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The following is a summary of Mr. Irving Howe’s opinion on Thomas Hardy’s short stories.

Hardy’s short stories have little to do with the main line of the modern short story. They have little ‘of Chekhov’s psychological plasticity, even less of impressionistic economy of the Dubliners, and nothing whatever of the tight-lipped stylization we associate with Hemingway.’ They might be described as tales because they are told in a more easy-paced and amiable mode of narrative than we can usually find in the modern short story. Like most short fictions composed by novelists, Hardy’s are fragments chipped off his large work, or developments of major themes in modest scope or exercises at sketching the figures and locale of his more ambitious books.’ Within these limits, however, Mr. Howe rates some of them highly; he appreciates the plot and severe and sophisticated narration in “The Fiddler of the Reels,” ‘an utterly winning survey of Wessex conduct and idiosyncrasy’ in “A Few Crusted Characters,” ‘a curious mixture of traditional folk belief and modern hypothesis’ in “The Withered Arm,” the comic stress in “The Distracted Preacher,” and ‘the interplay
of personal vanity and social ambition' in "The Waiting Supper."

As a whole Mr. Howe's opinion is acceptable, but it is a matter for
regret he does not refer to such works as "An Imaginative Woman,"
"Fellow-Townsmen," and "Alicia's Diary." They seem to belong to
what is outside or beyond Mr. Howe's definition of Hardy's short
stories. The paper aims, therefore, to point out the distinguished power
of "Fellow-Townsmen" and at the same time to let the story hold a
right place among the modern short story in general.

II

No reader could appreciate "Fellow-Townsmen" in its abridged
edition. The story which amounts to more than sixty pages is not so
much full of adventures or strange events as mainly concerned with
Barnet's psychology. What, nevertheless, carries the reader with a
growing interest to the end is the rhythm of the story—the repetition
of some events.

In "Fellow-Townsmen" some events are repeated; (1) Barnet meets
Savile; (2) Barnet looks at the house of Savile's far from his house,
(3) Barnet meets Charlson.

(1) Barnet visits Lucy Savile after a long separation. He receives a
cold treatment from her though he confesses he is not happy now and
repents that he did not marry her. But her coldness is due to his
having once deserted her for his marriage with a woman of higher
status. Here he confesses to her that he has come to see a woman he
loved. The second time when he meets her is when his friend Downe
and his wife are trying to make Barnet and his wife reconcile. Savile
looks thinner and paler. Barnet wants to offer his help but he does
not utter it. When Barnet's wife leaves him after the quarrel, he
strolls through the street and comes to the shore, where he meets
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Savile. He is informed that she is going out as a teacher of freehand drawing or governess or something of that sort and that if she cannot she will go to India and join her brother. He offers help to her, saying 'I could go abroad with you, Lucy.' After a while Savile becomes a governess of the Downes. With the children she comes to a house of Barnet's which is under construction. Since his wife left him, he becomes interested in building the new house. He says to Savile, '...its [the house's] recent associations are cheerful, and I am getting to like it fast.' This remark suggests that he is thinking of a possibility of living there with Savile. At the last time when she comes there she thanks him for her job. He is glad to hear it. Just after the wedding between Downe and Savile, Barnet meets them. 'It seems as if Barnet expected a half-guilty, look upon, Lucy's face; but no...' After twenty-one years and six months Barnet from abroad goes to see Savile (now the widow of the late Mr. Downe) and courts her. Though she is grateful for his love she does not accept his proposal. He immediately leaves the town.

That Barnet meets Savile several times at rhythmic intervals reminds the reader of his steadfast love for her. Besides, every time when he meets her his and her situations are changing or floating, with the fluctuation of their marital possibility. What is worthy of note is that in any situation he confesses to her that he loves her, sometimes reservedly and sometimes unreservedly. This repetition accompanied by their changing situations causes both a suspense and stimulating, undulating rhythm in the reader's mind. The surge rolls in the last chapter. Barnet and Savile are now free to marry and he, without any restriction mental or practical, woos her, but she refuses it obeying what she has been believing right in her past life. But when he leaves her, she begins, for the first time, to regard the marriage with him as a
practical and possible one. Two days later she finds him away from the town. Though she is ready to accept him, he does not return. This time it is Savile who has to wait for years and years in vain.

(2) In addition to Barnet's frequent meetings with Savile, his looking far at her house a few times makes the reader aware that he is always conscious of her existence close to himself even when she is not present before him. The effect of this repetition is most intensified in the passage where Barnet who is by his wife's bedside looks at the red chimney of Savile's house at her tea time. In the scene he looks at it three times. Each time his situation is slightly changing. The smoking shows the shift of the scene so vividly that it seems to have its own emotion. The climax of the story is when Barnet receives the information that his wife suddenly died near London. He is now completely free to marry anyone he loves. He stands alone in his nearly completed house and 'stretched his gaze to the cottage further down the road, which was visible from his landing, and from which Lucy still walked to the solicitor's [Barnet's] house by a cross path.' And he whispers, 'At last!'

(3) Barnet is witnessed by Charlson when he leaves Savile's. Knowing his mind, Charlson mockingly tells him that his marriage is a failure and that, therefore, he cannot give Savile up. Charlson is the first doctor that attends Mrs. Barnet narrowly escaped from drowning. His remark at that time that she is very serious sounds significant to Barnet. Twenty-one years later he meets with Charlson on the way to Chateau Ringdale. Charlson declares that he had given Barnet a chance to get married with Savile when his wife hovered between life and death.

What is Charlson to Barnet? Like Satan, Charlson appears abruptly before him and whispers into his ears what he morally and consci-
entiously cannot utter. Three times, that is, at the beginning, middle and final stage of the story he appears, with which the reader realizes what is vaguely but persistently dwelling on Barnet’s mind. Charlson represents the obscure side of Barnet’s mind.

Thus, giving the prose composition to closeness, the frequent repetition of these events forms a rhythm or an organic unity throughout the story.

Incidentally Mr. Howe describes Hardy’s short fictions as tales and comments:

It [The tale] is a voice leisurely in rhythm, with ‘flourishes of comment and digression, as if quite confident that the audience will enjoy not merely the matter of the narrative but also its incidental flourishes and charms.... the story aims at a self-sufficiency of context; it usually consists of an action directly rendered, a complete and unglossed impression....

Applying the standard of this remark, however, we can safely say that “Fellow Townsmen” is not a tale but a story.

III

The two parts in the story are drawn in a vivid and well-turned way. One is the scene where Barnet is thinking what to do with his wife who is lingering on the verge of death. There is a possibility that her death might, as Charlson’s eye seemed to suggest, bring him the deliverance from the present miserable situation and the chance to marry with Savile.

He...entered the room, where he stood regarding the shape [i.e. his wife] on the bed for a few minutes, after which he walked into his own dressing-room adjoining, and there paced up and down. In a minute or two he noticed what a strange and total silence had come over the upper part of the house; his own movements, muffled as they were by the carpet, seemed noisy, and his thoughts to disturb the air like articulate utterances.
This acoustic description is powerful enough to show the intensified strain of Barnet's mind. Just after the passage Barnet stretches his gaze toward the red chimney of Savile's house. Out of the chimney 'a curl of smoke (rose), as from a fire newly kindled.' It seems to be tempting him to do what he secretly desires. When he decides to exert himself for his wife's recovery and glances out of the window, the 'red chimney (is) still smoking cheerly' as if it is doubting his success. But when he has been successful in reviving her, the 'blue evening smoke from Lucy's chimney had died down to an imperceptible stream.' The smoke has discerned the result! Here the smoke symbolizes the possibility of one's death and consequently the other's matrimonial chance. The other fine sketching is Barnet's peripeteia from the rapture over the news of his wife's death down to the sad disillusionment caused by Savile's marriage with Downe. His peripeteia is expressed in a reserved and not straightened way—that is, for the expression Hardy adopts Barnet's choice of the wall-papers. At the news the wall papers 'got brighter for him.' Yet as he is thinking of Savile, all 'the papers previously chosen seemed wrong in their shades, and he began from the beginning to choose again.' Few minutes later he knows that Savile is going to marry Downe that morning. 'Turning to the wall-papers, which he had been at such pains to select, he deliberately tore them into halves and quarters, and threw them into the empty fireplace.' He goes to the church to congratulate the couple just wedded. Then in the churchyard he helps a sexton thread in the earth. Why? Like Ophelia, he does not know what he is doing. He is momentarily in delirium. Or perhaps he is burying what he has been longing for. In this seemingly redundant digression there is abundant pathos.

These symbolic and psychological sketchings have nothing to do
with the tale. We can enjoy them only in the story—the modern story.

IV

Some archetypes of Hardy's short stories relevant here are
(1) Mesalliance.
(2) Escape from it.
(3) Sudden advent of a person who had disappeared for this or that reason.
(4) The death of someone which gives another chance to one who had once failed in completing what he or she intended—that is, mainly marriage, whether successful or not.

"Fellow-Townsmen" is, therefore, a story made out of Hardy's conventionalism. If the story ends at chapter VIII, it still passes for a tragedy. By adding another chapter, Hardy made the story tragic to the extent that it might be said cruel. Barnet's love for Savile was not completed. What is it that disturbed his love in the last chapter? At first it is Savile's moral or religious restraint, but finally happy chances did not serve both Barnet and Savile. Chance here is a disguised form of Fate in the sense that it cannot be controled by human beings. As is often seen in Hardy's fictions, the story is a tragedy not between men and women but between men and Fate. The story, though conventional, is an example accomplished with Hardy's own philosophy. The following is the description of Barnet in his darkest moments, but it is also to be applied for the illustration of the theme throughout the story.

The events that had, as it were, dashed themselves together into one half-hour of this day showed that curious refinement of cruelty in their arrangement which often proceeds from the bosom of the whimsical god at
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other times known as blind Circumstance.

According to Mr. Howe 'what crucially distinguishes the stories from the novels is that in the former there is hardly a trace of the "modern" Hardy' who keeps 'fretting himself over "Crass Casualty" and "Immanent Will."' But the passage quoted above is nothing but the manifestation of "Crass Casualty" and "Immanent Will." Hence the modernity of "Fellow Townsmen".

Further, referring to the difference between the tale and the story, Mr. Howe says,

The tale seeks to evoke in listeners a feeling of wonder, sometimes awe, before the strange and the marvelous; the story tends to be more dependent on the conventions of realism. Unburdened by notions about the impersonality of art, the tale may end in explicit moral or philosophical reflection, perhaps in a hushed agreement as to the inscrutability of the mysterious; the story, however, ends in a climax of revelation or a turning of irony, which is also a kind of revelation.

Following the criterion, unfortunately for Mr. Howe, we can judge "Fellow-Townsmen" to be a story, not a tale.

V

Mr. Howe seems to have given so clear-cut an explanation for Hardy's short stories that he has no choice but to exclude the short fictions which cannot be explained with his standards. This may be true of "An Imaginative Woman", "Alicia's Diary", and so forth.

In spite of Mr. Howe's assertion, "Fellow-Townsmen" is a short story. It has the rhythm—the rhythmic repetition of some events with their variations. The rhythm sustains the organic wholeness of the story and strengthens the theme. The theme is Hardy's fatalism as is shown in his novels, and so it can rightly claim to modernity. Some parts of the story are powerful in their symbolic and psychological
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descriptions of the protagonist and the scene, which can also claim to modernity.

Text


Notes