fantasy. Jack Sullivan has shown that the "ghost stories" of Lawrence, Joyce, Conrad, Hardy, and Woolf further exploit definitive trends in their "major" fiction: "the fascination with darkness and irrationality, the focus on unorthodox states of consciousness and perception, the projection of apocalypse and chaos, and above all the preoccupation with timeless 'moments' and 'visions' ". Certainly in "The Withered Arm," as well as in other stories of rather a weird nature, Hardy was able to allow his imagination freer rein than he could in his more realistic narratives. During an interview with William Archer, Hardy expressed, "when I was a younger man, I would cheerfully have given ten years of my life to see a ghost, - an authentic, indubitable spectre". Because of the superstitious influence of his upbringing and his own desire to believe, elements of weirdness, superstition, and magic play an interesting role in Hardy's works. Specifically, Hardy incorporated aspects of superstition and witchcraft into his writings. Such elements provide the reader with an understanding of how Hardy perceived his world. In the daily journal notes or observations which make up much of Florence Emily Hardy's biography, Hardy frequently recorded anecdotes which dealt with superstitions, folk magic and witchcraft, and the bizarre."Instances of the unusual in any form were the staple of local journalism and gossip, and Hardy noted with care instances that appealed to him"(O'Sullivan 98). The use of supernatural elements comes as a protest against the excesses of realism and rationalism in literature. Hardy used these supernatural elements occasionally in minor ways in his novels, but in some of his stories the "exceptional" elements are central to the action. In "The Withered Arm," which he described to William Blackwood as a short story "of rather a weird nature" (Purdy, I. 168), Hardy uses the fantastic as a means of avoiding the domestic, and essentially bourgeois ideology of social realism. "The Withered Arm" begins,
quite realistically, with a chapter entitled "A Lorn Milkmaid," and its setting is a dairy farm. By the end of this opening chapter, we deduce that Rhoda Brook, the "thin, fading woman of thirty" (56), and the newly-married Farmer Lodge have been the protagonists of a drama played out twelve years before. Thus "The Withered Arm" begins in the shadow of an earlier untold but implied story of sexual initiation and its biological consequences as Rhoda remains on the Lodge farm to raise her illegitimate son. She is introduced as a "thin, fading woman" who performs her milking "somewhat apart from the rest" (56). And when she finishes her work and is joined by her son, we note the separation between this domestic unit and the rest of the farm community: "Their course lay apart from that of the others, to a lonely spot high above the water-meads, and not far from the border of Egdon Heath" (57). Their living conditions are harsh. Hardy evokes the meagerness of their existence in his description of their cottage roof: "in the thatch above a rafter showed like a bone protruding through the skin" (57). Despite the turbulence of their past, Rhoda and Lodge seem to have come to a silent understanding. Though her son clearly knows the identity of his father, Rhoda stoically, and a bit proudly, acknowledges no personal connection to Lodge. The story's second chapter, entitled "The Young Wife," makes explicit the juxtaposition between "The Lorn Milkmaid" and the newcomer which had been implicit in the milkers' gossip.4 Gertrude Lodge is the physical and social antithesis of Rhoda. Her complexion is "soft and evanescent, like the light under a heap of rose-petals" (58). While Rhoda is tall with dark eyes and hair, the young wife is small and blue-eyed with light hair. Her refined manners and silk dress clearly indicate that she is a lady, which makes her an object of jealousy for Rhoda. By the end of this second chapter, Rhoda is able, without ever having laid eyes on Gertrude, to "raise a mental image of the unconscious Mrs Lodge that was realistic as a photograph" (61), from the descriptions reported to her by her son. With the conspiracy of silence among Rhoda, Lodge, and the community disturbed by Gertrude's arrival, we are prepared for some sort of eruption, or rather disruption of social and domestic order. That disruption comes, however, not in a physical confrontation between "the supplanted woman" and the new wife, but rather in Rhoda's disturbingly realistic vision. Sitting over the 'turf ashes' Rhoda 'contemplated so intently the new wife' that she produces an exact mental picture of her. Rhoda then retires to bed, and as a result of this long contemplation Gertrude visited the supplanted woman in her dreams. Hardy suggests that this was more than a dream because he states, 'since her assertion that she really saw, before falling asleep, was not to be believed'. However, this apparition is no longer innocent, angelic, nor modest, but distorted, and wrinkled as by age. She sits upon Rhoda's chest as she lies in bed, almost suffocating her with pressure. Rhoda's paranormal ritual has called up an 'incubus' which 'still regarding her withdrew to the foot of the bed, only, however, to come forward by degrees, resume her seat, and flash her left hand as before showing her wedding ring. A struggle ensues during which Rhoda 'seized the confronting spectre by its obtrusive left arm, and whirled it backward to the floor. So vivid is the whole thing that Rhoda exclaims, 'that was not a dream - she was here!' at which point the
incubus vanishes. The following day Rhoda still retained the feel of the arm. The physical aftermath of this "dream," i.e., the bruising and subsequent withering of Gertrude's arm, is of course inexplicable in natural terms. Hardy manages to evoke the utterly destructive power of repressed anger, desire, and envy without positing a clear cause and effect relationship between Rhoda's vision and Gertrude's affliction. One peculiar side-effect of the vision and its aftermath is Rhoda's confusion not only about the nature of her dream, but about her own nature as well. She too is bewildered by the temporal connection between her nightmarish vision and the shooting pain in Gertrude's arm, but her anxiety leads her to doubt her very humanity, if she is a witch as suspected by other village folks. This questioning of self is related to Rosemary Jackson's view of the fantastic as a literature of subversion. Such literature, she contends, "moves towards a dismantling of the 'real', most particularly of the concept of 'character' and its ideological assumptions, mocking and parodying a blind faith in psychological coherence and in the value of sublimation as a 'civilizing' activity" (175-6).

