

“To Circle Round One Centre of Pain”:
Oscar Wilde, Thomas Hardy and the Human Condition

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1. Introduction

Oscar Wilde and Thomas Hardy are not writers that are traditionally, or indeed easily, grouped together. At first glance, the prose styles of Wilde and Hardy would appear to have little in common. Wilde’s aestheticism and social satire, modelled as it was on the rhetorical traditions of Swift, Pope and Moliere, appears to the casual critic worlds away from the austere, pessimistic, stoically late-Victorian tragedies of Thomas Hardy. Whilst both reached the literary and financial zeniths of their careers at almost exactly the same time, and both were similarly fêted as great literary men of letters in fashionable London society, they moved in different literary circles. However, these circles sometimes overlapped, and they did meet several times; according to Hardy’s autobiography *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy*, Hardy met Wilde in 1886 at the house of a mutual acquaintance (239). They had also met three years before in September 1883, when Wilde lectured at the Town Hall in Hardy’s hometown of Dorchester on “The House Beautiful.” Wilde advised an audience — including Hardy — that “Furniture should be Queen Anne, and stoves should be Dutch Porcelain” (Tomalin 261) and that floors should be covered by “tiles rather than a carpet” (261). The two men met privately after the talk had

ended, but, whilst Hardy moved into his new self-designed house at Max Gate shortly afterwards in 1885, Tomalin notes that “the hall floor was of polished wood” (261) rather than tiled. It should be noted that Max Gate was constructed out of brick in Queen Anne architectural style, yet nevertheless there is scant evidence of Queen Anne furniture or Dutch Porcelain having been used for decorative purposes inside. Hardy may thus have been largely unmoved by Wilde’s advice on interior design, but did attend a performance at the Literary Theatre Society of Wilde’s *Salome* with the poet Arthur Symons (Gibson 65) in 1906. Subsequently, he criticized “the play’s weakness — that Herod swears his oath to Salome before she has danced, and not — as in the Bible, after” (65). Wilde had, of course, passed away at this point, and was presumably beyond caring about such niggardly attacks.

Such connections aside, whilst there is thus no clearly acknowledged deep link between Wilde and Hardy, both writers enjoyed their greatest commercial and financial success during the early 1890s, and their influence jointly lingers on strongly into the present. A quick glance inside the *Oxford Book of Quotations*, for example, reveals a large number of entries from both men. Yet it might be interesting for one to also question what such quotations can reveal about Wilde and Hardy, their similarities and their differences, their literary styles and aesthetic opinions. Perhaps the first question that one might ask is whether it is actually as straightforward to distinguish between them as it might at first seem. It appears that certain Wilde quotations could be mistaken for Hardy’s and vice versa; indeed, Hardy constructed an aphorism of his own when mocking Wilde’s wit as relying “on a formula by which he took a well-known saying and distorted it to make it shocking, ‘Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today’ becoming ‘Always put off till tomorrow what you can do today’”

(Tomalin 260). Furthermore, the literary output of both writers also exhibited certain similarities, and, in thematic terms, the works of both address ideas which, although expressed differently, actually complement each other dyadically. Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Hardy's *The Well-Beloved* focused on the theme of the self-obsessed aesthete, and the long-term consequences that one incurs when striving after an idea. Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* addressed the act of falling in love in terms of how this process ultimately engenders self-realization. Finally, Wilde in *Salome* and Hardy in *The Return of the Native* dissected the idea of death as a narrative event. In this way, both writers explored fundamental elements of the human experience in terms of its singular and ever-decreasing circular condition, from aestheticism to self-realization, and finally, mortality and death. Both writers' works can thus be read in terms of Wilde's definition of the human condition in *De Profundis* as seeming "to circle round one centre of pain" (1). This discussion will examine and compare Wilde and Hardy's similar treatment of these same three stages, and in particular how the nature of the aesthetic creative experience is expressed in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Well-Beloved*. In order to examine how Wilde and Hardy represent these similar elements, however, and indeed to further dissect exactly how and why they share a subtle literary commonality, this discussion will first consider and address the historical milieu in which such ideas on art and aestheticism were founded.

2. Moralism vs. Aestheticism

The aestheticism and social satire of Wilde and the pessimism and tragic output of Hardy can perhaps best be seen as archetypal responses to the religious scepticism and doubt that punctuate the

late Victorian era. Such questioning was underpinned by a number of seminal works that appeared during the nineteenth century; writers such as David Friedrich Strauss in *The Life of Jesus* (1835) and Baden Powell in *Essays and Reviews* (1860) produced texts that challenged the Bible’s pretensions to divine authority, and Charles Darwin’s 1859 *On The Origin of the Species* provided a more radical perspective that brought this doubt into much sharper focus. This more dramatically accentuated the culture of scientific questioning put in place by Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1830-33), powerfully undermining the Biblical conception of the natural landscape and its flora and fauna as having been created by God. While these scientific moments had direct implications for theology, they also complimented movements within industry that were already taking place during the Victorian period. By the mid-point of the nineteenth century, work had become a sanctified term within the Victorian lexicon, elevated, as Altick contends, “into a virtual eleventh commandment by Carlyle” (168), who, in *Sartor Resartus* (1836) cried “Produce! Produce!...Were it but the pitifullest infinitesimal fraction of a Product, produce it in God’s name!” (qtd. in Altick 168). This added further impetus to the doctrine of work, and also chimed with the Victorian can-do credo of Samuel Smiles’ *Self Help*. Smiles argued that nature was practically exploitable and should be conquered through industry, with “labour and toil on the way leading to the Elysian Fields” (qtd. in Briggs 124). While the Romantics had depicted inventors and industrialists negatively, bridge construction workers, railways engineers, architects, ship builders and pipeline cable layers began to dominate the natural landscape; the most important words of the times in this regard were, as Briggs notes, “thought,” “work,” and “progress” (9).

In response to the turning wheels of Victorian industry, Matthew Arnold, in *Culture and Anarchy*, claimed that “Faith in machinery”

was the nineteenth century's "besetting danger" due to its lack of "value in and for itself" (96). Instead Arnold attempted to reinforce the worth of high culture, and its role in the "pursuit of perfection" (112). Arnold's atheistic pessimism was thus redirected, inspired by Coleridge's *On the Constitution of Church and State* which had argued for the existence of a "'clerisy,' or what would now be called the intellectual community — the sum of the nation's scholars and artists" (Altick 262-3). Arnold, in *Culture and Anarchy* thus dismissed the aristocracy, the middle classes and the working class, possessing "three distinct terms, Barbarians, Philistines, Populace, to denote roughly the three great classes" (143). Instead he favoured an intellectual elite, or what he termed the remnant; the few men who rose above the restrictions characteristic of their respective classes" (Altick 264). Thus if Arnold was the poet of faith in retreat, he nevertheless held strongly that art and culture should exemplify, in lieu of a religion, those moral codes of the highest order that had previously been the aesthetic preserve of the Christian tradition.

Arnold exerted a towering influence during the latter half of the nineteenth century, with his views on culture affecting writers as seemingly diverse as Wilde and Hardy. Arnold's high cultural tradition was, however, in certain cases met with derision by writers such as Hardy, who originated from outside of his elite circle. Leslie Stephen recommended in 1876 that Hardy turn to Arnold's work (Bjork 257), and, as the documented entries in Hardy's collected literary notebooks illustrate, he read Arnold extensively from this time onwards. The reasons for these extensive entries are unclear but it may, as Bjork contends, "have been the ethical idealism in Arnold's literary criticism that especially appealed to Hardy" (257). Certainly the strong social messages and reformist aspects that underpin Hardy's later, more mature novels such as *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* appear to exemplify an Arnoldian morality. Despite

Hardy’s sympathy for Arnold’s moral view of culture, it was likely his elitism that Hardy criticized in his final novel. In *Jude the Obscure* it is the intellectual class that prevent the gifted but lowly protagonist from rising; Jude Fawley is excluded from studying at Christminster, Hardy’s literary term for Oxford, due to his provincial, or ‘populace’ background. Such criticism of Arnold is documented much more explicitly in *The Early Life*, as Hardy states that “Arnold is wrong about provincialism...A certain provincialism of feeling is invaluable. It is the essence of individuality...without which no great thoughts are thought, no great deeds done” (Florence Hardy 189).

Wilde’s critical response to Arnold was of a different sort. The aesthetic pessimism noted above that permeates *Culture and Anarchy* is rejected implicitly by Sir Henry Wotton in *Dorian* and damned with satirical faint praise by Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist”:

It was reserved for a man of science to show us the supreme example of that ‘sweet reasonableness’ of which Arnold spoke so wisely, and, alas! to so little effect. (“Critic” 134)

This refers to Arnold’s discussion of the moral temper of Jesus from his 1873 *Literature and Dogma* (Blackburn 130). The phrase appears several times in the work and turns into something of a cliché by the end, presented ironically here. It is an example of Horatian satire at work in Wilde, mocking the ineffectuality and contrarian rationalist Spinozism (Honan 364) of Arnoldian rhetoric. Arnold was, as James Livingston notes, well-educated in religious thought and deeply concerned with its representation (17), but also rejected “the supernatural elements in Christianity”, and his critical reception was one in which accusations of his atheism was

foregrounded (Caufield 46). He was a writer who, in Collini's words "manifestly preferred to loll on Parnassus than to crawl up Calvary" (84). Thus, Wilde would have been more than aware of the irony in the phrase. In *Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry serves as a point of departure from amoral aestheticism. What seems most likely is that he embodies a complex mix of admirable detachment, a developed sense of beauty and dubious moral flexibility, becoming, in effect, a *fin de siècle* decadent everyman. He serves as a plot device rather than a fully-developed character, manipulating events without becoming directly involved in them. He is a Mephistopheles in this Faustian narrative. Lord Henry is intended, in this sense, to be censured rather than admired, and one might therefore argue that this offers an implicit support for the kind of moral aesthetic hierarchy which Arnold championed.

While those who followed such ideas as "the late nineteenth-century movement commonly called 'aestheticism'" (Collini 110) claimed to be Arnold's rightful literary descendants, as Collini observes acerbically, "figures as diverse as Walter Pater, [and] Oscar Wilde...could all be seen as having absconded with part of his legacy" (110). Significantly, Walter Pater's aesthetic response to Arnold, whilst linking him to Wilde, also greatly affected the thought and work of Hardy. Therefore, like Arnold, Pater can also be understood as an important joint influence upon the work of Wilde and Hardy. Whilst Hardy didn't meet Pater until 1886, Wilde first encountered the great essayist and critic in the last years of his studies at Magdalen College in 1877. This meeting was no coincidence; Wilde initially sought the latter out, sending him some of his own work (Ellmann 81). At this point, before he was to become the doyen of aestheticians everywhere¹, Pater would likely have been flattered by the attention. Whilst he was well-connected at Oxford, he was far from universally admired. His "Conclusion"

to the *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (originally published in 1873), had led to his public and private censure, due to his apparent support of hedonism, combined with his suspected homosexuality. In fact, Pater was denied an expected proctorship, and this, combined with similar humiliations, seems to have affected him greatly. This was to lead, in some ways, to his taking a more apologetic, cautious tone in the writing which followed. He removed the offending section, and it was not until 1888 that he was perhaps secure enough in his career as an aestheticist to restore the essay in a revised form (Shuter 50-51). Indeed, Michael Levey notes that he came to possess “a staidness and semi-timidty with which he had learned to shroud his true nature” (120).

The “Conclusion” contains, in its earliest version, the following oft-referred to but frequently misunderstood passage:

Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art’s sake has most; for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake. (Qtd. in Levey 96)

Albert Farmer noted as long ago as 1931 that Wilde was to take this philosophy and remove it from what was, for Pater, a moral context. Beauty had to be tempered with “all that is fine, noble and moving in human endeavor” (95). One might argue that Pater possessed an intensity which he was constantly attempting to suppress, whilst Wilde sought intellectual tools for the amplification of his self-image. As has been well documented elsewhere, despite their similarities, Wilde and Pater were not to become the most comfortable of friends. In fact, although Wilde flattered Pater in his reviews of *Imaginary Portraits* and *Appreciations*, and, whilst

he seemed grateful (Letters 109), Pater did not return the favour, attacking *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in terms of its depiction of epicurean philosophy in the form of Lord Henry Wotton (Levey 20). His review was gently sarcastic in places, containing such Wildean paradoxes as “There is always something of an excellent talker about the writing of Mr. Oscar Wilde” (qtd. in Levey 119). Oddly, this idea was paralleled in a comment by Harris in his 1916 biography. The connection between the two is complex and nuanced, but one can perceive perhaps a kind of symbiosis in play, where each inspired the other, although not always in ways that they may admit to or even be grateful for.

Unlike Oscar Wilde, Thomas Hardy was not an aesthete, and, therefore, while a great number of critics have traced the literary connections between Pater and Wilde, Hardy’s debt to Pater is harder to ascertain. Nevertheless, the links between them have not been completely neglected by scholars. Suzanne J. Flynn, for example, notes that Hardy likely encountered Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* around 1876 (95), and Pater’s “philosophy, and even his diction, are especially evident in Hardy’s masterful depiction of Hellenistic and pagan forces in *The Return of the Native*” (Flynn 95). Indeed, when one investigates *The Early Life*, one finds amongst Hardy’s notes fulsome praise for Pater’s erudition, Hardy recollecting after meeting Pater in 1886 that his “manner is that of one carrying weighty ideas without spilling them” (236). Yet perhaps the clearest link between Hardy and Pater can be found in Hardy’s disavowal of realism and naturalism, and his preference for imaginative art. These ideas are explicitly documented in *The Early Life*, where, as Hardy states, “Art is an actual changing of the actual proportions and order of things... which appeals most strongly to the idiosyncrasy of the artist... art is disproportioning... Hence ‘realism’ is not Art” (299). Such ideas

can also be found expressed in his literary works, such as his poetry where the creative power of Hardy’s fantasy frequently conjured ghosts and spirits, or “with magic in my eyes” imagined the Arthurian romance of Lyonesse on a trip to Cornwall. This aesthetic quality or model of artistic perception links Hardy to Pater, but through Pater this also connects his work to Wilde.

Whilst in their works, therefore, Oscar Wilde and Thomas Hardy explored fundamental aspects of the human condition, they did so through aesthetic creativity, and not realism. Hardy in *The Early Life*, while conceding “a going to nature”, maintained that his art was “no mere photograph, but purely the product of the writers own mind” (198). For Wilde, this artistic production of life did not mean, however, that “the artist desire[d] to prove anything”, and, as Wilde outlined in the preface to *Dorian Gray*, “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.” Both writers thus refracted the human condition through an artist lens, being stylistically different, and yet sharing in their creative representations of life’s stages a strong sense of conveying impressions and sensation that have more in common with Pater’s views on aesthetics than an Arnoldian morality.

3. The Circular Condition

In different works, published at different stages of their careers, both men represented in contrary styles an ever-decreasing circularity associated with the human condition, which was itself a literary commonplace in the period. Such universal stages of the living experience included young love and the idealisation of perceived beauty, middle age and gradual self-realization, and ultimately, the cold finality of death. Yet, in both cases, the treatment of these stages is managed through an aesthetic literary lens, dealing with these physical phenomena in the creative manner

of Shakespeare's metaphor for the seven ages of man, where "all the world's a stage" (227). Wilde's *Dorian Gray* and Hardy's *The Well-Beloved* both dealt with the first stage, and "the lover, Sighing like furnace" (Shakespeare 227), through satirical representations of the romantic aesthete, but Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* similarly addressed the process of enlightened or bitter self-realization that can occur when the self-obsessed, proud or vain look outside of themselves and learn to genuinely love another, becoming "full of wise saws" (Shakespeare 227). Finally in *Salome* and *The Return of the Native* the "second childishness and mere oblivion" (227) or death, seen as an imaginative narrative event, is examined by Wilde and Hardy.

As an aside, it is worth noting that no claim is being made in the present discussion that there is a fundamental uniqueness to their work in this sense. Concerns with the human condition and the aesthetic connection with the cycle culminating in oblivion are common in the writing of this period. One might well argue this for most other periods as well, as well as genres other than the literary. What is, instead, being explored is the way in which connections can be made between Wilde and Hardy, arguing that, whilst the thematic preoccupations may not be unique, links that can be discussed between the two writers offer a valuable perspective on both their works and the interconnected nature of the literary aestheticism of the time.

In Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Hardy's *The Well-Beloved*, both works focus on, and indeed satirise the theme of the self-obsessed aesthete, and the long-term consequences that one incurs when striving after an idea. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) is a depiction of obsession, or, indeed, several obsessions taken to dangerous lengths. Whilst the titular protagonist can be understood as the embodiment of obsessive evil, he is nevertheless a product

of his environment. He is sought out, cultivated and then allowed to grow corrupt as an active member a society which refuses to condemn evil in incremental steps. Lord Henry, based in large part upon Lord Ronald Gower, a Scottish politician and sculptor well-known for his homosexuality in late Victorian society (Gatsby 64), but also in some ways a version of Pater and perhaps even Wilde’s conception of himself, claims amorality:

If one puts forward an idea to a true Englishman - always a rash thing to do — he never dreams of considering whether the idea is right or wrong. The only thing he considers of any importance is whether one believes it oneself. (11)

He is admonished for this later by the painter Basil Hallward, who notes that his amorality is a philosophical posture:

I believe that you are really a very good husband, but that you are thoroughly ashamed of your own virtues. You are an extraordinary fellow. You never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing. Your cynicism is simply a pose. (15)

One can argue, therefore, that the motivation felt by Lord Henry to corrupt Dorian Gray with his “fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories” (88) is an obsession based around a desire to see his ideas come to life, yet to avoid direct personal responsibility. Our other obsessives in the novel — Basil Hallward is obsessed with his art, Sibyl Vane is obsessed first with her acting career then with Dorian, James Vane is obsessed with his sister’s death — all suffer terrible consequences. In fact, the only major character who does not is Lord Henry himself, perhaps because he retains at least the pretense of detachment throughout. In this, a reflection of Wilde in

his departure from the somewhat repressed passions of Walter Pater can be found. Wilde starts as a Lord Henry, but ultimately becomes a Dorian, at least in public perception. Of his fall from grace, Frank Harris was to write, with strong reference to the “poisonous book,” a semi-justification which contains much of the circular condition in its depiction of Wilde as a creature of his passions:

We have all come from the animal and can all without any assistance from books imagine easily enough the effects of unrestrained self-indulgence. Yet it is instructive and pregnant with warnings to remark that, as soon as the sheet anchor of high resolve is gone, the frailties of man tend to become master-vices. All our civilization is artificially built up by effort; all high humanity is the reward of constant striving against natural desires. (450)

The Well-Beloved, by Thomas Hardy, serialized in 1892, shortly after the publication of *Dorian Gray*, but published in 1897, can be seen as representative of one the aesthetic texts of the late Victorian age. Similarly to Wilde’s work it is a novel about an obsession with art, beauty, and most importantly the idea of beauty that draws on classical themes. Like *Dorian Gray*, Hardy’s text also looks toward Greek culture for its inspiration; while the titular protagonist of Wilde’s novel appears to resemble Narcissus in his idealization of himself, and was likely named after Doros, the grandson of Zeus, Jocelyn imagines his ideal female personification of beauty as “the wile-weaving daughter of high Zeus...the implacable Aphrodite herself” (12). Yet where Hardy’s protagonist, Jocelyn Pierston, appears to resemble Basil Hallward in his vocation as an artist, as well as in his desire to create an image of beauty in stone, in his pursuit of his idea of the well-beloved, his character

is actually closer to the irresponsibility of Lord Henry. Thus in *The Well-Beloved* Pierston places his own artistic ideas before reality, seemingly, like Lord Henry, to see these ideas made flesh. In particular Jocelyn hangs his own particular concept of beauty upon the frame of a number of different women so that “she who always attracted him...had not remained the occupant of the same fleshy tabernacle in her career so far” (13). He convinces himself that Alice Caro, a “nice girl” (13) is his well-beloved made flesh, and proposes marriage, and yet while “To his Well-Beloved he had always been faithful; but she had had many embodiments” (12). Yet the singular peculiarity of Hardy’s novel is that Jocelyn attaches his concept of the well-beloved to three successive generations of Caro women. But eventually Jocelyn realizes, with sinking heart that he too had become the personification of another’s well-beloved. The second of the Caro girls informs him in an ironic twist that while he has been the object of her desire:

...I get tired of my lovers as soon as I get to know them well. What I see in one young man for a while soon leaves him and goes into another yonder, and I follow, and then what I admire fades out of him and springs up somewhere else, and so I follow on, and never fix to one. (78)

The gradual sense of self-awareness that Jocelyn encounters in *The Well-Beloved* is examined in more detail in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Both Wilde and Hardy employ the motif of consumption as an objective correlative in order to symbolise their characters’ selfishness, pride and vice. In *The Importance of Being Ernest* this is represented by Algy’s lust for cucumber sandwiches, muffins, *pate de foie gras* and champagne. Jack accuses him of being “perfectly heartless” for

eating “muffins in that greedy way” when they are in “horrible trouble” (297). Oliver S. Buckton notes that Algy’s “excessive appetite is the besetting vice throughout the play” (130). Wilde’s use of such food, and Algy’s attitude towards it, provides a window into his inner predatory nature; he “incessantly eats food intended for other people and so usurps their right to nourishment” and thus his “greed emerges as a failure to accept the social contract” (131). Similarly, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy employs Michael Henchard’s early craving for firmity laced with rum as an objective correlative for his masculine pride masking his inner weakness and selfishness. Henchard’s drunkenness leads him to sell his wife and daughter to a stranger, leading him, in chapter two of the novel, to “take an oath before God” that he will “avoid all strong liquors for the space of twenty-one years to come” (765). At the termination of his self-imposed limit, however, with his personal and professional life once more in disarray, he again relapses into alcoholism. Escape from this vice, and indeed the pride and weakness that it stands for, comes not through renouncing alcohol but in learning to open his heart to his wife’s daughter. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Michael Henchard, like Shakespeare’s soldier, “Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel” (Shakespeare 227) comes to love his adopted daughter Elizabeth-Jane as a true father, providing, as Elaine Showalter argues, “the emotional centre of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*” (130). Having mistreated and deceived her, he decides to burden her no more and learns to act selflessly on behalf of her happiness, in his will stipulating that “Elizabeth-Jane Farfrae be not told of my death, or made to grieve on account of me” (982). Henchard’s moment of self-realization that accompanies his “weakness and “womanishness,” breaking through in moments of tenderness” leads Showalter to argue that “Hardy is really showing us the man at his best” (130). Yet his letting go of Elizabeth Jane

and his forgiveness of Donald Farfrae allows them to marry happily at the conclusion of the novel. Similarly, in *The Importance of Being Earnest* the self-awareness of both Wilde’s male leads is engendered by the process of falling in love; Jack and Algernon thus discover “the importance of being Earnest” (313) in the course of this process.

Wilde in *Salome* and Hardy in *The Return of the Native* both dissected the idea of death as a narrative event, just as Shakespeare’s seven ages conclude with the final act of “oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything” (227). Yet, again, both writers engage with death through a refracted and metaphorical lens that seems to borrow from Shakespeare’s idea of stage as aesthetic realm. In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy’s aesthetic stage is Egdon Heath, which operates as a manifestation of the artists’ own mind. Thomas Hardy grew up in an isolated cottage in the village of Higher Bockhampton on the edge of a large expanse of open heathland. This environment became the basis for his literary Egdon Heath, yet it was also imaginatively inspired by a Shakespearean rural dream world. Hardy was likely familiar with *As You Like It* where Shakespeare writes of a dream-like Arcadian “golden world” (218) when describing the Forest of Arden. Egdon Heath, immortalised in *The Return of the Native*, was described by Hardy in the preface to that book as “the Heath of that traditional King of Wessex — Lear” (Orel 13). Hardy’s Wessex, similar to Lear’s heath, was employed as a dramatic stage upon which acts of seemingly random tragedy would play out, so that man becomes as Gloucester cries in Act IV, Scene I of *King Lear*, “a worm”, or “as flies to wanton boys” (132-37). Virginia Woolf, therefore, trained her critical lens upon the source of Hardy’s tragedy and, identified it as emanating from his heathland, where “The moors are round us and the stars are above our heads. The other side of the mind is now

exposed — the dark side” (260). D. H. Lawrence also connected Hardy with the darkness of the moors, and saw his tragedy as emanating specifically from “the Heath...Here is the deep, black source” (68). Indeed, Egdon is described by Hardy at the beginning of *The Return of the Native* as possessing the power to “intensify the opacity of a moonless midnight to a cause of shaking dread” (455).

Yet upon this creative and tragic stage Hardy also plays with the characterisation of mysterious and amoral beauty in the form of its most famous representative female inhabitant. Kaye notes that “Many of the period’s most arresting ideas and images about sexuality are evident in the late-Victorian fascination with an atavistically aggressive female” (56), and while the heath is depicted anthropomorphically as a man, the central figure of *The Return of the Native* is the female protagonist, the heath’s “Queen of Night”, Eustacia Vye. During the nineteenth century novels and painting began to play with the form of the female ‘bad sublime’, and J. B. Bullen notes that the representation of the female protagonist as “witch, child-killer, or patricide” followed in a tradition of the “‘bad’ female sublime [that] has many precedents in literature” (168) such as Mozart’s *Queen of the Night*, the Vampire and the Sphinx. More specific to Victorian art and literature during the 1860s, however, such as the poetry of Swinburne or the painting of Rossetti, the concept of the ‘bad sublime’ juxtaposed a sexualised yet often dangerous, or amoral female figure with the older traditional sublime, Bullen noting that the latter was “closely associated with landscape effects, overwhelming sensations of vastness and power” (169). Thus while Eustacia claims to hate the heath, she appears to represent one half of a matrimonious “bad sublime” that, similarly to the representation of the “bad sublime” female subjects of Swinburne’s verse (168) will result in the emasculation of the

supine men around her.

Indeed, Hardy intimates that Eustacia shares more in common with its dark environs than she will admit, so that “Egdon was her Hades, and since coming there she had imbibed much of what was dark in its tone, though inwardly and eternally unreconciled thereto” (500). From this passage one can ascertain that Eustacia is bound up with and representative of the paganism of the heath, but her dark beauty and the bonfires that she lights to attract the local men also connect her to the landscape. Indeed, the bonfires are indicative of “Druidical rites,” and see her suspected by the local Christians of possessing witchcraft, leading Eustacia to bemoan that this “witch story will be added to make me blacker” (603). The theme of amoral beauty as representative of the back heart of the heath is also found in Hardy’s poetry. In “The Moth Signal (On Egdon Heath),” for example, Hardy relays the story of a cheating wife who deceives her husband, yet he also subtends a wider historical perspective, as an ancient Briton tells how hearts are “thwartly smitten” (245) across the generations. Ultimately Eustacia’s flirtations with Damon Wildeve break the heart of her husband Clym Yeobright, and his perceived rejection of her prompts her to fall or throw herself into Shadwell Weir. Clym, having convinced himself that he was responsible for Eustacia’s death becomes an itinerant preacher. This path towards faith is foreshadowed earlier in the novel when Clym uses the language of Paul of Tarsus to describe his awareness of suffering, seeing “the whole of creation groaning and travailing in pain, as St Paul says” (581), and he is himself described in somewhat desultory fashion by Eustacia as reminding her of “the Apostle Paul” (657). Thus while Eustacia, as Hardy’s representative of the heath, is suspected of witchcraft to emphasize her anti-Christian and ostensibly amoral pagan character, Clym is driven to Christianity and indeed a passive, Christ-like life through guilt at her death. This has

led several critics to link the emasculation of culture to *fin-de-siecle* “bad sublime” of the later nineteenth century. Bullen, for example, lists Swinburne, Rossetti, Pater, and Hardy as “drawing upon a group of sentiments which clustered around the notion of the ‘bad sublime’ in the 1860s and 1870s” (170), while Kay observes that atavistic femme fatales included Rider Haggard’s *She* (1885) with its ruthless goddess-ruler, and Robert Louis Stevenson’s novel of London anarchists, *The Dynamiter* (1885), featuring the dominatrix brothel-owner Senora Mendizabal” (56). However, as Kay concludes, “The most enduringly successful of these femme fatales is undoubtedly *Salome* in Oscar Wilde’s play” (56).

Wilde’s *Salome* can thus also be seen as representative of this bad sublime in terms of stage and amoral beauty (Bullen 168). Interestingly, Wilde’s play, performed long after Hardy’s tale, inverts Hardy’s theme of death and religion, and, if anything, appears a more powerful emasculating force than Hardy’s work, as, unlike Eustacia, instead of dying and converting her lover to Christianity, Salome is responsible for the beheading of John the Baptist. Wilde sets the play within a familiar topographia, but it is one which has been transformed by the sensibilities of the narrative. A biblical story on the surface, and, indeed, in facsimile, *Salome* is really a twisted mirror image. It is a psychodrama of desire, and the “bad sublime” in the play is — if one considers this in the sense promulgated by Schopenhauer — a force of terror and destruction. Replacing the warmth of the sun, the moon becomes a cold, distant over-sexualized distortion of the nurturing of love (Stokes 122). Beauty transforms to something repulsive yet greater, as in Salome’s contrarian lust for and rejection of Jokanaan:

SALOME

I am amorous of thy body, Jokanaan! Thy body is white like

the lilies of a field that the mower hath never mowed. Thy body is white like the snows that lie on the mountains, like the snows that lie on the mountains of Judaea, and come down into the valleys. The roses in the garden of the Queen of Arabia are not so white as thy body. Neither the roses in the garden of the Queen of Arabia, nor the feet of the dawn when they light on the leaves, nor the breast of the moon when she lies on the breast of the sea . . . There is nothing in the world so white as thy body. Let me touch thy body.

JOKANAAN

Back! daughter of Babylon ! By woman came evil into the world. Speak not to me. I will not listen to thee. I listen but to the voice of the Lord God.

SALOME

Thy body is hideous. It is like the body of a leper. It is like a plastered wall where vipers have crawled; like a plastered wall where the scorpions have made their nest. It is like a whitened sepulchre full of loathsome things. It is horrible, thy body is horrible. (403)

The play was originally to be staged with the finest actress of the day, Sarah Bernhardt, in the title role, but famously failed to receive licensing from the Lord Chamberlain's Office. Ostensibly, the reason given was the transgression of the ruling on the stage presentation of biblical characters, but Wilde and others were aware that this was clearly a disingenuous excuse, as the availability of contemporary productions such as Saint-Saëns' *Samson and Delilah* showed (Hyde 140). The bleakness of desire as a motivic force underpins the action of *Salome*. The titular character searches for

pleasure and self-gratification, yet, through a heuristic process of manipulation, discovers only emptiness and death. Gratification is endlessly delayed and desire ultimately abrogated.

4. Satire and Similarities

In their output, therefore, one can make the argument that Wilde and Hardy explore seminal periods of the human condition in terms of three circular and decreasing stages. Hardy's *The Well-Beloved*, the first of these stages, inhabits an ostensibly paradoxical position, both connecting thematically to Wilde's work while also appearing to possibly critique it. This might perhaps be partly attributed to the fact that *The Well-Beloved* is a rather curious and unique number in the Hardy canon, and critics appear divided over its origins. Robert Gittings has linked the novel "in which the hero, Pierston, falls in love, again almost without volition, with three generations of girls, all with strong physical resemblances" (167) to Hardy's female cousins on his mother's side. Gittings notes how, as members of "the large Sparks family, his three girl-cousins were so widely separate in age as to suggest three generations" (167). Certainly it appears that Hardy was romantically attached to the youngest of the three girls, Tryphena Sparks, and may have been rebuffed by the other two. Yet Hardy's work appears less an avocation of Jocelyn's obsession than a satire of it, as Patricia Ingham argues, noting, "the medium for the examination of art and the artist in this text is high farce" and that it represents "the ironising of the fanciful and artistic idea that women are clay or a medium or an instrument" (107). If the novel is, indeed, a high farce or satire, this leads one to consider exactly who the target of Hardy's work might have been. It is possible that Hardy was parodying The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and perhaps Dante Gabriel Rossetti's obsession for employing working class women, such as Jane Burden, as muses. Certainly

the second Avicé fits this mold, working as a washer woman until Jocelyn finds her in the sunlight appearing “rather as a sylph than as a washerwoman...it was not the washerwoman that he saw now” (68). The linen washer thus becomes yet another well-beloved, “that more real, more interpenetrating being whom he knew so well!” (68) The target may also have been the Pre-Raphaelite sculptor Thomas Woolner, who Jocelyn resembles, and who Hardy knew, and, in an 1897 letter to Florence Henniker he revealed that the plot of *The Well-Beloved* was inspired by “the remark of a sculptor that he had often pursued a beautiful ear, nose, chin, &c, about London in omnibuses & on foot” (169). Yet in its satire of aestheticism and aestheticists Hardy’s work can also be seen as mocking the “art-for-art’s sake” school, and according to Michael Ryan, “Hardy’s primary targets are Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde” (qtd. in Holmes 240).

Thus, where Hardy’s *The Well-Beloved*, like *Dorian Gray*, deals with the theme of youthful artistic obsession, being one of the cycles of the human condition, the text can also be seen as a satire of aestheticism and, by implication, of Wilde’s general body of work. Yet Wilde and Hardy also share a number of commonalities; both are artistic inheritors of complex and evolving ideas that saw their ferment in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Religious criticism and new scientific theories led to a growing mercantile capitalism that placed emphasis upon industry and work leading Arnold, in direct response, to establish his view of the moral responsibility of culture’s role in society. The legacy of this Arnoldian tradition dominated the late Victorian age, casting an intellectual shadow over numerous writers, poets and critics, and influencing the very different work of Wilde and Hardy. It concomitantly provoked responses from aesthetes such as Pater, whose imaginative and artistic influence also, in turn, affected the

two great Victorian authors. This may perhaps be why many of their ideas and quotations on the uses of art and literature appear similar, but thematically, the two writers also converge. This leads to the conclusion that, whilst Hardy and Wilde moved in different literary circles, their narrative themes addressed the human condition in a somewhat similar fashion. In this way, the connections between how both writers explored the various fundamental stages of the human experience in terms of its ever-decreasing circular condition, from aestheticism to self-realization, and finally, mortality and death, is revealing. Their satires of society, their innovative methods of employment of a framework that was a literary commonplace at the time, their oddly contrastive yet complimentary stances to one another and to the process of writing — all of these argue for an underlying connection between the two men that, if not immediately apparent on the surface, is all the more intriguing for its subtlety.

NOTE

- 1 Pater's blue plaque says "Walter Pater 1839-1894 aesthete and writer lived and worked here 1885-1893."

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