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This article opens by citing some contemporary reviews and critical accounts (including Conrad's own) to show how and why Conrad was commonly compared to Thomas Hardy by those people who then read him. Evidence that Conrad in fact had read Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and with deliberation and care adapted dramatic elements that struck him to form a crucial part of *The Secret Agent*, is considered. It is maintained that Conrad found much in *Tess* that was of use, often in the spirit of creative rejection. Key areas of both novels are closely examined, and Conrad's characteristic method of ironic tragedy is contrasted with Hardy's particular tragic emphases. Ultimately, the intention of this study is to place present assumptions about the nature of "Modernism" in a new light.

An unsigned review of *The Secret Agent* in the *Glasgow News* of 3 October 1907 contrasts the mood of Conrad's writing with that of the tragic Thomas Hardy:

At the utmost there is a grave irony, or a faint tinge of melancholy, as of one brooding without resentment over the futility of human efforts and desires. But this is a new note in our literature — Hardy's sombre tragedy is something quite different.

This astute immediate response to the striking originality of Conrad's novel appears to fit in with a general contemporary English attempt to place the mature, post-sea novel Conrad in the perspective of some recent, familiar English novelist. Hardy's later tragedies, such as *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* seemed to provide a natural reference-point for Conrad readers. C. E. Montague, reviewing *Chance* in the *Manchester Guardian* of 15 January 1914, compares Conrad with *Tess*, saying of the Dorset novelist:

Mr Hardy likes to show the sufferers, by such tragic embarrassments [defined by Montague as "profound, incalculable trouble of the stream of experience, not by their fault"] in their isolation — to show, for instance, how little it mattered to anyone what mattered to Tess.

Richard Curle in his *Joseph Conrad, A Study* (1914) in his chapter 10 ("Conrad as Artist") makes an explicit contrast between the two writers:

Conrad again shows his artistic realism in the fact that his works are not overweighted with mechanical plots or impossible coincidences. No character can appear actual, when it is obvious from the first that its life has to fit into a preconceived dovetailing. Look at the dénouement of a book like Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* — it is too absurdly
obvious that the author himself is pulling the strings of fate. Conrad can write a novel called *Chance*, he could never write one called *Coincidence*. There is all the difference in the world.

In a rather different spirit R. E. Megroz remarks in his *Joseph Conrad's Mind and Method* (New York, 1931):

Conrad had a much more critical respect for what we may call the realism of human emotions than his modern English peers, Meredith and Hardy. . . . And yet Hardy's definition of his own artistic aim exactly fits that of Conrad: "to intensify the expression of things, so that the heart and inner meaning is vividly visible". 

-- but perhaps, as I wish to show later, though *The Secret Agent* can be shown to bear a most interesting relation to Hardy's artistic emphases, Conrad's "heart and inner meaning" is often quite another thing from Hardy's!

J. H. Retinger, a Pole who knew Conrad well, mentions in his *Conrad and his Contemporaries* (London, 1941) that Conrad himself "among his contemporaries praised Thomas Hardy and Henry James for the virility of their conceptions, the economy of their technique, the precision of their style". Then, of course, there is the famous letter by Conrad to John Galsworthy of 6 January 1908 on the failure of his *The Secret Agent*:

I suppose there is something in one that is unsympathetic to the general public -- because the novels of Hardy, for instance, are generally tragic enough and gloomily written too -- and yet they have sold in their time and are selling to the present day.

Jocelyn Baines for one, though, from studying Conrad's private correspondence for his *Joseph Conrad, A Critical Biography* (London, 1960), found it hard to discover whether he had ever actually read Hardy or Meredith (as opposed, one presumes, to casually browsing through pages and checking impressions against a generally "received opinion")?

He seems to have had little interest in his British contemporaries and only to have read their books when the author was a personal friend.

Without doubt it was the French novelists of the nineteenth century whom Conrad knew best and it was to them that he went to study the craft . . .

-- well, Conrad *had* met Hardy personally, which may possibly indicate that he had bothered to look into at least one or two of his novels.

If Conrad *had* looked into *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* he would surely have found much of vital interest to his creative concerns, even in the nature of a rejection. In certain ways *Tess Durbeyfield* is the strongest and most vivid tragic character in all Hardy's fiction, with the author's weighty emphasis on the striking and peculiar blend in her character
of a stubborn, proud self-sufficiency with an ingrainedly passive adoration of her husband Angel Clare. Hardy’s novels invariably work in distinct episodes, many of which do not match up in a coherent whole, but one here can, by ignoring certain particular emphases and spasmodic authorial forcings, at least come to focus on some general picture. It is one of a girl finally beaten down by social convention and sheer fate (Hardy’s, of course!), who kills the man who manipulated her by first sexually victimising her (directly causing her to be denied by the man she loves) and later exploiting her predicament of a woman abandoned by her husband. When one sorts the novel out (as the Hardy reader commonly has to), her killing of Alec d’Urberville seems as much a turning against what Tess feels is the sheer mechanism of the trap that got her to live with such a man, as an expression either of personal animus or of hopelessness from feeling that she is now forever denied the husband who has returned to her. This may have provided a starting-point for Conrad’s envisagement of Winnie’s position in his “domestic drama” of *The Secret Agent*, where she arrives at the perception that she needs her freedom. Alec cooperates in his death by his sharp words interrupting Tess’s grief, and forcing her attention onto him – Verloc, of course, does a lot more when faced with Winnie’s recrimination!

Chapter 56, the scene of the murder itself, is (like much material in the novel) a set theatrical contrivance, in effect a deliberate cause célèbre in the late-Victorian novel. Hardy in his Preface to the fifth edition of 1892 mentions with satisfaction a contemporary objection to the fact that a lodging-house carving-knife appeared in a respectable story. We probably remember the action for the way Hardy switches to observe the scene through the eyes and ears of the landlady, Mrs Brooks. She watches what emerges as the beginning of the drama through the keyhole, and comes to learn of the violence from the growing scarlet blot on her back room ceiling, assuming the form of a “gigantic ace of hearts”. Frightenedly arrested before the handle of her lodgers’ upstairs rooms, she hears that the “dead silence within was broken only by a regular beat” of the “drip, drip, drip” of blood. When she breaks in with the aid of a passing workman, the scene is described as follows:

The room was empty; the breakfast – a substantial repast of coffee, eggs, and a cold ham – lay spread upon the table untouched, as when she had taken it up, excepting that the carving knife was missing. She asked the man to go through the folding-doors into the adjoining room.

He opened the doors, entered a step or two, and came back almost instantly with a rigid face. “My good God, the gentlemen in bed is dead! I think he has been hurt with a knife – a lot of blood has run down upon the floor!”

The alarm was soon given, and the house which had lately been so quiet resounded with the tramp of many footsteps, a surgeon among the rest. The wound was small, but the point of the blade had touched the heart of the victim, who lay on his back, pale, fixed, dead, as if he had scarcely moved after the infliction of the blow.
If – as seems extremely possible – Conrad was acquainted with this chapter, it could have helped in getting his imagination working (besides the clear promptings Conrad had from *Macbeth*) for his own treatment of a woman killing a man in *The Secret Agent*. One can turn to Conrad’s dramatic shift in viewpoint with the scene of Winnie overhearing her husband’s revealing interchange with Chief Inspector Heat, her ear pressed to the keyhole:

... her lips were blue, her hands cold as ice, and her pale face, in which the two eyes seemed like two black holes, felt to her as if it were enveloped in flames.

On the other side of the door the voices sank very low. She caught words now and then sometimes in her husband’s voice, sometimes in the smooth tones of the inspector. ...

... Mrs Verloc sprang up suddenly from her crouching position, and stopping her ears, reeled to and fro between the counter and the shelves on the wall towards the chair.

After the ensuing killing, most carefully prepared and described by Conrad, Winnie "comes to herself" with a ticking sound impinging on her consciousness. Concluding dreamily that it is not from the clock in the room, she lowers her gaze to her husband’s body:

Its attitude of repose was so homelike and familiar that she could do so without feeling embarrassed by any pronounced novelty in the phenomena of her home life. Mr Verloc was taking his habitual ease. He looked comfortable.

By the position of the body the face of Mr Verloc was not visible to Mrs Verloc, his widow. Her fine, sleepy eyes, travelling downward on the track of the sound, became contemplative on meeting a flat object of bone which protruded a little beyond the edge of the sofa. It was the handle of the domestic carving knife with nothing strange about it but its position at right angles to Mr Verloc’s waistcoat and the fact that something dripped from it. Dark drops fell on the floorcloth one after another, with a sound of ticking growing fast and furious like the pulse of an insane clock. At its highest speed this ticking changed into a continuous sound of trickling. Mrs Verloc watched that transformation with shadows of anxiety coming and going on her face. It was a trickle dark, swift, thin. ... Blood!

At this unforeseen circumstance Mrs Verloc abandoned her pose of idleness and irresponsibility.

With a sudden snatch at her skirts and a faint shriek she ran to the door, as if the trickle had been the first sign of a destroying flood.

This drama of Winnie’s awakening guilt and terror following apathy (after the spasm of murder) is presented in the mode of grotesque irony, but yet, unlike the externally reported Hardy equivalent, is drawn from the inward response of a character. Hardy’s *details* (rather than what he does with them) such as the carving knife, the cold ham (with Conrad, a piece of roast beef horribly suggestive of the mass of Stevie’s blown-up remains), and the drip of the blood breaking the “dead silence”, blood that later is seen to have run down on the floor, are certainly directly comparable. Hardy’s sharp portrayal of the victim lying on his
back (like Verloc) as "pale, fixed, dead, as if he had scarcely moved after the infliction of the blow" may easily bear a fascinating relation to Conrad's idea of showing Verloc's phantasies about methods of escape in the amazed instants before his wife stabs him. Here Conrad's poetic drama concentrates on the opposition of the surge of mental agility produced by Verloc's shocked awareness placed against the rigidly static last physical moments of his life.

Winnie Verloc is physically voluptuous despite herself in just the same way as Tess, but no innocent peasant girl encumbered by a sense of aristocratic ancestors and the legends of doom that go with them. She is a modern city petite-bourgeoise (of French descent), respectable and incredibly placid. Winnie's mother too has a completely different part to play from Tess's, though in both novels it is interesting that the mothers have strong "supporting" roles. But Winnie's legal "marriage", in contrast, proves in the very drabness of its utilitarian progress to be as (if not more) crippling as the abuses of rape-cum-seduction, abandonment, living-in-sin, and fate, endured by Tess. Conrad has a completely different conception and treatment of tragedy from Hardy. The consequences of murder are as inexorable, though less stagy, for Winnie as for Tess; presumably Hardy was aiming at an "Ancient Greek" effect. Conrad's tragedy is done in realistic terms that are "anti-glamorous" and unrhetorical, though vividly picturesque and dramatic.

Winnie shares with Tess a mixture of the passive with an inner fire; but both Conrad's psychology and his handling of emotion are quite different from Hardy's. Winnie's peculiar kind of "devotion" to her husband is essentially viewed ironically, unlike Tess's, and this irony heightens the tension of Conrad's inner dramatisation. Winnie's slave-like adherence to the unwritten rules of her marriage is for the purpose of protecting her idiot brother Stevie, and makes her position beneath her placid exterior significantly brittle. The basis for her unselfish sacrifices, unlike Tess's, was calculatedly laid down in the past, so her married life is a commitment to a well-charted routine. Hence her sudden realisation of the futility of this method of existence, due to the removal of Stevie heightened by her hearing the circumstances of her brother's death, causes a sudden explosion.

Tess's "psychology" seems much more incidental, actually subordinated to an amorphous tragic pattern. It is difficult to reconcile the stress Hardy sympathetically lays on Tess's hardy-tiring conventionality in her devotion to Angel Clare with the novel's violent attacks on social conformity, and with Tess's attempts at self-determination. Ultimately, it is a general texture of tragic pathos that Hardy seeks, not emotion made tangible by an intellectual clarity of diagnosis, as with Winnie's predicament which is carefully particularised. Tess's giving in to Alec's demands for a second time is for purposes of an under-
lined drama of blood leading to the destruction of the heroine, and is not in the first place coherent in psychological motivation. The repetition in *The Secret Agent* of the viewing of Verloc’s body is no simple escalation in a tragic catalogue. It brings through black comedy an intense emphasis on the distinct natures of the two different kinds of terror and dread felt by Winnie and Ossipon, the latter being forced (unlike Angel) to do more than just “guess” what the murderess was “driven to do”.

On the other hand, Tess’s great cry of “I have no husband!” to the hovering Alec, before she succumbs a second time to him, could well have suggested Conrad’s stress on Winnie’s realisation that she has no grounds for a marriage, first expressed figuratively with:

In that shop of shady wares fitted with deal shelves painted a dull brown, which seemed to devour the sheen of light, the gold circlet of the wedding ring on Mrs Verloc’s left hand glittered exceedingly with the untarnished glory from some splendid treasure of jewels, dropped in a dust-bin.

The “murderesses” can also be validly compared. Verloc, while contemptibly despicable and selfish in his way, is not melodramatically wicked like Alec, who says of himself “I was born bad, and I have lived bad, and I shall die bad in all probability”. The part Verloc plays in unconsciously directing his wife to murder him (through egotism and gross insensitivity) is infinitely more colourful and pointed than Alec’s, whom one feels is the Victorian stereotype villain whose role in the novel is to be disposed of. This is just what happens to him in the murder scene! So Alec’s “answer” to Tess’s exclamation of chapter 46, “O Alec d’Urberville! what does this mean? What have I done?” is consistent in being a piece of consciously devilish villainy:

“Done?” he said, with a soulless sneer in the word. “Nothing intentionally. But you have been the means – the innocent means – of my backsliding, as they call it. I ask myself, am I, indeed, one of those ‘servants of corruption’ who, ‘after they have escaped the pollutions of the world, are again entangled therein and overcome’ – whose latter end is worse than their beginning?”

Such theatricality is lacking in the irony aimed at conventional morality that Conrad brings to bear on Verloc’s charge against his woman:

“Don’t you make any mistake about it: if you will have it that I killed the boy, then you’ve killed him as much as I.”

In sincerity of feeling and openness of statement, these words went far beyond anything that had ever been said in this home, kept up on the wages of a secret industry eeked out by the sale of more or less secret wares: the poor expedients devised by a mediocre mankind for preserving an imperfect society from the dangers of moral and physical corruption, both secret, too, of their kind.

The “smug citizen” aspect of Verloc, in his shockability (“This woman [Winnie], capable of a bargain the mere suspicion of which would have
been infinitely shocking to Mr Verloc’s idea of love. ‘...’ can be most interestingly placed next to Hardy’s substantial depiction of Angel Clare’s selective squeamishness about his wife’s past. Conrad develops another character who comes closer to Alec’s role as confirmed exploiter of women, in Ossipon – Verloc only suffers (if fatally) from the delusion that he is a lady-killer.

Unlike Alec with regard to Tess, Ossipon earlier in the novel is only a would-be seducer, kept with stolid uneasiness at an arm’s length by a respectable housewife. It is as if he functions as a sort of insurance for Winnie, for when she loses her respectability in her own eyes through killing her husband, she can logically turn to him as a member of her newly-acquired caste. Her moral split is expressed in another idiom and context from Tess’s whole confusion of situations between Alec and Angel. Conrad can capture the poignant irony of Winnie giving her “place” for a now utterly unwilling Ossipon in her life as a “fallen woman” with:

She ceased for a moment; then in the depths of the loneliness made round her by an insignificant thread of blood trickling off the handle of a knife, she found a dreadful inspiration to her – who had been the respectable girl of the Belgravian mansion, the loyal, respectable wife of Mr Verloc. “I won’t ask you to marry me,” she breathed out in shamefaced accents.

Her instinct to be a free woman when ridding herself of her marriage bonds changes to a last-gasp desire for life and terror of the gallows, setting the stamp on Conrad’s dramatisation of Winnie’s conventional sense of morality. In contrast, Tess, once “naturally pure” in the face of narrow social prejudice, after the murder becomes stoically resigned to her guilt and punishment by a merciless society. She is led away to execution with dignity, having had a Dr Zhivago-like (though quite unerotic) sojourn with the man she loves. We are deliberately as an artistic device not directly given the last moments of either woman, but like Angel Clare and more specifically the obsessively-ruined Ossipon, can imagine them vividly from afar.

Ossipon develops from being the predictable, heartless confidence-trickster by being actively caught-up in Winnie’s destiny. Alec may try a brief change of spiritual garment, but reverts back to the predator type (if he ever genuinely left it); characteristically with Hardy, morality and belief are either conducted with a rigorous bigotry, or are shattered by doubt. Ossipon, however, develops a moral outlook in Conrad’s novel, in that he is crushed by a new and real sense of moral judgement. In convulsively abandoning Winnie to her fate (while maintaining a precarious self-control), he at the same time breaches the security of his own callous assumptions for good. Conrad’s image of him “rolling head over heels like a shot rabbit” when deserting Winnie at Waterloo station is
a precise and concrete illustration of the dawning effects of conscience on a moral coward. This image is naturally integrated into a total poetic study of moral effects under urban conditions that dwarf the individual. Hardy’s pastoral tragedy meanders from setting to setting, so that the scenes of human drama are relatively episodic. So Tess’s throwing herself in “mad grief” on Angel Clare’s protective mercy (chapter 57) when confessing her murder:

It was very terrible if true; if a temporary hallucination, sad. But, anyhow, here was this deserted wife of his, this passionately-fond woman, clinging to him without a suspicion that he would be anything to her but a protector. He saw that for him to be otherwise was not, in her mind, within the region of the possible . . .

not only causes quite another inner response than that of Ossipon’s to Winnie in the same situation, but is also an isolated dramatic scene, a local and final flare-up in a tragedy.

This is not to discount the chapter’s power; we are impressed by the allegorical vision Hardy gives of “a human figure running”, while Clare waits “with a dim sense that somebody was trying to overtake him”. It seems likely, once more, that Hardy’s concept prompted the later study of Winnie in The Secret Agent; and Clare’s wondering confusedly if some “obscure strain in the d’Urberville blood had led to this aberration [of murder]” while Tess is weeping on his shoulder, points to an inspired adaptation. Conrad has (only partly in the spirit of parody) perhaps transformed this into the fascinated Ossipon gazing scientifically at Winnie “as no lover ever gazed at his mistress’s face”, while tracing out Lombroso’s theories of criminality. At the same time we are aware of an extra dimension with Winnie’s misguided appeal to and false conception of her saviour. Conrad’s ironic method is linked to a controlled explorative analysis in a novel constructing related personalities. The violent “jolts” he gives the reader with sudden changes of direction with Winnie (when she kills Verloc) and Ossipon may cause surprise, but refer back to a substantial and considered texture. Conrad manages to be both more iconoclastically challenging than Hardy and (even through the Conradian mode of irony) more profoundly moral, that is, humanly positive about the conditions of living.

Such a comparison between a late-nineteenth century and a more clearly twentieth-century writer like Conrad not only brings out distinctions of both artistic methods and status, which entail different treatments of sexual and social morality. One also is thrown back (in the case of original writers like Conrad who draw on literature of the past) to an inescapable sense of some creative common-soil from which the novel is drawn. Here Conrad may be seen to creatively transpose both Hardy and Dickens. The current habit of imposing simplistically clear-cut systems of divisions, as between “premodern” and “modern” writers,
produces the emphasis that a mere mechanical *kitsch* -parody such as *Catch-22* could be the summation of some literary movement. Critics like Claire Rosenfield, Ian Watt, C. B. Cox, or Malcolm Bradbury (among others) have tended to invoke such a concept of art when praising as distinctive the "modernism" of *The Secret Agent*. But certainly, Conrad's own contemporaries compared him usefully with Hardy, quite unaware of the literary diagrams of the late twentieth century.

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**Notes**

1. Hardy in his Preface to the fifth edition of his novel alludes to *King Lear*, and indeed we can discover studied and elaborate use of the play in the drama of his book involving Angel and Tess. Conrad makes ironical references to *Othello*, but it is *Macbeth* that is sardonically behind the scene of Verloc's death, as when the husband advises Winnie sympathetically, "'What's done can't be undone'". And this method is extended by Chief Inspector Heat, who feels when his particular world system is under threat that things "appeared to him by a sudden illumination as invariably written by fools for the reading of imbeciles". The force of the *Macbeth*-like murderous guilt on Winnie at the end of chapter 11 is beyond sardonic irony.

2. Albert J. Guerard in his *Conrad the Novelist* (London, 1958) puts it: "He [Conrad] is more interesting than the grave primitive Hardy, if only to the extent that he is more aware of inward crisis, and substitutes a stern for a tender outlook".

3. This is one of the scenes in Hardy which affected D. H. Lawrence; one thinks of Gudrun "betraying" her failed relationship with Gerald Crich to Loerke in chapter 30 of *Women in Love*.


5. The study of Ossipon can be linked to the more central tortured drama of Razumov's guilt and atonement in *Under Western Eyes*.