This story is profound on a number of levels. For a start it probes Gertrude's character and shows, perhaps subconsciously, that she is egotistical, gloating, and vindictive. The colour of her eyes and her mocking gestures betray this. Yes, Gertrude is quite different from the reader's initial impression of her. It further implies that lurking within certain individuals are paranormal powers, and aspects of the personality that one is unaware of. Such powers may be released by the right stimulus. The stimulus in this case is the projection of Rhoda's bitterness into the lower part of Gertrude's nature. The story at the same time seems to contain a strange paradox. At one level of interpretation Gertrude is a victim of Rhoda's jealousy; at another level, she herself is the witch. Gertrude by unwittingly displacing Rhoda, and disinheriting Rhoda's son, arouses strong, hostile emotions. The whole thing occurs in a framework of one individual acting consciously or unconsciously upon another. Such events results in setting in motion a whole chain of events with malign repercussions throughout the story.

The second half of the story details the aftermath of Rhoda's vision as it affects Gertrude. Rhoda's vision has had the ultimate effect of denying to Gertrude and Lodge the biological bond of parenthood which she and her former lover share, besides leaving her arm disfigured. The coincidence upon which the story's second crisis hinges- i.e., that the "innocent person" hanged is Rhoda Brooks' son-is one of those "satires of circumstance" which we expect to find in Hardy's works. But given the power of Rhoda's "mind over matter," we cannot escape the haunting sense that Gertrude's perverted prayer has been answered. Gertrude herself has "a curious creeping feeling that the condemned wretch's destiny was becoming interwoven with her own" (76). Once again, Hardy creates "something visionary out of Victorian coincidence by juxtaposing the fantastic and the everyday" (Guerard, 4). We are forced to consider both natural and supernatural explanations for a strange event. By the story's end, Gertrude has in effect become the threatening figure of Rhoda's vision. "This is the meaning of what Satan showed me
in the vision! You are like her at last! The "dream" of six years before becomes reality when Rhoda, "clutching the bare arm of the younger woman," flings her against the wall (80).

Hardy gave himself more than creative liberty, however, when he chose the fantastic mode for "The Withered Arm." Because of its "nonrealism," Hardy could present a more subversive portrait of fallen womanhood than he had yet dared. Rather than upholding Victorian morality, "The Withered Arm" is perhaps Hardy's most scathing indictment of the sexual hypocrisy of his culture. Hardy's sympathies lay unequivocally with the seduced or "ruined" woman. While the sexually initiated or sexually threatening women of his major novels (such as Fanny Robin, Eustacia Vye, and of course, Tess) meet tragic ends, Rhoda Brook endures while all around her (including the partner of her "fall") die. As if to indicate that this story will be a departure from the traditional tale of the betrayed maiden, Hardy relegates the male figure in this sexual triangle to the backgrounds. "The Withered Arm" demonstrates Hardy's understanding and interest in the ways in which sexual betrayal could haunt the relationships between not only lovers, but husband and wife, parent and child, and woman and woman. Commenting upon the disturbing nature of supernatural fiction, Sullivan notes that the supernatural exists "as an unaccountably destructive force which makes its own rules and chooses its own victims. The victim is often anonymous, almost never deserving the consequences that befall" (130). In "The Withered Arm," both "named" victims, i.e., Rhoda and Gertrude, share some responsibility for the suffering they cause-Rhoda because of her intense jealousy and "sense of triumph" over her rival, and Gertrude because of her demonic longing for the death of some "guilty or innocent" person-and thus can be said to merit a portion of the anguish they suffer. But the "unnamed" victim, i.e., the illegitimate son of Rhoda and Lodge, takes no willing part in the psycho-sexual battle going on between the story's three adults. As he has done in many other works, Hardy illustrates how the sins of the fathers (and mothers) may be visited upon the children.

Central within the structure of the story is another ‘unreal’ character called conjuror Trendle. Trendle is a Conjurer in the true sense of the word. He is not a person practicing tricks or sleight of hand, but a true magician who works with paranormal power. He is intrinsic to the plot as it is the two meetings that Gertrude has with him that brings in the transitions and changes the course of the story. At the first instance it is with the magic of the egg that he recognizes Rhoda’s ‘overlooking’ as the cause of Gertrude’s affliction, while in the second it is he again who leads Gertrude to her final visit to the hangman. The power invested in this figure of the conjuror comprising of village folklore and supernatural element is immense, which points out to Hardy’s own conception and belief on these fantastical elements.

Not long after Hardy's death, this type of story became unfashionable even among the general reading public. More sophisticated, urban audiences turned away from an interest in folktales, peasant superstitions, and odd rural traditions recounted at a leisurely pace. Thus, both the
subject and the form of these tales of the strange and unusual were rejected. It is Hardy's explorations of the supernatural or preternatural world of the "exceptional," obviously enjoyed by readers in Hardy's day, that are most often misunderstood by later critics. A few modern readers and critics accepted, with reservations, Hardy's predilection for hinting at the supernatural and occult. Hardy's artistic philosophy of exploring both the exceptional and the non-exceptional domains thus created the situation that he was out-of-step with the times one way or the other. His own contemporaries enjoyed strikingly unusual tales, but shied away from too much blunt realism in the depiction of the ordinary relationships of men and women. However, perhaps we have come full circle. Once again, with the advent of cultural criticism, the kinds of folk material Hardy collected in his journals are considered valuable aesthetic products. Literary works such as Hardy's tales of the supernatural, which represent a popular form of the genre, can be examined as aspects of "popular culture." However, more importantly, we can now recognize the need to probe the historical context out of which Hardy's stories grew and his adjustment of things unusual with things universal that was to be the key to his art.

WORKS CITED:


