

IRONY IN THOMAS HARDY'S  
"A FEW CRUSTED CHARACTERS"

---

A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English  
University of Houston

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

---

by  
Patsy Ayers Evans  
July, 1974

## FOREWORD

The author wishes to thank Dr. Sherry Zivley, Dr. Don Harrell, Dr. Carolyn Smith, and Dr. Tom DeGregori.

IRONY IN THOMAS HARDY'S  
"A FEW CRUSTED CHARACTERS"

---

An Abstract of a Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate Faculty of the Department of English  
University of Houston

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

---

by  
Patsy Ayers Evans  
July, 1974

IRONY IN THOMAS HARDY'S  
"A FEW CRUSTED CHARACTERS"

Thomas Hardy's series of short stories "A Few Crusted Characters" was written and published during the years 1887-1894 that saw the publication of Tess of The d'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure. It is a frame-story that is almost universally ignored by critics and the general reading public alike; however it is a fine example of Hardy's mastery of ironic techniques, and it provides a potential index for understanding his ironic philosophical outlook.

During this period of time Hardy also wrote three essays expressing his theories about writing. "The Profitable Reading of Fiction," "Candour in English Fiction," and "The Science of Fiction," the only essays on style that he ever wrote, express in expository form the theories on ironic outlook and irony in literary technique that are dramatized in "A Few Crusted Characters." Indeed, the frame-story reads, in many instances, as if it were written to clarify the ideas that are but haltingly formulated in the essays.

In "A Few Crusted Characters" Hardy covers many types of irony--verbal, situational, and juxtaposition of

contrasting characterizations and scenes. He uses irony to clarify his philosophical outlook, especially in his choice of narrators in the individual tales. These narrators see the various levels of reality and communicate them to the reader: the minister sees only the benevolent motives and acts which are compatible with his own system of values; the prankster sees the world of everyday and uses his vision of it to fool others; the aged groceress sees time, space, and humanity from a great distance and seems to receive her information through a supernatural agency. The groceress serves a two-fold literary and philosophic function: because she seems like fate and because she is passive and disinterested, she furnishes a valuable insight into Hardy's idea of the relative influence of fate in human affairs. In understanding his ironic philosophy, it is important to see that she is not the malignant meddler that Hardy is usually credited with having created. Furthermore, since Hardy has placed the frame's own narrator outside the realm of this narrator, and in a position to control her role in his tale as well as her own narrative, this relationship would suggest that he considers destiny subject to man's control.

The frame-story is good entertainment, dealing as it does with a representative gallery of Hardy's rustics. The

stories also have intellectual appeal because they investigate Hardy's themes of alienation and impercipient, the inefficacy of organized religion, the unworkability of hasty marriage, and the inequities of civil justice. The greatest value of "A Few Crusted Characters" is that it helps to clarify Hardy's philosophical outlook regarding the relative roles of fate and free-will in human activities.

## CONTENTS

	Page
FOREWARD	
INTRODUCTION	
I. HARDY'S THEORY OF IRONY . . . . .	1
II. IRONIES IN THE SEPARATE STORIES . . . . .	28
III. IRONIES IN THE FRAME . . . . .	64
CONCLUSION . . . . .	91
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	96

## INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hardy's frame-story called "A Few Crusted Characters"<sup>1</sup> has been underestimated as merely an "affectionate" or "winning" look at Wessex citizens and their ways.<sup>2</sup> It is a pleasant aesthetic experience, especially for a reader familiar with Hardy Country, his characters and his uses of irony. I believe, however, Hardy meant it to be more than entertainment. He wrote it when he was striving hardest for accurate expression in his prose fiction and was finding himself misunderstood at every turn. Most of the misunderstanding resulted from his critics' inability to appreciate Hardy's pervading ironic tone and its effects on the smaller, more obvious ironies within the fiction. In "A Few Crusted Characters" Hardy has provided what amounts almost to a schematic representation of

<sup>1</sup>Life's Little Ironies (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1942), pp. 189-259. This series is of the convention of the frame-story. The internal stories will be referred to in my text as the "stories" or "tales" and the external narration as the "frame."

<sup>2</sup>Irving Howe, Thomas Hardy (New York: the Macmillan Company, 1967), p. 77; Norman Page, "Hardy's Short Stories: A Reconsideration," Studies in Short Fiction, IX, No. 1 (Winter 1974), p. 77.



his ironic outlook and the forms it takes in fiction. Because it can serve as a diagram of Hardy's uses of irony, "A Few Crusted Characters" is also a potential index for understanding irony in other of his writings; from it we can perhaps draw inferences for new insights in the larger body of his work. The effect of his irony on his form and meaning has often been the subject of controversy, and evaluation among critics. Analysis of the balance of irony, form, and meaning in "A Few Crusted Characters" can perhaps shed some light on Hardy's idea of what comprised a balance.

The present debate involving the value of his work as a whole centers around the same considerations that occupied the attention of his earliest critics: 1) his cosmic irony and 2) the artistic merit of his literary style. Critics usually interrelate the two. In a review of Jude the Obscure in 1895, W. D. Howells said: "I do not know how instinctively or how voluntarily he [Hardy] has appealed to our inherent superstition of Fate . . . but I am sure that in the world where his hapless people have their being, there is not only no Providence, but there is Fate alone; and the environment is such that character itself cannot avail against it." He went on to say, "I find myself defending the book on the ethical side when I meant chiefly

to praise it for what seems to me its artistic excellence. . . it has unity very uncommon in the novel, and especially the English novel."<sup>3</sup>

In 1949, Albert Guerard challenged the earlier "generation" of Hardy critics, whose dates he sets as 1895 to 1946; their view of Hardy as a pessimist or fatalist could no more survive modern scrutiny than could their high opinion of his literary craftsmanship, Guerard said. Once the violent Victorian reactions--both favorable and unfavorable--had subsided, he explained, the novels' plots stood out as the unpolished contrivances that they were. Furthermore, he claimed, the plots themselves demonstrated that Hardy was not a fatalist, because he had obviously not intended them to be realistically fatalistic; they were, instead, Hardy's fictitious representations of reality, "highly convincing foreshortenings of the actual and absurd world."<sup>4</sup> In other words, Guerard believed that Hardy's greatness was genuine enough, but that it lay not in his depictions of realistic and pre-determined patterns, but rather in the anti-realistic creations of ironically distorted, purely

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Hardy and his Readers, eds. Laurence Lerner and John Holmstrom (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1968), pp. 115-117.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas Hardy (Norfolk, Connecticut: James Laughlin, 1949), pp. 2, 3. Hereafter referred to in my text as "Guerard."

imaginary situations. Irony, Guerard felt, was an almost accidental but highly effective rhetorical device of Hardy's; it was not the world-view of a technically-precise fatalist.

The opinion represented by Guerard has not stood as the final word, however. The question of Hardy's effectiveness of philosophy and style continued to engage the attention of critics; and Hardy's irony still lay at the root of the debate. In 1963 Roy Morrell attempted to vindicate both style and philosophy, and their interdependence, in what amounted to a reversal of critical direction and the taking of an extreme position. Hardy's point, he said, is that man wrongly blames Fate for the consequences of his own actions. Then, Morrell said, Hardy contrives sequences of contradictory elements in "ironic relation"<sup>5</sup> in order to make form express meaning; or he shows people voicing an intention and then behaving in a way calculated to thwart their own stated objectives. Hardy will go to great lengths, Morrell said, to show his characters' abuse of their own freedom of choice and action; when they finally bring catastrophe on themselves, they assign such outcomes to the inscrutable workings of destiny. In a

<sup>5</sup>The Will and the Way (Kuala Lumpur: The University of Malaya Press, 1963), p. 12. Hereafter referred to in my text as "Morrell."

final irony, then, Hardy will intrude to make an authorial comment such as the one concerning the "President of the Immortals" at the end of Tess of the d'Urbervilles--a comment, incidentally, that was taken at face value in Hardy's day and for long afterwards (Morrell, p. 133).

These authorial intrusions, said Morrell, are meant to establish Hardy's real, ironic, anti-fatalistic attitudes, and are stylistically effective. In short, Morrell said that Hardy's craftsmanship is deliberate and successful, that through the use of irony it expresses a belief in the free-will of mankind.

In 1971 R. F. Southerington moved one step away from the favorable but perhaps overly-subjective position taken by Morrell. Although he agreed that Hardy's irony is of larger scope than had been previously recognized, he qualified Morrell's belief in unlimited freedom of choice; and he questioned whether Hardy's style--regarding the authorial intrusions--could support a viewpoint of even limited freedom of choice. In Hardy's fictitious world a certain amount of free-will does seem to exist, said Southerington, but man also seems subject to both internal and external biological and evolutionary forces. "The question that remains," he said, "is whether that world is one whose limitations on human actions are only partial, as

Hardy the man seems to have believed, or whether Hardy the novelist presented characters without freedom. This is not merely speculative questioning; on the answers depends a just appreciation of his work."<sup>6</sup>

Here the state of Hardy criticism presently rests--with view of Hardy as partially deterministic in regard to life and his characters, and with the matter of the success of his treatment and form in question. Further evidence is needed to help establish his stance as an ironist; and, although his poems, novels, and historical dramas have been thoroughly analysed for ironic implications, the short fiction is relatively untouched by critics as yet. Although much of this fiction consists of mere episodes or sketches, some of the stories have well-defined plots, more-than-adequate themes and characterizations, and ample room for the exercise of ironic techniques and devices. "A Few Crusted Characters" qualifies as one of Hardy's well-constructed works of short fiction, and my thesis will examine its structure and content with the intention of clarifying Hardy's ironic outlook.

<sup>6</sup> Hardy's Vision of Man (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971), p. 12. Hereafter referred to in my text as "Southerington."

The purpose of my thesis is to show that "A Few Crusted Characters" goes far toward illuminating Hardy's stance in relation to ironies in life and literature. Because of the crucial time in Hardy's career that it was written, and because the frame-story can be shown to illustrate Hardy's literary theories concerning irony, I believe this selection to be an exceptionally accurate index to Hardy's attitudes and of his application of those attitudes to his work. If this can be shown, then the value of "A Few Crusted Characters" to clarifying key issues in Hardy criticism is considerable.

## I. HARDY'S THEORY OF IRONY

In 1891 Hardy published "A Few Crusted Characters" in serial form and republished the entire series three years later in Life's Little Ironies. During these years Hardy was also bringing out serial publications of Tess of the d'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure, and the excitement generated by the novels drew attention away from Hardy's other writings of the same period; the short stories, at least, were almost universally ignored. It is unfortunate that the stories dropped out of sight, for if Hardy had been able to make himself understood through them, the furor over Tess and Jude might have been less, and the appreciation greater. As it happened, however, public reaction to the two novels was so virulent that Hardy remarked that a man would be a fool to risk such another volley of criticism, and he was never to write another novel. The outraged readers of Tess and Jude, missing the subtle and shifting ironies of the novels and seeing only what they mistook for bitterness and pessimism, were at a loss to explain just what they were outraged about, resorting, therefore, to such measure as burning the novels and mailing

Hardy the ashes.<sup>1</sup> He was equally helpless to understand the cause of their reaction. Yet, their dismay, his bewilderment, and the books' greatness all have a common cause--his encompassing sense of irony, and its infusion into his fiction. As an ironist, his stance is exceptionally remote--as shown, for example, by his personal writings--and it is this remote stance that serves either to sharpen or to obfuscate meaning, depending upon the reader's perception of the irony's existence.

Only recently have critics achieved enough distance in time and philosophy to recognize the number and extent of the ironies in Hardy's work. That understanding might have been reached sooner, and even now can be facilitated, by a thorough examination of "A Few Crusted Characters," especially if the series is read in conjunction with his notebooks, biographies, and with his essays written around 1890. "A Few Crusted Characters" can be shown to fit some of Hardy's main theories in these essays, theories which call for ironic techniques and devices. Furthermore, the characteristic form of this frame-story permits critical dissection and observation of the writer's art, possibly

<sup>1</sup>Evelyn Hardy, Thomas Hardy: A Critical Biography (New York: Russell & Russell, 1954; rpt. 1970), p. 245. Hereafter referred to in my text as "CB."



better than other forms can do, where irony is concerned. It will be the purpose of this chapter to show first, Hardy's general ironic outlook regarding life and art; second, his determination, in the burst of productivity and social concern he experienced around 1890, to gain his readers' understanding; and third, his embodiment, in "A Few Crusted Characters," of his theories regarding irony, life, and art.

Although his outlook in life and his techniques as a writer were based on irony or ironic treatment, Hardy never used the term to describe either his attitudes or his work, the one glaring exception being in the title, Life's Little Ironies. The unexpected outcome, the incongruous combination, the coincidental turn of events that he often observed around him, he referred to merely as a "curious" happening or as a "trick of Nature."<sup>2</sup> He regarded the transference of these elements into his fiction as the "giving of artistic form to a true sequence of things . . ." (Orel, p. 25). His personal writings emphasized his ironic world-view: he stressed the need for detachment; he recorded the incongruities he noticed in his daily life; and he conceived ironic plots and made note of them for future use.

<sup>2</sup>Harold Orel, ed., Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1966), p. 31. Hereafter referred to in my text as "Orel."

A vivid expression of his need for detachment appears in this passage from Early Life:<sup>3</sup>

I have attempted many modes [of finding the value of life] . . . For my part, if there is any way of getting a melancholy satisfaction out of life it lies in dying, so to speak, before one is out of the flesh; by which I mean putting on the manner of ghosts, wandering in their haunts, and taking their view of surrounding things. To think of life as passing away is a sadness, to think of it as past is at least tolerable. Hence even when I enter into a room to pay a simple morning call I have unconsciously the habit of regarding the scene as if I were a spectre not solid enough to influence my environment; only fit to behold and say as another spectre said: 'Peace be unto you!'

Hardy seems sometimes to have equated detachment with a highly desirable form of death-in-life, and to have projected this belief and desire onto others. Always sensitive to signs of pain or illness in others, he both consoled himself with their potential for detachment and tormented himself with their failure to avail themselves of the relief it offered. Once, upon seeing a sick and aged man, he recorded the pity he felt for the man's unwillingness to detach himself from his body or to part, even in fancy, from the ailing physical self. Hardy said, "A staid, worn, weak man at the railway station. His back, his legs, his hands, his face, were longing to be out of the world."

<sup>3</sup>Florence Emily Hardy, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928), p. 72. Hereafter referred to in my text as "EL."

His brain was not longing to be, because, like the brain of most people, it was the last part of his body to realize a situation" (EL, p. 293). Immersed in life, the man suffered all its discomforts without knowing of an immediate, far less an ultimate, escape from it by mental distancing.

To be too closely involved in a situation was to be deceived by it, or blind to it, Hardy felt. In his conviction that reality lay below surface appearances, he considered a lack of detachment to be a type of delusion, as he explained in this passage: "I was thinking a night or two ago that people are somnambulists--that the material is not the real--only the visible, the real being invisible optically. That it is because we are in a somnambulist hallucination that we think the real to be what we see as real" (EL, p. 243). Furthermore, to become intimately involved in the specifics of a material world was, paradoxically, to lose touch with those very specifics, because the observer could see only one aspect at a time, rather than all the conflicting aspects that comprise reality. To see only one aspect at a time would also rob one of perspective, since an accurate scale of values results from the ability to see and compare the levels of reality. Evelyn Hardy records, in her biography, that

"Hardy used to find fault with Middleton as having no sense of life as such; as one who would talk, for instance, about bishops' copes and mitres with an earnest, serious, anxious manner, as if there were no cakes and ale in the world, or laughter and tears, or human misery beyond tears. His [Middleton's] sense of art had caused him to lose all sense of relativity, and of art's subsidiary relation to existence" (EL, p. 296).

To Hardy, then, detachment seemed a sort of triumph over the illusions presented by a material world. By simulating the body's death, detachment freed the mind and imagination from mortality's ordinary state of sleep-walking and enabled the individual to keep his values intact. Hardy made such a point of the necessity for remaining aloof, emotionally, that his critics and biographers usually attempt some explanation of the reasons for the attitude and try to suggest its source and relevance.

Irving Howe tells us that Hardy's "reticence" was something that "everyone noticed," even at a first meeting. Howe emphasizes that it "was not mere shyness, nor merely the result of a wish to keep free from the murky entanglements of publicity. It was a reticence that went deep into his psychic composition and had a strange reflection in the fact that he always disliked being touched by other

persons . . ."<sup>4</sup> An extremely accurate observation is that people noticed in Hardy a "considerateness, but also a certain abstractness, what seems a gentle distance from his own life" (Howe, p. 74). That this "abstractness" gave Hardy an unusual authorial perspective is obvious to those who have read his personal writings: "His ability to hold himself aloof from the world mentally and emotionally made Hardy see people at a concert, a picture-gallery or in the Museum Reading Room as 'Souls outside Bodies,' or 'Souls . . . screened by their bodies,'" says Evelyn Hardy (C.B., p. 224).

The foregoing passage sounds like a description from Muecke: "The ironic attitude of a 'General Ironist' is complicated by his own equivocal position. On the one hand his sense of irony implies detachment . . . he will be detached from life itself or at least from that general aspect of life in which he perceives a fundamental contradiction. On the other hand, the picture he sees of an ironic world must show himself as victim. So he is at the same time involved and detached . . ."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Irving Howe, Thomas Hardy (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), p. 74. Hereafter referred to in my text as "Howe."

<sup>5</sup>C. D. Muecke, The Compass of Irony (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1969), p. 122. Hereafter referred to in my text as "Muecke."

The critics' statements about Hardy's detachment, and the ironologist's definition of typical ironic remoteness converge in a statement made by Richard Carpenter. Noting a relationship between Hardy's personal distance to the world and his ironic outlook, Carpenter says, "He always kept a polite and ironic mask before the world and never, as some writers have done, let it drop so that the real man beneath might be seen and understood . . ."<sup>6</sup>

J. Hillis Miller sees a relationship between Hardy's tone and stance as a writer and his detachment from life. ". . . Hardy can turn back on the world and watch it from a safe distance, see it clearly . . . and judge it. This way of being related to the world is the origin of his art. Such an attitude determines the habitual stance of his narrators, that detachment which sees events from above them or from a time long after they have happened. . . The tone of voice natural to a spectator who sees things from such a distance imparts . . . throughout his work as a compound of irony [and] cold detachment . . ."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Richard C. Carpenter, Thomas Hardy (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964), p. 18. Hereafter referred to in my text as "Carpenter."

<sup>7</sup>J. Hillis Miller, Distance and Desire (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 7. Hereafter referred to in my text as "Miller."

Far enough removed from the everyday human attitudes to see clearly, Hardy was always on the alert for the unexpected, and he looked for contrasts everywhere. He was impressed with the two-fold nature of existence, with the way a thing often conceals its exact opposite. Actually, this metaphysical concept of inherent dichotomies has correlates in the physical world. Physicists tell us, for example, that so familiar a thing as color has a complex explanation--that it is not a phenomenon, but an experience, and that the color we perceive an object to be is the only color which that object is not. That is, an object retains all the light waves except the ones reflected back to us as color. The chair we call red, therefore, contains every color except red. Without knowing this physical fact, Hardy nevertheless guessed at such a state of affairs. He noted, "The hypocrisy of things. Nature is an arch-dissembler. A child is deceived completely; the older members of society more or less according to their penetration; though even they seldom get to realize that nothing is as it appears (EL, p. 24). Hardy approached life with the intention of penetrating its concealments, asserting that, "If you look beneath the surface of any farce you see a tragedy; and, on the contrary, if you blind yourself to the deeper issues of a tragedy you see a farce"

(EL, p. 282). Often he would notice an actual contrast and then would devise a contrast analogous to it, as he did here: "To Trinity Church. Dorchester. The rector in his sermon delivers himself of mean images in a sublime voice, and the effect is that of a glowing landscape in which clothes are hung out to dry."<sup>8</sup> Almost any juxtaposition struck him as ironic; one winter's day he wrote, "Long Ditton. Snow on the graves. A superfluous piece of cynicism in Nature" (Ntbk, p. 50).

He looked for irony in what he heard and read, as well as in what he observed for himself and made note of almost any tale of unexpected outcome, as in the case of "A man named Sherwood, a boxer . . . used his wife roughly, left her and went to America. She pined for him. At last he sent for her to come with the children. She died of joy at the news" (Ntbk, p. 32). He would sometimes draw conclusions of his own, using only the bare outline of a situation to go on: "The Reverend Mr. Wilkinson in Cornwall married a handsome actress. She settled down to serve God as unceremoniously as she had previously done Hammon" (Ntbk, p. 50).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hardy's Notebooks (London: The Hogarth Press, 1933), p. 45. Hereafter referred to in my text as "Ntbk."



In addition to searching for ironies in actual situations, Hardy also created numerous ironic fictions in skeleton form. As he conceived of the situations, he noted them in journals: "Plot for a novel, or play. A good looking woman, with a thirst for fame, tries literature and fails . . . meets a philosopher who tells her notoriety is as good as fame . . . she continues chaste in deed. . . [although she gains an unsavory reputation] meets a pure young man, and loves him passionately. . . How can she convince him of her innocence?" (Ntbk, pp. 64-65). Sometimes he later expanded these seminal plots into actual stories; "Andrey Satchel and the Parson and Clerk," for example, probably had its beginning in November of 1877 when Hardy entered in his notebook: "The Honest Earl. . . accidentally shut up in a tower . . . with a blacksmith's daughter . . . feels it his duty to marry her. Does so and finds her not so good as she seemed . . ." (Ntbk, p. 52).

Transferring life's ironies to fiction requires a certain falsification, no matter how conscientious the artist, as Hardy was well aware. "Art," he wrote, "is the secret of how to produce by a false thing the effect of a true . . ." (EL, p. 284). This production involved strange distortions, he knew, since he sometimes observed oddities in life far surpassing those that he dared embody in fiction.

He stated wryly that, "Though a good deal is too strange to be believed, nothing is too strange to have happened" (Ntbk, p. 35). He realized that a writer who sees the unusual in everyday events has some considerable adjustment to make if his fiction is to be credible, and he reasoned that, " . . . a story must be striking enough to be worth telling. Therein lies the problem--to reconcile the average with that uncommonness which alone makes it natural that a tale or experience would dwell in the memory and induce repetition" (SL, p. 314). For him, the extraordinary was perfectly believable, and in order to achieve any measure of reader credibility, Hardy had actually to bend his plots in the direction of the accepted concept of the "usual."

In the year 1890, at age 50, with twelve novels to his credit, Hardy enjoyed a world-wide reputation, and his journals are filled with accounts of friendly associations with other famous writers and with the nobility. He had advanced from mere prosperity to genuine wealth. Most of his works had been received generously by critics and the general reader; and although he overlooked the favorable reviews to worry about the few that were not so favorable, he was still determined to tell the truth--in fiction. He was, furthermore, set on telling the truth on his own terms,

and on being understood. He was more convinced than ever that "reality" was hidden by appearances. In 1987 he had written: "I don't want to see landscapes, i.e., scenic paintings of them, because I don't want to see the original realities . . . I want to see deeper reality underlying the scenic, the expression of what are sometimes called abstract imaginings. The 'simply natural' is interesting no longer . . . The exact truth as to material fact ceases to be of importance in art--it is a student's style . . ." (EL, pp. 242-243). Because of his integrity as an artist, he felt his responsibility to be that of accurate depiction of this world-view, as he says in his biography, "Consider the Wordsworthian dictum (the more perfectly the natural object is reproduced, the more truly poetic the picture). This reproduction is achieved by seeing into the heart of a thing (as rain, wind, for instance), and is realism, in fact, though through being pursued by means of the imagination it is confounded with invention, which is pursued by the same means. It is, in short, reached by what M. Arnold calls 'the imaginative reason'" (EL, p. 190).

At a loss to explain his ironic outlook in any but general terms, he embodied it as honestly as he was able in fiction. As long as enough humour existed in his plots,

as long as sex and violence were disguised or symbolized--and--this was generally the case up through The Woodlanders, published in 1887--his reading public gave him their approval and support. He was, however, dissatisfied with what he considered the lack of purpose in his work, and he wanted to write a novel with a really serious theme and an unflinching view of reality as he perceived it. On April 28, 1888, he entered in his journal: "A short story of a young man--'who could not go to Oxford'--His struggles and ultimate failure. Suicide . . . There is something [in this] the world ought to be shown, and I am the one to show them . . ." (EL, p. 272). Mature in ironic outlook and in the application of irony in his writing, Hardy was formulating his master-piece, Jude the Obscure.

Almost as if he were clearing the way for its reception, he tried, as never before, to explain his literary methods and intentions. In 1888, 1890, and 1891 he wrote and published three formal essays on style and purpose in fiction--the only such essays he ever produced: "The Profitable Reading of Fiction," "Candour in English Fiction," and "The Science of Fiction," respectively. Michael Millgate in 1971 calls these essays an "important" part of Hardy's extraordinary burst of productivity in the years 1888 through

1891.<sup>9</sup> At the time Hardy wrote them, however, neither critics nor the general reader seems to have reacted to them.

Nevertheless, reaction was vigorous to other of Hardy's writings during these years. "A Group of Noble Dames" drew adverse criticism that he tried to meet by explaining the ironic distancing in his use of a middle narrator--that is to say, the narrator of a story within the main story. The serial publication of Tess that began in 1889 drew immediate attention, both favorable and violently antagonistic. With Jude also ready for serial publication, Hardy had made every effort in his power to facilitate the public's reception and understanding of his work, to explain his use of ironic techniques and his own philosophies and artistic outlook. Undoubtedly he sensed the futility of trying direct explanation of what he was doing, for he realized that in any type of writing besides poetry and fiction, he was all but helpless to communicate. Besides, he had access to no standard set of technical terms for discussing literary theories; Guerard notes that " . . . [during the Victorian Era] criticism was rich in grand general statements about the relationships of literature and

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Hardy: His Career as a Novelist (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 253. Hereafter referred to in my text as "Millgate."

life, form and content, etc., but it rarely got down to particulars" (Guerard, p. 38).

Frustrated by his own inadequacy as an essayist and by the absence of a standard literary vocabulary, yet spurred by his need to communicate, Hardy would predictably have resorted to a fictional representation of his theories. Delmore Schwartz both recognizes Hardy's problems in expository writing and also suggests the solution when he observes that "Hardy failed when he tried to make a direct statement of his beliefs; he succeeded when he used his beliefs to make significant the observations which concerned him."<sup>10</sup> "A Few Crusted Characters" quite possibly represents Hardy's attempt to use his beliefs to "make significant" the presence, uses, and relevance of irony, both as a fact of life and as a literary treatment. The stories demonstrate, point-by-lucid-point, the theories he but haltingly formulated in the three essays; and in their unrivaled use of irony, the stories can serve to clarify not only the essays but also Hardy's application of irony in general, especially his final remote stance in regard to his own philosophy and art.

<sup>10</sup>"Poetry and Belief in Thomas Hardy." The Southern Review, VI (Summer 1940), pp. 66.

The first obvious connection between one of the essays and "A Few Crusted Characters" appears in the use of the unusual word "crusted." In "The Profitable Reading of Fiction" Hardy makes the point that when a character achieves even a modicum of sophistication, he can no longer be classified with the "untutored classes of mankind," and his exterior becomes his "screen," rather than his index.<sup>11</sup> He goes on to say, "Contrasts are disguised by the crust of conventionality, picturesqueness obliterated, and a subjective system of description necessitated for the differentiation of character" (Reading, p. 124). Hardy is speaking of a "crust" of sophistication; yet in "A Few Crusted Characters," he deals with Wessex folk, the whole gallery of rustics whose counterparts appear in the novels and poems. A contradiction might be suspected, had not Thomas Hardy often presented Wessex as quite a respectable portion of the larger world--the church bells of Longpuddle, he had once observed, were surely of the same alloy as those of St. Mark's in Venice (EL, pp. 252-253).

<sup>11</sup>Thomas Hardy, "The Profitable Reading of Fiction" in Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings, ed. Harold Orel (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1966), p. 124. Hereafter referred to in my text as "Reading."

Obviously, then, Hardy here speaks of a "crust" besides that of sophistication; the Oxford English Dictionary supplies an appropriate definition: "(from crusted wine): Antiquated, 'venerable'; often with admixture of the notion 'covered with a crust of prejudice, etc.' . . . 'The lengths to which good old crusted bigotry can go . . . ' 'England . . . cherishes a fine old crusted abuse as much as it does its port.'" Thus there are at least two kinds of crusts: that of sophistication and that of bigotry and prejudice, and Hardy penetrates one type of crust in his characters in order to get under another type in his readers.

At the beginning of the essay, "The Profitable Reading of Fiction," Hardy says that fiction should provide a change of scene which should "manifestly be as complete as if the reader had taken the hind seat on a witch's broomstick. The town man finds what he seeks in novels of the country . . ." (Reading, p. 111). "A Few Crusted Characters" is certain to be read by the "town man," and here a "crust" of sophistication comes in, but in the reader, rather than in the fictional character. And it is, after all, fully as important to penetrate the reader's crust as to pierce that of the character in the story. An author's first challenge is to get the reader's attention, and to do it without undue offense. To present a point that



engages the imagination, a situation that piques the sense of curiosity, a crime that involves the reader only peripherally and a penalty that taxes him by proxy: this is the challenge and the reward of getting under the reader's crust. Hardy recognized the importance of such penetration; Michael Millgate quotes him in a letter that says, " . . . the upper classes of society have been induced to read, before any, [sic] books in which they themselves are painted by a comparative outsider. That, in works of such a kind, unmitigated utterances of strong feeling against the class to which these readers belong may lead them to throw down a volume in disgust; whilst the very same feelings inserted edgewise so to say--half concealed beneath ambiguous expressions, or at any rate written as if they were not the chief aims of the book (even though they may be)--become the most attractive remarks of all" (p. 19). Here Hardy gives the appearance of speaking about rustics; in doing so, he is writing for the educated classes, but in a way to penetrate their "crusts." He uses a "subjective" system of description to penetrate the "crust" of the characters.

The "subjective" system of description that he uses in "A Few Crusted Characters" is, very briefly, this: he has the narrators of the individual stories assign their

own attitudes to the characters they tell about: the overly-innocent Curate, for example, is unable to see pre-meditation in the elopement of the couple in "The History of the Hardcomes." Mr. Day, the "world-ignored" landscape painter, is seen to admire craftiness and boldness in women by the admiration he voices for Netty Sargent: his concept of virtue as "what one doesn't get caught at" is obvious when he says, "Virtue had its reward," after having described Netty's deceit--and success--in securing the copyhold.

Although Hardy describes "crusts" as pertaining to people, he also speaks of penetrating the appearances of events to get to reality. This concept defies easy definition and is somewhat peripheral to my main purpose in this thesis, but is nevertheless important to Hardy's explanation of his ironic "arrangements" of outcome, and in the fact that "A Few Crusted Characters" gets around the problem. How does an author balance plot and conclusion between the morally-edifying "crust" of appearances and the "natural" issue determined by his characters' actions? In the first instance the public approves but does not believe; in the second it believes but does not always approve, and both instances involve complex aesthetic and ethical questions. Hardy says that "It must be borne in mind, despite the claims of realism, that the best fiction,

like the highest artistic expression in other modes is more true, so to put it, than history or nature can be" (Reading, p. 117). He seems to refer to the author's privilege of determining how his story shall end, how his characters shall behave. He feels it somehow a breach of morality to interfere with "spontaneity" in plot and action; he wonders, for instance, how an author can avoid "charlatanry" in writing a serial for a magazine. "As it advances month by month," Hardy says, "and the situations develop, the writer asks himself, 'what will his characters do next?'" (Reading, p. 129). The author is then caught between the claims of realism, or what he knows his characters would naturally do, and the claims of the literary conscience that imposes a moral responsibility upon the author as a member of society. Hardy continues, "The dilemma then confronts him, he must either whip and scourge those characters into doing something contrary to their natures, to produce the spurious effect of their being in harmony with social forms and ordinances, or, by leaving them alone to act as they will, he must bring down the thunders of

respectability upon his head, not to say ruin his editor, his publisher, and himself."<sup>12</sup>

There are several ways in which "A Few Crusted Characters" gets around this problem: first, there is the all-important distancing produced by the use of multiple narrators, meant to act as buffers for the harsher aspects of a situation. This was Hardy's second experiment with multi-layered narration; in 1889 he had published "A Group of Noble Dames," his one other attempt at a frame-story, and was called to task by a reader in the Pall Mall Gazette for the grotesque details of mutilation in "Barbara of the House of Grebe." He replied to the critic: ". . . to guard against the infliction of 'a hideous and hateful fantasy,' as you call it, the action is thrown back into a second plane or middle distance, being described by a character to characters, and not point-blank by author to reader" (Millgate, p. 289). This distancing device of multiple narrators, is, of course, the ironist's attempt to gain detachment enough for himself and for his reader, to portray a true sequence of events without being overwhelmed

<sup>12</sup>Thomas Hardy. "Candour in English Fiction" in Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings, ed. Harold Orel (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1966), p. 130. Hereafter referred to in my text as "Candour."

by it. If anything, Hardy succeeded too well in "A Few Crusted Characters," since, as I noted in the introduction to this thesis, the selection has been called an "affectionate" and "winning" look at Wessex, when actually murders, destructive hypocrisy, and an execution are described in it, as well as a forced marriage and a robbery. Without causing undue alarm, Hardy had managed to steer the events in the direction he felt they would realistically go, given the circumstances and the characters he had created.

That the writer does have a further obligation to the public, over and above the claims of reader credibility, Hardy was quick to point out. In speaking of the aesthetic and instructive aims of fiction, he placed the second above the first in importance, by admitting that ". . . to get pleasure out of a book is a beneficial and profitable thing . . ." (Reading, pp. 111-112). "[However] our true object," he goes on to say, "is a lesson in life, mental enlargement from elements essential to the narratives themselves and from the reflections they engender" (Reading, p. 114). The relationship of form to meaning is especially important here, involving, as it does, the relationship of art to morality.

To choose a form for one's fiction is, necessarily, to exercise artifice, and Hardy does not attempt to deny this; he says, "The most devoted apostle of realism, the sheerest naturalist, cannot escape, any more than the withered old gossip over her fire, the exercise of Art in his labour or pleasure of telling a tale."<sup>13</sup> Since choice of form is inescapable, an author will do well to choose an existing form; Hardy explains, "Good fiction may be defined here as that kind of imaginative writing which lies nearest to the epic, dramatic, or narrative masterpieces of the past. One fact is certain: in fiction there can be no intrinsically new thing at this stage of the world's history" (Reading, p. 144).

In utilizing the literary convention of the frame-story, Hardy certainly was staying with a "masterpiece of the past," where his form was concerned. That he was aware of the convention, that it was fresh in his mind, is evidenced by the fact, as Evelyn Hardy points out, that he had recently been reading Chaucer and Boccaccio (CB, p. 24). The frame-story was no "new thing," having had its origin in the Orient at least a millenium before Hardy's

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Hardy, "The Science of Fiction," in Thomas Hardy's Personal Writings, ed. Harold Orel (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1966), p. 134. Hereafter referred to in my text as "Science."

time and having been preserved in such well-known works as The Arabian Nights, The Decameron, and The Canterbury Tales.

His form once chosen and the type and extent of artifice decided upon, the author must then adjust the balance of aesthetic and moral effects he intends his work to have. Hardy seemed fairly sure of his own opinions about this balance, but his critics were less sure of his success, at least where the novels were concerned. In the spring of 1890 Hardy noted, "In an article on Ibsen in the Fortnightly the writer says that his manner is wrong. That the drama, like the novel, should not be for edification. In this I think the writer errs. It should be so, but the edified should not perceive the edification. Ibsen's edifying is too obvious" (EL, p. 224). Under ordinary circumstances, Hardy's own edifying was also rather obvious, his critics usually feel; Guerard says that when Hardy abandoned the impulse to entertain for the impulse to "theorize, classify, and schematize" his style suffered accordingly. "Hardy's formal weakness," he says, "derived from his apparent inability to control the comings and goings of those divergent impulses and from his unwillingness to cultivate and sustain the harsher ones. He submitted to first one and then another, and the spirit blew where it

listed. Hence the radical unevenness not merely of his work as a whole, but of any one book" (p. 48). "A Few Crusted Characters" overcomes this weakness, and provides adequate support for both entertainment and edification because of the frame-tale's characteristic form: the individual stories exist mainly for their entertainment value, the frame mainly for its instructive or philosophic value, and sharp contrasts in mood and approach are expected. Although the frame-story is not universally constructed with this relationship between the parts, it lends itself especially well to such a relationship in "A Few Crusted Characters."

The frame-story series "A Few Crusted Characters" thus represents, in dramatic form, Hardy's literary theories as they stood in 1891, at the height of his powers as a novelist and as an ironist. They illustrate his ideas of realism in plot and character, and most of all, his ideas of how to get beneath the "crusts" of character and reader alike. They illustrate the importance he attaches to ironic distancing whereby the reader can understand, without becoming over-involved in, the less savory aspects of "reality" in the stories; they illustrate his concept of the relations of form to meaning in fiction, and of pleasure and edification. That they also represent, in great



detail, the ironist's many perspectives, will be shown in Chapter II; that they represent Hardy's final, extremely remote, ironic position, will be shown in Chapter III.

## II. IRONIES IN THE SEPARATE STORIES

This chapter examines the way Hardy reveals different levels of reality and illusion by his manipulation of ironic distance within the separate stories. In searching out and identifying the techniques by which he achieves his effects, I will rely on terms and descriptions from The Compass of Irony, in which C. D. Muecke describes the techniques an ironic author will use when attempting to penetrate appearances. In "A Few Crusted Characters" Hardy illustrates through the ironic effects of his fiction, the many ways of regarding concrete reality, establishing his own beliefs about and relationships to the concept that he finally reaches. In his fiction he defines illusion by embodying it in situations, actions, and ideas that he feels his readers will recognize as being distortions of truth; he succeeds so well as a story-teller, however, that his ironic representations too often are taken at face value and not recognized as distortions at all. The reader arrives at the end of a passage with the vague feeling that he has missed something, and if he goes back and looks carefully, he can often locate an ironic twist or two that

changes the tone of the entire passage. By searching Hardy's work for the techniques that Muecke describes as belonging to a certain type or level of irony, it is possible to arrive at a clear understanding of Hardy's irony and a closer approximation of the effects he is striving for.<sup>1</sup>

"Irony" may be said, very simply, to be the experience of something gone awry in the order of things. The key words here are "experience," "awry," and "order." (These terms are mine, but the general ideas are Muecke's; all other terms are Muecke's, unless otherwise specified.) Because irony must be perceived in order to exist at all, it is not a phenomenon, but rather an "experience." "Gone awry" and "order" indicate that irony is two-layered, the upper level having to do with an assumed correctness in an assumed system, the lower level containing some violation or contradiction of the correctness. The contradiction may be as simple as an accidental juxtaposition of objects, such as two books on a shelf--Walden beside Future Shock, for example--or it may be as simple as a work of

<sup>1</sup>I have tried to stay within the guidelines provided by Muecke's terms as applied to Hardy's techniques, and that I have, furthermore, tried to limit my correlations to the plainest, most obvious, instances of irony, attempting to bear in mind Northrup Frye's admonitions against "irony-hunting."

literature containing deliberate incongruities of language (verbal irony) or events (situational irony). While the first instance requires only that someone observe the juxtaposition, the second owes its existence to an ironist who arranges the contradictions, and who may, besides, be the only person who recognizes them.

Muecke's second definition deals with the people, in addition to the ironist, who may be involved in irony. When a person is "confidently" or "arrogantly" unaware of a discrepancy's existence, when he sees only the lower level of the ironic structure and firmly believes it to be genuine (mere ignorance or innocence will not suffice) he is said to be a victim of irony, or the alazon (Muecke, p. 39). In real life this can happen when someone plays a practical joke, the ironist leading some victim into a situation whose destination is the reverse of what the victim confidently expects. The victim may or may not eventually see the discrepancy; furthermore, the ironist may become his own victim, if a third level emerges to contradict the second, as when Absalon, in Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale," applies the heated brand. Because of his confident assumption that he is deceiving someone, the ironist always runs a risk; at the same time that he arranges a victimization he places himself in the precarious

position of potential victim. Related to ironic victimization is the target of irony, or the thing that one is ironic "about"--an institution, an attitude, a custom, a condition--but not a person (Muecke, pp. 34-33).

Muecke's third and last group of definitions that I will use involve ironic mode, the ironist's distance from his own irony, his relation to it in terms of his awareness of its presence and ramifications. This irony may exist either in life or in literature; in literature, it is intimately connected with point of view, the narrator's distance from and cognizance of the world and the characters that he describes, especially in regard to his ability to see beneath surface appearances and pretenses. In any ironic Mode of narration the author presents at least two concurrent, continuing, and conflicting levels of reality, concealing at least one of those levels from someone--either narrator, reader, or someone within the fiction; in non-ironic modes, on the other hand, the author presents the same reality to narrator, reader, and other characters within the work of fiction. Muecke defines the four Modes thus: 1) Impersonal, the "most common of the first three modes . . . The distinguishing quality of Impersonal Mode is the absence of the ironist as a person; we have only his words, generally, though not always

dispassionately expressed" (p. 64). Innuendo, the rhetorical question, pretended doubt, ambiguity, fallacious reasoning, internal contradiction, understatement, and overstatement are all characteristic expressions of Impersonal Mode. If the ironist is subtle enough, and if he aims at a timely and controversial target, the reader is quite easily victimized, especially when the work is one of non-fiction; occasionally it happens that a whole generation of readers takes the Impersonal ironist at his literal word, as did Swift's contemporaries in the case of "A Modest Proposal." The ironist in Impersonal Mode is "behind a more or less impenetrable mask," and the irony is between what he says and what he means. 2) In the second mode, Self-disparaging, the ironic contradiction exists between the ironist's real opinion and the one he pretends to hold. This mode presents the ironist as deceptively innocent; that is, he pretends to be unaware of the irony in what he says, but he knows that his listeners or readers know he is aware. Mock humility that is meant to be penetrated by all except the most arrogantly unaware victim is the aim of this Mode. Socrates employed Self-disparaging Mode in his pretense of ignorance, deceiving no one in his ostensible search for information except the hopelessly pompous. 3) Ingenu Mode, Huecke's third type of narrative

distance, resembles Self-disparaging except that the ironist presents himself as genuinely innocent; the prototypical figure in Ingenu Mode is Mark Twain's Huck Finn. He is often the victim, but just as often, he escapes the victimizations planned for him by his crafty associates, because of his very lack of sophistication. 4) Dramatized Mode is the fourth and last type, differing from the first three modes in that the author here simply presents ironic situations to our sense of irony. Detached from cause and effect, guilt and innocence, good and evil, this ironist applies no labels and draws few conclusions, feels neither pain nor joy in the situations he describes. The targets of irony here are immense, and the victims include whole populations of mankind, even the ironist himself, who sees but cannot escape the universal victimizations.

Since Hardy's major device for uncovering realities in the individual stories consists in varying the narrators' distances from their environments, I will approach each of the three main narrators with an eye to defining the Modes they use. Relying first on whatever obvious signals Hardy provides to his characters' ironic distance, I will then search for more subtle clues whose existence is not immediately apparent. My belief is that with each of the three main narrators of the separate tales--

Christopher Twink, the Curate, and the aged groceress-- Hardy intends to show how the world looks from various degrees of detachment or immersion. By assigning what Muecke has defined as Impersonal and Self-disparaging Modes to Twink, Innocent Mode to the curate, and Dramatized Mode to the aged groceress, the reader can easily determine other elements within those narratives that Hardy probably meant as ironic. By demonstrating his awareness of and his ability to demonstrate the various distances from life, Hardy can speak with authority about the one he finally chooses.

Except for the three narrators mentioned above, the other narrations are non-ironic in mode. Internal ironies of situation and victimization, as well as verbal ironies, are present in all the tales, but in all but these few, the on-going, parallel contradictions characteristic of ironic Mode are missing. No two adjacent tales have ironic Modes of narration, and the non-ironic narratives that are interspersed serve to emphasize the others. Christopher Twink tells "Andrey Satchel and the Parson and Clerk" and "Absent-mindedness in a Parish Choir," the fourth and sixth tales, respectively, and only one other instance of ironic Mode of narration has gone before him--the Curate's "History of the Hardcomes," which is the second tale in the series. Just before Twink's first tale, the registrar



tells "The Superstitious Man's Story," in a straightforward and somewhat depressing manner. When the traveller remarks that the story was "rather melancholy," Twink takes the remark as justification for the rollicking type of irony he is eager to apply.

In both his stories Twink uses a combination of Impersonal and Self-disparaging Modes; I will treat these two tales separately in some respects and as a related pair in others. The greater part of Twink's narration is spent in Impersonal Mode, with the irony consisting merely of a contradiction between what he says and what he means; changing occasionally to Self-disparaging Mode, he will add a sudden, temporary pretense of innocence, and the conflict then exists between what he says, what he means, and what he pretends to mean. Slightly more complex than Impersonal in this addition of a third contrasting element, Self-Disparaging Mode is a difficult one for an author to maintain for prolonged periods, and Hardy uses it with Twink mainly for variety and emphasis. Both these Modes show an ironist in close contact with his subjects, and at an intermediate distance between the detachment of Dramatized Mode and the victimized immersion of Ingenu Mode.

Hardy packs the first paragraph of "Andrey Satchel and the Parson and Clerk" with indications of the ironic

distance, point of view, and character of the narrator. The first important clue to Twink's character and ironic mode lies in Hardy's choice of name for him. "Twink" suggests the "spark of subdued liveliness" (LLI, p. 219) in the eye, and is also very close to "twit" which hints at a tendency to humorous eccentricity. Also, although the pun is very broad, Hardy almost probably meant the occupation of "master-thatcher" to indicate Twink's propensity for "topping" anyone else's story ("storey"), as well as to place him in an occupation suitable for seeing wide stretches of the landscape, and for being habitually at the topmost level of any situation. Hardy repeats this placement of Twink by the position he takes in the van, in relation to the other passengers; he sits "in front of the van" (which comes to represent life or the journey of life), and not merely on it, since his feet are outside. Obviously, the master-thatcher does not relish being borne passively along in the vehicle, and is ready to dismount, if necessary, and stand on his own two feet. His alertness is also significant, his attention's having been directed "a long way ahead," and "mainly upon small objects" during the journey thus far (LLI, p. 219). Hardy thus emphasizes that Twink is keenly aware of what lies ahead of, beneath, and around him. Certain enough of his grasp of reality that

he can afford to scramble it for others, he indulges in a bit of harmless falsifying, for the sheer fun of it.

The fun begins when Twink asks ("schooling himself to a tone of actuality," Hardy says), "'You don't know, Mr. Lackland, I suppose, what a rum story that was between Andrey Satchel and Jane Vallens and the parson and clerk o' Scrimpton? . . . Theirs was a queerer experience of a parson and clerk than some folks get, and may cheer 'ee up a little after this dargness that's been flung over yer soul.'" <sup>2</sup> Having thus begun in Impersonal Mode, Twink introduces elements of Self-disparaging Mode in his next remark: "'Though' as it has more to do with the parson and clerk than with Andrey himself, it ought to be told by a better churchman than I'" (LLI, p. 220).

Twink speaks the Essex dialect and therefore qualifies as one of Hardy's rustics, whom critics usually credit with insight lacking in the more sophisticated characters. Simply, often crudely phrased, the rustics' comments nevertheless go straight to the heart of a matter, with a

<sup>2</sup> Twink's bantering tone, applied to his subjects of religion and marriage, as an example of "stylistically-signalled irony," which Gueske defines as being "any divergence . . . from the stylistic level appropriate to the ironist's subject or his ostensible meaning . . . (p. 760.

wry and typically Hardy-esque truthfulness. In a blend of the Hardy rustic's candour and Twink's own special irony, the narration includes both situational and verbal irony; one type of the latter is characteristic of Impersonal Mode and is known as "verbal purification by irony."<sup>3</sup> In this method of defining a word by demonstrating what it is not, Hardy has Twink clarify the meaning of "mercy" by making a target of its absence: the Parson and Clerk in the story are eager to join a fox hunt that is beginning near the village, but they will not directly admit their interest in this un-priestly activity. Instead, they pretend to be concerned about the comfort of the horses, which will be stabled for weeks during the coming winter. Having saddled the mounts and ridden off in different directions--supposedly with the compassionate purpose of exercising the animals--the Parson and Clerk soon meet in the chase. Riding side by side at a gallop, they resume the conversation about their kindness in exercising the horses:

"A merciful man is merciful to his beast," says the pa'son. "Lee, heel" says the clerk, glancing sly into the pa'son's eye. "Na, na!" says the pa'son. . . he sees the fox break cover .  
 . . (LLI, p. 226)

<sup>3</sup> Glenn W. Hatfield, Henry Fielding and the Language of Irony (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 217.

Twink later describes the horses' exhaustion after the hunt:

Neither the pa'son nor the clerk knowed how they were going to [get home], for their beasts were well-nigh tired down to the ground . . . (LLI, p. 226)

The unfortunate fox also comes in for his share of the clerics' brand of compassion; Twink continues:

At last, late in the day, the hunting came to an end by the fox running into a' old woman's cottage, under the table, and up the clock-case. The pa'son and clerk were among the first in at the leath, their faces a'staring in at the old woman's window, and the clock striking as he'd never been heard to strik' before (LLI, p. 226).

Without a break in the playful tone of the narrative, Hardy has accomplished an altogether serious purpose in showing misapplication and misunderstanding of "mercy," and in making targets of cruelty and hypocrisy.

Characteristic of Twink's ironizing is that it abounds in targets and in victims of the targets. The only genuine victimizations in Twink's irony are within his

<sup>4</sup>This anecdote of the hunted fox's hiding in a clock is another instance of Hardy's ironic use in literature of events from life. In a July 1886 entry in Early Life he noted: "Lord Portsmouth made his shipper-in tell Emma the story of the hunted fox that ran up the old woman's clock-case, adding corroborative words with much gravity as the story proceeded . . ." (p. 223).

narratives; although he seeks the humorous victimization of his fellow-passengers, insofar as they will believe his fabrications, he does not succeed in victimizing them. The carrier's whispered warning to Lackland that "Christopher's stories will bear pruning" (LLI, p. 221) indicates that Twink has found victims thereabouts in the past.<sup>5</sup> The passengers never-the-less insist that he tell the story of Andrey Satchel, evidence that his victimizations have not caused an excess of grief or disillusionment among the company. Hardy indicates that Twink's present listeners are too wary to become victims of his irony, and that Twink does not go out of his way to victimize them. Even the victims within the tales Twink narrates are victims not of his ironizing, but rather, of the targets of his irony. That is to say, Twink's stories make targets of first, the social attitudes toward "respectability" in the relations between the sexes, and second, of the inefficacy of the local clergy, and its perpetuation of the community's

<sup>5</sup>In 1894, the year Life's Little Ironies was published, Hardy wrote a poem in which the local prankster, Kit (Christopher) Twink, tells a woman of her husband's death. The woman knows Twink's nature so well that at first she does not believe him, even on so serious a matter as death. She says, "--'Ha, ha--go away! 'Tis a tale, methink,/ Thou joker Kit! laughed she./I've known thee many a year, Kit Twink,/And ever hast thou fooled me!'" (From Collected Poems.)

distorted values. Andrey Satchel and Jane Vallens are shown to be the victims of both targets: the bride-to-be is far advanced in pregnancy, and the Parson, while commenting sympathetically on her condition, self-righteously refuses to marry the couple while the groom is tipsy. The bride tearfully explains that if Andrey doesn't come drunk to the altar, then "he won't come at all" (LLI, p. 222); and her plea neither surprises the Parson nor moves him to change his decision. Though fully aware of the groom's lack of feeling for her, Jane nevertheless subscribes to the opinion that any marriage is better than none, and she happily anticipates the ceremony's transforming power to "make her one with Andrey for the rest of her life," as Twink wryly phrases it (LLI, p. 221). Anxious to avoid harmful community gossip--the pre-marital pregnancy is tolerated so long as a wedding precedes the actual birth--she looks "calm and smiling" once the marriage is performed (LLI, p. 229). Because of the pregnancy, Andrey and Jane become the victims of secular and religious custom.

Even toward his targets, however, Twink exhibits a measure of leniency, taking a tolerant and amused view of sin behind the pulpit as well as sin in the congregation. He closes his first narrative with a remark, in fact, that injects an ambiguity concerning his own moral and social

allegiances. Having shown the discrepancies in attitudes toward marriage, religious guidance, and "decency," discrepancies that clearly imply the enforced ceremony to be a mistake unworthy of enlightened people, Twink ends the story with the unexpected observation that "' 'tis true she saved her name'" (LLI, p. 230). The effect of this remark is one of skillfully-managed ambiguity, and whether it is Twink's irony at the passengers' expense, or Hardy's irony at Twink's expense, is impossible to determine. In either case, and because of the element of doubt, this ironic surprise is certainly at the reader's expense. The entertainment value of the entire narrative is high, all the more since the reader is not asked to weight and measure moral issues of the discrepancies between the "sinners'" actions and the standards of their church or community.

The same tone of tolerance and humour characterizes Twink's other story (the sixth in the series) "Absent-Mindedness in a Parish Choir." The Wexsex players, or local quire, appear frequently in Hardy's poems, novels, and stories; this tale relates the blunder that occasioned their dismissal as the Longpuddle church musicians. Exhausted from playing for Christmas festivities in Wexsex homes, the players fall asleep after drinking hot beer-and-whiskey to keep warm in the icy church. The church is dark and the



minister's sermon lasts till nightfall; wakened suddenly by the minister's order to begin playing, the Choir think themselves at a Christmas dance and begin a lusty rendition of "The Devil a-cry the Taylors." Twink introduces the story with a form of verbal irony known as "blaming in order to praise" (Wicks, p. 67), when he says, "'A terrible scrape 'twas, too -wasn't it, John? I shall never forget it-- never! They lost their character as officers of the church as complete as if they'd never had any character at all' . . . The pastor-thatcher attentively remarked past times as if they lay about a mile off, and went on . . ." (LLI, pp. 232-233). The same target appears in this story as in Twink's first story: a mild and wholly comprehensible hypocrisy that springs from man's imperfect understanding of the nature of evil. Twink describes the all-too-frequent tendency to want to appear better than we are, and at someone else's expense, when he repeats the Squire's denunciation of the players: " . . . he was a wickedish man, the squire was, though now for once he happened to be on the Lord's side . . . 'not if the Angels of Heaven come down,' he says, 'shall one of you villainous players ever sound a note in this church again; for the insult to me, and my family, and my visitors, and the parson, and God Almighty [not least among Hardy's ironies here is the squire's list

of priorities] that you've a-pennetrated this afternoon!" (LLI, pp. 235-236). Twink exonerates the clergy, this time, by admitting, " . . . The parson might have forced 'em . . . but the squire would not. That very week he sent for a harrell-organ that would play two-and-twenty new psalm tunes, no exact and particular that, however sinful you was, you could play nothing but psalm tunes whatsoever. He had a really respectable man to turn the winch, and the old players played no more" (LLI, p. 236). Again, Twink has aimed his ironies at social and religious attitudes. He shows that collectively, people formulate rules that they cannot apply as individuals; the "flaw" lies not in the people, but in the discrepancy between collective aspiration and individual application, therefore. This discrepancy is Twink's target, and his characters, the victims of the target.

Twink's tolerance and moderation toward his subject, typical of the Impersonal Mode, are accompanied by other characteristics of this Mode. Quette names, in addition to the device of "blatant in order to praise" recently mentioned, the related ironies of "praising in order to blame," and "inappropriate or irrelevant praise" as belonging to Impersonal Mode (pp. 67-68). Hardy combines all three of these devices in Twink's narration, as, for example, when

Fa'son Toogood expresses remorse at having neglected the engaged couple locked in the church: "'Why the hell didn't I marry 'em, drunk or sober!' (fa'sons used to cuss in them days like plain honest men)" (LLI, p. 227). Innuendo and irony by analogy also indicate Impersonal Mode, and several instances of these two devices occur in Twink's two stories. An example of innuendo is in his description of Jane Vallens' advanced pregnancy, which he refers to as "bodily circumstances owing to that young man [Andrey]" whom she is about to marry (LLI, p. 220). Two examples of irony by analogy have to do with the combination of religion and marriage, and with the "trapped animal" image that Hardy so often employs in connection with a passage on marriage or religion. When Fa'son Toogood refuses to marry the couple and tells Andrey to "Go home and get sober!" Twink says the Fa'son "slapped the book together like a rat-trap" (LLI, p. 222). When the church-tower door is finally opened, Twink says, ". . . immediately poor Jane and Andrey busted out like starved mice from a cupboard" (LLI, p. 228).

Alternating with his use of Impersonal Mode, Twink utilizes Self-disparaging Mode occasionally, as in his remark, ". . . a better churchman than I" (LLI, p. 220). Muecke admits, "It is often difficult and not always

profitable to draw a line between Impersonal and Self-disparaging . . ." (p. 87), but some fairly clear instances of Self-disparaging Mode can be cited in Twink's narratives. For example, he will suddenly shift, from what appears to be an eyewitness account, to what seems to be the repeating of hearsay: " . . . the plan was that as soon as they were married they would make out a holiday . . . Well, some folks noticed that Andrew walked with rather wobbling steps to church that morning . . ." (XXI, p. 221). The implication here is that Andrew was drunk and that Twink had witnessed the "wobbling" stroll to church, but that he wishes to protect Andrew's reputation. The ironist thus is able to make an accusation without being liable for the consequences of his accusation; he is also able to hint that he is too modest to tell all that he knows. The invulnerability and mock humility of this Mode again appear in Twink's disclaimer of knowing whether the pregnant bride was happy to be marrying at last: " . . . 'twas with a joyful countenance (they say) that she, with Andrew and his brother and sister-in-law, marched off to church . . ." (LXI, p. 221). This change of Mode serves to add variety to Twink's narrative, as a momentary departure from what might otherwise seem too consistent a style.

In assigning Impersonal and Self-Disparaging Modes to "rustic" Christopher Twink, Hardy has taken the reader close enough to life to see its conflicting levels clearly, yet has kept the reader far enough apart from the conflict to remain objective. Without getting involved in life's dilemmas to the extent of risking victimization by them, Twink represents a moderate and sympathetic closeness to humanity. Howe makes a generalization that certainly stands in the case of Christopher Twink and his narratives: "Wessex provides Hardy with a tentative or usable nostalgia, but he seldom approaches it without a complicating irony. . . our criticism says little about the ranges of voice that Hardy's irony can accommodate. Hardy's irony is mild and affectionate, and what allows him to maintain it toward the very world eliciting his nostalgia is that this world is utterly his own" (pp. 45-46). The "ranges of voice" in Twink's ironies arise from his detachment from life; that his irony is "mild and affectionate" is due to his involvement in it. This balance between the two extremes is the view of reality that Hardy gives us through Twink's narrative Mode.

Hardy describes an entirely different reality through the Curate's Ingenu Mode, in showing life as it appears to the ironic victim's myopic point of view. Hardy first

establishes the Curate's limited reliability, then proceeds to have him narrate a story consistent with Victorian mores, in stereotyped "clerical" language--"The History of the Hard-comes." If the reader misses the fact that the Curate is not a reliable narrator, then the story seems flat, the narration pointless, for here verbal irony is almost entirely missing, and situational irony trite and predictable.

Hardy gives two main clues to the Curate's unreliability as a narrator; the first is through a rhetorical device contained within the text of "The Two Trusted Characters," the second, by a symbol that is fairly obvious but that needs support from another work of the author's. Both clues are objective, coming from information contained within the frame. The earliest glimpse of the Curate comes just after the carrier asserts, ". . . he ought to be punctual . . . for he's not here; and a serious old church-minister he ought to be as good as his word" (LLT, p. 190). To emphasize a character's responsibility for truthfulness rather than his reputation for it raises skepticism in a reader, and this cleric has failed to keep his word to be on time. Significantly, he is almost left behind when the van departs punctually. When he does arrive, Hardy describes his appearance in terms of the sun's rays reflected from

his spectacles<sup>6</sup> and thus provides a thumbnail sketch of a near-sighted late-comer of whom clear vision and leadership are nevertheless expected. That the light is described as reflected from, rather than as penetrating the eyeglasses is also significant; this aid to faulty vision obscures rather than clarifies.

The reader must immediately recognize that the Curate blindly ignores or cannot see the faults and waywardness of his parishioners, and that he therefore has little chance of helping them overcome their problems; otherwise, the story loses most of its ironic impact. Nevertheless, ironies of situation and of outlook exist in the story, even without the presence of an ironic mode of narration, and might mislead a casual reader into thinking that no larger ironic cast exists. The Curate's plot very briefly, is

<sup>6</sup> Clym Yeobright, in Hardy's Return of the Native, also wears thick spectacles. Like the Curate, Clym has difficulty accepting any but the most idealistic views of human behavior. Jean R. Brooks considers the spectacles a symbol of Clym's lack of insight. She says, 'Clym's troubles spring from his failure to respect the laws of physical reality. His blindness is both a natural consequence of ignoring physical strain on his eyes, a simplification of the modern complexity of life which denies him 'any more perfect insight into the conditions of existence,' and a complex poetic symbol of the figurative blindness . . .'. From Thomas Hardy: The Poetic Structure (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Paperbacks, 1971), pp. 135-136.

this: the Hardcome cousins, James and Steve, are both engaged to be married: before the banns are announced, however, they become an odd sort of each other's sweethearts when they exchange partners in the pattern of a dance at Tony "ytes" wedding party. They marry the partners of this second choice and make the most of the marriages for two years, when Oliver and Steve go for a dance ride and drown at sea, leaving a widow and a widower. Within a year and a half, this bereaved couple marry, and thus at least one of the original engagements is fulfilled.

Even without the presence of an ironic "voice" of narration, the ironies are numerous in the story, especially in the dance-like pattern of the plot. Richard Cartwright's comment on Jarvis's general use of situational irony



can be aptly applied to the Curate's story;<sup>7</sup> Carpenter says that Hardy levels " . . . strong focus on the ironic nexus, the point at which Chance (conceived as Fate) and time cross, the 'convergence of the twain' in the broadest sense. . . . No writer in English . . . was more keenly aware of the fundamental, metaphysical irony of such convergences" (p. 177). Such ironic outlook is present in the Curate's quiet evaluation of the couple's drowning, when he muses that, "It had been their destiny to die thus. The two halves, intended by Nature to make the perfect whole, had failed in that result during their lives . . ." (LLI, pp. 214-215).

<sup>7</sup>Roy Morrell notices, as did Carpenter, the patterns of convergence and divergence in Hardy's situations, but Morrell stresses the "choice" and "re-choice" suggested by the patterns, asserting that Hardy shows his characters' refusal to treat life as anything other than a game, and that he "concentrates . . . upon the one area of blame [after having recognized man's essential goodness]: man's lack of will, his taking life too easily, his imagining that it is the kind of trivial game where the players can afford to 'act like puppets,' to be 'so contemptibly unaware'" (p.166). Morrell also discusses this "refusal to act" in a passage from *Desperate Remedies* in which the "encroachment of nature" battles the human will. The heroine is debating inwardly, he says: "'Should she withdraw her hand? No, she could not withdraw it now; it was too late, the act would not imply refusal. She felt as one in a boat without oars, drifting with closed eyes down a river--she knew not whither'" (p. 102).

When the view of an unreliable narrator, such as the Curate, is superimposed on the story, the irony increases, but reverses direction. Rather than showing chance, time, destiny, and nature as the controlling forces, the tales show the results of human decisions made carelessly or in haste and blamed on fate. My own opinion is that Hardy meant to emphasize man's ability to choose: the couples in the story eventually realize that their first exchange was made in the excitement of a dance, and that "people get quite crazy in a dance, sometimes" (LLI, p. 209).

Although they admit their part in this first instance of neglected responsibility, the couples do not seem to recognize a similar situation when Steve and Olive drift out to sea in a canoe; the Curate relates how "'The Heedless pair afloat now formed a mere speck in the films of the coming night, which thickened apace, till it completely swallowed up their distant shapes. They had disappeared while still following the same straight course awar from the world of land-livers, as if they were intending to drop over the sea-edge into space, and never return to earth again'" (LLI, p. 211).

Hardy thus shows (and even the Curate realizes, to an extent, the element of choice--he calls the couple a "heedless" pair) that careless, arbitrary choices are

sometimes made, and sometimes no choice at all is made, and the characters then drift. What is called fate or destiny is therefore usually wrong choice or refusal to act. When the Curate refers to the marriages and deaths as "destiny" planned by "Nature" or as foiling "Nature's plan," he is filling his Ingenu role of being unaware of the true nature of reality, and of being a victim among other victims.

Once the Curate's Mode is established accurately, the tale assumes a more solid artistic merit. For example, the couple left on the shore during their mates' canoe ride make (according to the Curate) utterly inane comments about the attractiveness of the couple rowing the canoe. They continue watching and saying such unbelievable things as "' 'Tis a pity we should have parted 'em.'" (LLI, p. 209). If the Curate is taken as reliable, the plot is ordinary and the dialogue insipid, with the reader seeing the couple on the shore as victims of the most obvious self-deception. The irony then is too shallow to elicit much response, one way or the other. However, when the Curate's Mode is recognized, several pathetic victimizations become apparent. First, the Curate deceives himself about the motives and desires of his parishioners. Second, his corrosive poetry blinds him to the real needs of humans who make stupid

choices and then need help in understanding and changing-- help which he cannot give because he cannot see the need for it.

Summarizing the Curate's story in terms of literary value, I will have to say that the tale takes on depth only if the Ingenu Mode is clearly understood to be operative. If Hardy meant to show reality as it appears to the victim of irony or of appearances, then he succeeded so well that the reader narrowly escapes victimization along with the Curate and his unfortunate parishioners. Hardy certainly demonstrates an understanding of the victim's viewpoint, representing it so faithfully as to occlude reality almost entirely. As Twink's stance was alongside reality and contradictions, so the Curate's is beneath reality and ironic discrepancies.

The last ironic Mode I will treat in the separate tales projects its narrator far above the contraries and confusions of existence. The aged groceress tells her story, "The Winters and the Palmleys," in a Dramatized Mode whose remote stance reduces all human activity to its simplest patterns, Muecke describes Dramatized Mode as belonging to the cosmic ironist, and Hardy's delineation of this narrator's character relegates her to such a category. Hardy's first clue is the symbolic placement in the empty van: "At

twenty minutes to four an elderly woman places her basket upon the shafts, slowly mounts, takes up a seat inside, and folds her hands and her lips. She has secured her corner for the journey, though there is as yet no sign of a horse being put in, nor of a carrier" (LLI, p. 189). The fact that she has no other title than Hardy's description of "aged groceress," that she occupies the van before guide, driver, or power for the journey arrives, that she is silent and still, suggest further her cosmic dimensions. She is the only passenger who recognizes Lackland, the stranger, and she bases her recognition on her memory of his father, gone from Wessex for thirty-five years. After greeting Lackland she falls silent, remaining quiet thereafter until he asks about his old acquaintance, Mrs. Winter. "Nobody in the van seemed to recollect the name" (LLI, p. 236), Hardy writes; at this point the groceress speaks, "'I can recollect Mrs. Winter very well, if nobody else can'" (LLI, p. 236). Her next two remarks hint at witchcraft; she first denies having much knowledge of the causes of Mrs. Winter's woe, saying merely, "'It had to do with a son of hers, I think I once was told. But I was too young to know particulars'" (LLI, p. 236). Then she suddenly begins remembering, and not just the bare outline of the story, but the minute, particular details she has denied knowing at

all. In describing her act of memory, Hardy uses a significant figure of speech suggesting superhuman powers: "The groceress sighed as she conjured up a vision of days long past. 'Yes,' she murmured, 'it had all to do with a son'" (LLI, p. 236). She seems to be receiving her information through a magical source, on the spot; even her diction that should by rights be the Wessex dialect, is correct, polished, and poetic. "'To go back to the beginning--if one must . . .'" she introduces her story.

One of the characteristics of Dramatized Mode is that it presents situations clearly enough that the reader can see them as indisputedly ironic; in this Mode the narrator should never have to point out the ironies, and Hardy's technique here is flawless. In language so icily objective that the entire tale seems to be viewed from a great height, the groceress in the first four short paragraphs tells of two marriages, two deaths, a bankruptcy and an inadvertent murder. The description of this last event reads like a medical report; the groceress says, "'Well, in some way or other--how, it was never exactly known--the thriving woman, Mrs. Winter, sent the little boy with a message to the next village one December day, much against his will. It was getting dark, and the child prayed to be allowed not to go, because he would be afraid coming

home. But the mistress insisted, more out of thoughtlessness than cruelty, and the child went. On his way back he had to pass through Yalbury Wood, and something came out from behind a tree and frightened him into fits. The child was quite ruined by it; he became quite a drivelling idiot, and soon afterward died'" (LLI, pp. 238-239). This utter lack of emotion persists throughout the groceress' story, as, for example, in her explanation of the lovers' bone of contention--Jack's poor penmanship. "'Jack Winter's performances in the shape of love-letters quite jarred her [Harriett's] city nerves and her finer taste, and when she answered one of them, in the lovely running hand that she took such pride in, she very strictly and loftily bade him to practise with a pen and spelling-book if he wished to please her. . . He ventured to tell her in his clumsy way that if her heart were more warm towards him she would not be so nice about his handwriting and spelling; which indeed was true enough'" (LLI, p. 239). This warped set of values is merely stated; the reader is left to reflect on it for himself. The groceress gives so few clues as to how the reader should feel about the characters, that one finds himself assuming the same strange objectivity as the narrator. The reader notes, for example, as from a distance, that although Jack is rejected for his

handwriting, and seems to be suffering greatly from the selfish young woman's narrow cruelties, he learns nothing that improves his own values. "'Jack was much affronted at this, and determined to go for the letters himself. He chose a time when he knew she was at home, and knocked and went in without much ceremony; for though Harriet was so high and mighty, Jack had small respect for her aunt, Mrs. Palmley, whose little child had been his boot-cleaner in earlier days'" (LLI, p. 241). Stung by Harriett's assumption of superiority in education and training, angry with her snobbishness, Jack yet exhibits the same condescension to her aunt. He is hurt by Harriett's rejection of him, but his behavior towards others is equally cruel.

The Groceress' almost photographic descriptions are characteristic of Dramatized Mode, and her self-assurance is such that her reliability is unquestionable; not least of Hardy's credibility devices here is his hint that the groceress receives her information through supernatural means. In a passage remarkable for its visual imagery, she says, "'At the dead of night he came out of his mother's house by the back door, and creeping through the garden hedge went along the field adjoining till he reached the back of her aunt's dwelling. The moon struck bright and flat upon the walls, 'twas said, and every shiny leaf of



the creepers was like a little looking-glass in the rays . . .'" (LLI, p. 244). The groceress continues with a description of the cart that brought Jack's body home, and in this passage the auditory imagery is exceptionally immediate: "'All the parish waited at their cottage doores in the evening for its arrival: I remember how, as a very little girl, I stood by my mother's side. About eight o'clock, as we hearkened on our door-stones in the cold bright starlight, we could hear the faint crackle of a waggon from the direction of the turn-pike road. The noise was lost as the waggon dropped into a hollow, then it was plain again as it lumbered down the next long incline, and presently it entered Longpuddle'" (pp. 245-246). Hardy evokes images so clearly here that the reader has the impression of seeing and of hearing along with the narrator; the narrator herself speaks "not as one who remembers, but rather as one who sees."<sup>8</sup> This is Dramatized Mode at its best.

At the remote distance assumed by the groceress, the perspective is different from that of the other Modes in regard to the targets and victims of irony. Everyone in the tale is a victim in at least one sense, in that for all the plotting, planning, and execution of successful

<sup>8</sup> Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972), p. 257.

revenge, everyone loses what he really wanted. Mrs. Winter and Mrs. Palmley both lose husbands and sons; Harriett Palmley and her husband are rejected by the neighbors, and Jack Winter dies for a crime he did not commit intentionally. (That is, he took a box containing love letters, and having burned them, was apprehended by the constable. The box, which was still in his possession, contained several gold coins, though he had not been aware of their presence. For the theft of the gold he was hanged.) Religion, justice, marriage, class distinctions--all come in as targets of irony. Furthermore, the reader is left asking himself not whether the social and religious values are misplaced, but whether they have any basis for existence at all. Hardy has succeeded in placing the groceress and the reader far enough above life's ironies that the contrasts and contradictions emerge quite clearly, and appear quite small, as small as the humans who struggle among them.

Although the entertainment value of this story is high, and its form, meaning, and impact coordinated to an exceptional degree, the story's main contribution to "A Few Crust-ed Characters" lies in its depiction of an unemotional, impartial, and passive fate who merely stands back, watches, and makes no comments unless pressed to do so, and whose ironic distance is so great as to make her omniscient.

Hardy demonstrates, in the individual tales, that he is familiar with many levels of reality, with many degrees of awareness. Furthermore, he involves the reader in his demonstrations. By the use of different Modes of narrators he is able to assume four different and quite important distances from the ironic conflicts of life. This ironic Mode exerts a constant, consistent influence on the types and degrees of irony that emerge in each of the four main narrations. Twink's Impersonal Mode gives a view of an ironist who not only perceives but also controls many of life's inconsistencies--controls them in the sense that he exercises a mild and humorous deceit toward his fellow man. Furthermore, Twink sees and controls the ironies at close range; he is involved in the lives of people around him, familiar with their problems, their backgrounds and attitudes. Hardy shows, through Twink, the most intimate contact the genuine ironist ever makes with life's conflicts: perceiving, understanding, and manipulating them without himself being caught up in them. When, on the other hand, Hardy wishes to show how reality looks to the victim of life's ironies, he uses the Curate's Ingenu Mode of narration, involving the reader in the victimisation to a certain extent. The near-sighted cleric sees only the lower level of reality in which he is immersed, with an

overwhelmingly confident unawareness of the existence of conflict at another level. Because Hardy holds an unvarying Ingenu Mode during the Curate's narration, delivering no direct authorial indication of the Curate's unreliability, the reader experiences a mild exposure to the victim's own dilemma: what is the reality, here? The reader finally arrives at much the same conclusion the Curate has reached: he must sift the evidence available and decide for himself where the truth lies.

From Twink's familiarity with and mastery of life's ironies, and the Curate's immersion and blindness to them, Hardy moves to the aged groceress' remoteness from and disinterest in them. The Dramatized Mode he assigns this narrator traces the movements of the characters as if they were participants in a game: casual cruelty to the feeble or powerless members of the community, unprotested travesties of justice, whole spans of human struggle and defeat are all summarized in brief, trite phrases. Hardy removes the reader to the narrator's distant position by this factual, impartial technique of description; he also generates in the reader a corresponding mood of inertia and disinterestedness in outcomes. Hardy manages to give an impression of mankind's goals as so transient and trivial as to be unworthy of fate's attention, either to thwart or to

facilitate. The result is one of cosmic boredom in which the reader participates, and Hardy has successfully illustrated his fourth ironic distance.

These views of the ironists' many realities are important in themselves, but they have further value, when examined in the frame's context, of helping to establish Hardy's own stance as an ironic writer. When taken in conjunction with the general ironies in "A Few Crusted Characters" and with the theme of alienation the traveler John Lackland represents, they illuminate Hardy's own relationship to ironies in life and literature.

### III. IRONIES IN THE FRAME

The overall purpose of this thesis is to show that "A Few Crusted Characters" helps illuminate Hardy's ironic philosophies and stance as an ironic writer. Chapter III will examine the ironies in the frame of the series, as those ironies contribute to an expression of Hardy's main themes and as they help to clarify his position in regard to determinism and destiny, especially.

Three different approaches are helpful in examining the ironies of the frame: first, to treat the frame as a story in its own right, one that expresses Hardy's themes of alienation and impercipientness (Hardy's term for the tendency to neglect the present time and place while anticipating the future or recalling the past); second, to utilize the frame as a base-line for viewing the recurring instances of identical ironic patterns or treatment, within the separate stories, and for inferring larger ironic statements from these specific instances; third, to see the frame as a middle distance in the overlapping points of view, and to determine from this position where the final authority--the frame's own narrator--stands in ironic

relation to his fiction, especially in relation to the groceress, his narrator who represents fate.

As an aid to understanding Hardy's ironies, a study of the frame's own story is less fruitful than one might wish. An examination of its other aspects, its functions as unifying and distancing devices, is much more productive. One reason for the frame's ineffectiveness as a story is that taken alone, its narrative structure is relatively weak. When juxtaposed with the contents and authorial skills of the individual stories, the frame's fictional elements suffer still more: the main plot appears frail and diluted beside the force of the anecdotal and occasionally almost mythic action of the individual stories. The frame's characters, also, are defined more in terms of the stories they narrate than in terms of their existence and interaction as characters in the stories; they are colorful and genuine as narrators, but as fellow-passengers in the van they are stereotyped and underdrawn. The frame's themes, as well, suffer from a general lifelessness by comparison with those of the individual stories'; Hardy's familiar and usually poignant themes of alienation and impotence are greatly lacking in force and conviction, here. In such close proximity to the vividly-dramatized themes, in the tales, of devastating injustice, for example,

or destructive self-deception, alienation and impercipientence emerge as bland and peripheral. My second and third objectives in examining the frame, dealing with its functions as a unifying and illuminating force, have found much more evidence of Hardy's care as an author. His opinions and stance emerge clearly when the frame is utilized to correlate elements within the stories, and as a standpoint for establishing Hardy's final authorial distance from his subject.

In approaching the two themes of the frame, I will handle them in terms of their separate manifestations and their mutual resolution. Hardy's point here, as it appears again and again in his poems and novels, is that these two divisive forces are unified, ironically, by the final division of death. Alienation from one's surroundings and associates, impercipientence of the present's opportunities, converge and are reconciled in Hardy's work--usually he shows both survivor and departed as benefiting from the reconciliation; in "A Few Crusted Characters," however, he deals only with the effects on the survivor.

The primary theme of the frame is that of alienation; the frame's protagonist, John Lackland, realizes that he "can't go home again." Returning to his native Wessex after an absence of thirty-five years, he arrives in the market



town just in time to hail the departing carrier van, explaining to its passengers, "I have come down here entirely to discover what Longpuddle is looking like and who are living here. That was why I preferred a seat in your van to hiring a carriage for driving across'" (LLI, p. 193). Only one of the passengers, the aged groceress, had known Lackland's family at all; everyone else in the van is a stranger. Although they begin, at his request, to discuss mutual acquaintances, the narrators soon become absorbed in their own stories and begin to speak of people Lackland does not know. Most of those whom he had known are now dead, as it happens. The carrier tells Lackland, as the journey begins, "'Well, as for Longpuddle, we rub on there much as usual. Old Figures have dropped out o' their frames, so to speak, and new ones have been put in their places'" (LLI, p. 193). The carrier then launches into a narration of an event thirty years in the past, rather than describing any of the "new figures" in the "frame." Tony Kyles, the hero of the first story, is still living in Wessex, but the characters in the second and third stories have long been dead. Andrey and Jane Satchel, protagonists of the fourth story, are still alive, but Andrey's father, from the fifth story, is "'dead and gone, poor man, as we all shall be!'" (LLI, p. 232). Even the robust players of

Twink's "Absent-Mindedness in a Parish Choir" have "'been done away with these twenty year'" as a group. Mrs. Winter, the "hollow-eyed" annuitant of the aged groceress' story, is "'dead these five-and-twenty year at least'" (LLI, p. 236). George Crookhill and Netty Sargent, of the last two tales, are probably still living, but were only slightly known to Lackland. Thus, most of the stories concern friends of his who are now dead; when the protagonists are still living, they are largely strangers to him.

The tales of the past occupy the whole journey; almost immediately after a "lull in the discourse," the van enters the "long straggling village" (LLI, p. 258), and the passengers are "dropped off one by one, each at his or her own door," the stranger being left to proceed alone. By the light of the moon, he strolls through the village, looking still toward the past, at "this chimney and that old wall" (LLI, p. 259), until he reaches the churchyard. His former friends lie here, and his alienation from the living is complete.

Lackland's alienation is only part of the irony in the frame; Hardy's subordinate theme of impercipientia accompanies and supports that of alienation, adding an extra dimension and finally, a resolution. When Hardy uses the term "impercipientia" he refers to a somewhat complex

philosophical concept; the tendency in people to reject what is around them, to neglect the present in their dreams of the future or their regrets for the past; Hardy's impercipients live out what amounts to a total negation of the carpe diem philosophy. It is obvious, given this notion of impercipient, that alienation--being out of touch with others and with the present--grows out of impercipient and the neglect it accompanies. Morrell notices that Hardy blames impercipient for much of one's alienation from life; Hardy shows, Morrell says, "the general weakness of preferring the remote or the inaccessible, and despising reality. Hardy never tired of deploring the romanticist's habit of 'looking away' from the small but satisfying glow of real life . . ." (pp. 144-145). Although Lackland's romantic remembrances have brought him into an alien environment, the van's other passengers indulge in a similar disregard for reality that removes them to another place of time and space, in either the past or the future. They regard the past with an enthusiasm conspicuously missing in their consideration of the present. Even Twink keeps his eyes focused on objects ahead of the van. Impercipient, in one form or another, affects every character in the frame.

Hardy reconciles both themes at the conclusion of "A Few Crusted Characters." When Lackland stands alone in the cemetery, he perceives, Hardy says, that his roots are not here, and that he would have to begin as a newcomer should he choose to remain in Longpuddle. The experience of the journey, of hearing strangers speak of other strangers, has begun Lackland's percipience of his position as an outsider. His moonlight walk through the village has convinced him further of his alien status, as the "peculiar charm" of the place is "lowered . . . by magnified expectations from infantine memories" (LLI, p. 259). The final stage of percipience comes when he stands among the headstones in the churchyard and begins at last to "feel himself amid the village community": the complete unawareness and total separation symbolized by death carry alienation and impercipience to their farthest extremes, and Lackland suddenly perceives his true situation. In describing the outcome, Hardy does not say exactly what Lackland finally does or where he goes, except to note that he leaves Longpuddle and has not been seen for fifteen years. Apparently the feeling of belonging to a vanished populace did not appeal to him any more than the feeling of estrangement from the living did, or a new beginning among strangers. Percipience, and the positive action based on

percipience, would seem to be Lackland's solution. The fact that Hardy does not elaborate on Lackland's ultimate decisions and destiny seems to me to weaken the frame's effectiveness; possibly Hardy means to indicate that ambiguity is part of existence, and is just another aspect of experience. If so, the overall structure of "A Few Crust-ed Characters" is concluded satisfactorily by the two themes' resolutions, while the plot is not ended, but merely abandoned.

Turning from the frame's theme and plot to its function as a unifying force yields more conclusive results about Hardy's ironies. The frame is invaluable in providing the reader with a means for integrating specific, individual instances of irony and for inferring Hardy's attitudes from these integrations.

Seen from the linear, ongoing narrative of the frame, Hardy's ironies in the separate stories join to form two main categories: those that make statements about social attitudes and those concerned with religious institutions and attitudes. By and large, the social ironies concern inverted values, the shirking of responsibility, or the inequities of civil law. The religious statements deal with the impotence of the church and with general misapplication or misunderstanding of religious doctrine.

Marriage is one subject in the ironies that deals with distorted social values and the avoidance of responsibility. In two different instances Hardy described young women as going to a great deal of trouble to contract for marriages that they later have reason to regret. Here Hardy seems to be illustrating an idea he had expounded in "Candour in English Fiction": "Life being a physiological fact, its honest portrayal must be largely concerned with, for one thing, the relations of the sexes, and the substitution for such catastrophes as favour the false colouring best expressed by the regulation finish that 'they married and were happy ever after,' of catastrophes based upon sexual relations as it is. To this expansion English society opposes a well-nigh insuperable bar" (Orel, pp. 127-128). In the two stories in question, the two "catastrophes" disguised as marriages were not dismissed with the conventional "happy ever after" phrase. The first marriage, in "Andrey Satchel and the Parson and Clerk," took place with the bride's expecting a child momentarily, and marrying in order to "save her name"; after having been locked in the church tower while the groom sobers up enough to satisfy Pa'son Toogood's sense of propriety, the couple finally marry, the bride looking "smiling and calm forthwith, and Andrey limper than ever" (LLI, p. 230). The

narrator, Twink, ends the story with Hardy's realistic substitution for the "happy ever after" falsehood: "'It was a long while before the story of what they had gone through was known, but it was talked of in time, and they themselves laugh over it now; though what Jane got for her pains was no great bargain after all'" (LLI, p. 230). The second "catastrophic" marriage, in "Netty Sargent's Copyhold," involves a young woman's determination to save her uncle's property from confiscation. In order to get a husband, she must own the property--otherwise, the young man has declared, he will not marry her. Before the transfer can be signed, her aged uncle dies, and she props up his corpse and guides the hand in a signature, to make the waiting clerk think him still alive. The ruse works; she keeps the cottage and land, and gets her husband. The narrator, Mr. Day, ends the tale with another of Hardy's inversions of the "happy ever after" phrase: "'Two years after they were married he took to beating her--not hard, you know; just a smack or two, enough to set her in a temper, and let out to the neighbors what she had done to win him, and how she repented of her pains'" (LLI, p. 258). Having resorted to different variations of the "tradition of deceit" (Morrell, p. 20, quoting John Holloway's The Victorian Sage), both Netty and Jane secure husbands in a socially-acceptable

Victorian way: this view of marriage saw men as antipathetic to the idea of wedlock but vulnerable to the charms of women and/or property. Whatever a woman had to resort to in order to make the prospect of marriage attractive enough economically, sexually, or socially was looked upon in the "tradition of deceit" as perfectly justifiable, since marriage was a necessary, holy, and honorable condition. Any trick, from wearing a false hairpiece to getting oneself with child by one's beloved, was condoned, so long as marriage was the objective. Hardy here shows the lengths to which the tradition could be carried, and he furthermore shows the results of the marriages thus made.

The shirking of social responsibility, Hardy's second ironic theme, involves the irrational, erroneous, or impulsive choice of mates--a choice that is later blamed on destiny, in many instances. A comic example is that of Tony Kytes, who, unable to decide which of three former sweethearts he wants to marry, proposes to each of them in turn--within the hearing of the other two. Speaking of Hardy's themes, Morrell uses the terms of "choice" and "re-choice" and uses Tony's fickleness as an example; it is, he says, a humorous treatment of a serious theme--the absurdity of such "re-choices" based on impulses of the chooser's exaggerated value of what he has rejected (p. 146).



The mere fact of "re-choice" is not the final irony, however; Hardy gives another twist to the story: when the first two young ladies have refused Tony and have stalked indignantly away, then " . . . there at last were left Milly and Tony by themselves, she crying in watery streams, and Tony looking like a tree struck by lightning. 'Well, Milly,' he says at last, going up to her, 'it do seem as if fate had ordained that it should be you and I, or nobody. And what must be must be, I suppose. Hey, Milly?'" (LLI, p. 203). Hardy assigns a far more serious tone to the shirking of responsibility in "The History of the Hardcomes," which treats of choice, "re-choice" and "non-choice" (Morrell, p. 146) in courtship and marriage. The Hardcome cousins, James and Steve, had previously chosen fiancées, but had exchanged them on impulse at a dance and had married the partners of this re-choice. Two years later the marriages still held, but a tragic non-choice cost the lives of two of the four protagonists. J. I. M. Stewart notices such tendencies in Hardy's characters and says, "Again and again individuals make no choice at all; they take up instead a fatalistic attitude as if concurring in their own puppetry. This last attitude--a kind of deterministic abnegation of responsibility, produces some of the worst

messes of all."<sup>1</sup> As I pointed out in Chapter II, Hardy often treats non-choice symbolically by describing his characters as drifting aimlessly in a boat, or as immersed in a dream-like state. In "The History of the Hardcomes," Olive and Steve, who had been engaged to each other originally, drift out to sea in a canoe, gazing into each other's eyes like somnambulists. When the canoe capsizes, they drown, evidently never having recovered their wits enough even to know they were drowning, because they are found "tightly locked in each other's arms, his lips upon hers, their features still wrapt in the same calm and dream-like repose" (LLI, p. 214). Having related the particulars of these tangled and arbitrary choices, the Curate then uses the same expression that Tony Kytes had used: "'It had been their destiny to die thus. The two halves, intended by Nature to make the perfect whole, had failed in that result during their lives. . .'" (LLI, pp. 214-215). Whether in jest or in all seriousness, Hardy's characters have "gone out of their way" to "move in a curious and roundabout manner when a plain, straight course lies open to them"

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hardy: A Critical Biography (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1971), p. 43. Hereafter referred to in my text as "Stewart."

(Reading, p. 111), and then have renounced responsibility for the outcome of their actions.

Turning from the individual's responsibility to society, Hardy looks at society's responsibility to the individual; in three separate stories he lets the relationship of crime to punishment speak for the inequities of civil justice. In one story the crime and punishment are equal in nature and severity, but in the other two stories, an imbalance exists--in one case the penalty is not exacted at all, and in the other, it is far too severe.

Of the three stories concerning justice, only the registrar's "Incident in the life of Mr. George Crookhill" fits the punishment to the crime. George is Hardy's Wessex version of a small-time con-man and is, furthermore, one of the few characters in "A Few Crusted Characters" to become his own victim. As the narrator sums up his character and situation, "'There was Georgy Crookhill--he was one of the shady sort, as I have reason to know . . . Well, as he began so he went on. It never got so far as a hanging matter with him, to be sure; but he had some narrow escapes of penal servitude; and once it was a case of the bitter bit'" (LLI, p. 246). Having conned a "rich farmer" out of his clothing and horse, Georgy is arrested, being mistaken for the "rich farmer" who actually was a runaway

soldier and who had stolen the horse and clothing the day before from the original farmer. Punishment is "comparatively light" for Georgy, since he had "only robbed the robber"; the soldier himself "was never traced," and so, goes unpunished. Since Hardy has swung our sympathies to follow the soldier, and since he tells us that Georgy's punishment is slight, the story's overall effect is one of justice's having been satisfied.

"Netty Sargent's Copyhold," on the other hand, is a story in which crime is actually rewarded. Mr. Day, the narrator, takes a humorous view of Netty's cleverness and courage in outwitting the rich landlord who wants her cottage and land. In outmaneuvering the landowner, Netty breaks several laws; a detailed list of her crimes technically includes forgery and misrepresentation of facts. Yet she succeeds in securing the copyhold, gains a husband, and earns the admiration of her neighbors. Even after her trickery is known to the landholder, no action is taken against her, for "'Netty was a pretty young woman, and the Squire's son was a pretty young man at that time, and wider-minded than his father, having no objection to little holdings; and he never took any proceedings against her'" (LLI, p. 258). Mr. Day sums up his admiration of Netty's cleverness with the observation that "Every virtue has its

reward . . .'" (LLI, p. 256). The situation is especially ironic when contrasted with the outcome of the third story in Hardy's examination of crime and punishment.

"The Winters and the Palmleys" represents the exact opposite of Netty's experience, showing a penalty too severe for the crime committed. This groceress' tale deals with an "offense-revenge" motif that is only satisfied by the death of a relatively innocent victim. Young Jack Winter breaks into the home of his former fiancée to regain his poorly-written love-letters, because he fears she will use them to mock him; he takes the box that contains them and is arrested with it in his possession after he has destroyed the letters. Unknown to him, the box also contains several gold coins, for whose theft he is nevertheless arrested. The aged groceress' matter-of-fact account of his arrest and trial is that "'Jack's act amounted to night burglary--though he had never thought of it--[underscoring mine] and burglary was felony, and a capital offense in those days'" (LLI, p. 244). Contrasting this remark with the registrar's statement that Georgy's punishment was fairly light since he "only robbed the robber" and with Mr. Day's "'Every virtue has its reward'" concerning Netty's crime, the reader sees that justice seems to be blind--

because it depends on people who deliberately blind themselves to its administration.

When Hardy turns from the ironies involving society to those involving religion, he is at one and the same time more subtle and more devastating in his effects. Except when using Twink's humor or the curate's gentle near-sightedness, Hardy camouflages his religious ironies in "A Few Crust-ed Characters," embodying them either in symbols or in the inappropriate use of scriptural quotations. The recognition of a symbol requires reader involvement; the tracing and correction of inappropriate scripture usage requires even more attention, but is regarded by greater effect on the reader. In the separate stories, the symbols and quotations are relatively mild, but seen from the frame, they gain much in ironic impact.

The Longpiddle church-tower is a recurring symbol in the frame. In each of three separate stories, it functions as an actual edifice, as part of the incongruity in different situational ironies. The first instance is very slight, and goes by the reader almost unnoticed: in "The Superstitious Man's Story" the sexton is said to have reported how he had felt the bell "go heavy" in his hand as he was tolling it, and he "feared it meant a death in the parish" (LLI, p. 216). The bell, of course, is in the

church-tower, and the sexton would be standing well up into the building to pull the rope. This is the only reference in this particular story to the church-tower, although the church-building itself figures in the semi-pagan superstition<sup>2</sup> the story centers around. When the young folk of the village keep watch on Old Midsummer, they see the "faint shapes" of "all the folk in the parish who are going to be at death's door within the year" enter the church; only those destined to recover "come out again after a while; those who are doomed to die do not return" (LLI, p. 218). William Privett enters but does not return, according to the young witness. The ironies here result from the juxtaposition of Christian and pagan elements; taken alone, the reference to the bell-tower seems insignificant, and certainly would seem to have no meaning outside the story, were it not for other references to the tower in the other individual stories.

The second instance in which the bell-tower figures brings its existence sharply to the reader's attention,

<sup>2</sup> This superstition regarding the church bell's powers was a common Wessex tradition. In some versions, fairies rang the bell on special occasions. Kinsley Palmer, Oral Folk Tales of Wessex (Plymouth: Latimer Trend & Company, Ltd., 1973), p. 120.

however. In Christopher Twink's "Andrey Satchel and the Parson and Clerk" which follows the "Superstitious Man's Story," the tower serves as a prison for a young couple about to be married. As noted before, Pa'son Billy Too-good refuses to marry the couple while the groom is tipsy, although the bride seems ready to give birth at any time. The clerk locks the engaged pair in the bell-tower, at the request of the bride, who explains, " . . . if we bide here in the church, folk may see us through the windows, and find out what has happened [she is referring to the Parson's refusal to marry them until Andrey is sober; the reader may at first think that she refers to the pre-marital pregnancy, but this incongruity in Victorian social attitudes is just one more irony; Jane sobs, "and 'twould cause such a talk and scandal that I never should get over it; and perhaps, too, dear Andrey might try to get out and leave me! Will ye lock us up in the tower, my dear clerk?'" (LLI, p. 223). Hardy achieves both ironic humor and ironic pathos, and although the tower is seen here as symbolic, the irony of the symbol is subsidiary to Twink's manner and the force of his rollicking narrative.

The bitterest use of the church-tower symbol appears in "The Winters and the Palmleys," after young Jack has been hanged from a crime he did not intend to commit. The



body has been brought back to Longpuddle from the jail where the execution took place, after a trial in which the witnesses, who could have saved the boy's life with a word, did not trouble themselves to appear, because of a long-standing family grudge. After the description of the coffin's slow approach in the wagon, the groceress remarks laconically, "The coffin was laid in the belfry for the night, and the next day, Sunday, between the services, we buried him" (LLI, p. 246). The church's role has been entirely passive in Jack's life; he is even buried "between the services" so that the Sunday ritual will not be disrupted. When it is viewed from the frame, therefore, in conjunction with the tower as prison and the tower as origin or a semi-pagan rumor, it assumes substantial and solemn proportions, as a symbol of the impotence of a religion outgrown and outlived.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the ironic religious symbols in "A Few Crusted Characters," Hardy makes ironic use of Biblical quotations. William Rutland notes that in Hardy's earlier novels scripture is often put to humorous use, but that

<sup>3</sup>See Frank R. Giordano, Jr., "Secularization and Ethical Authority in Jude the Obscure," The Thomas Hardy Year Book 1972-1973, pp. 34-45.

"Too often, in the late novels, Hardy's references to Scripture are bitterly ironical . . ."<sup>4</sup> "A Few Crusted Characters," written about the same time as the "late novels," partakes of the same tone, in Hardy's references to Scripture. "The History of the Hardcomes," and especially "The Winters and the Palmleys" contain mis-applications of Scripture that are especially pointed.

In "The History of the Hardcomes" the Curate uses a Biblical passage in conjunction with a reference to Destiny, and thus increases the irony. He says of the drowned couple that "'in death they were not divided.'" This quotation comes from II Samuel 1:23 by way of George Eliot's Mill on the Floss; in both these contexts, death alone had served to re-unite loved ones who, because of pride, ambition, or lack of charity, had become estranged. In Mill on the Floss, Maggie had come to rescue her brother Tom from the flood, and so was reconciled with him just before their deaths by drowning; in the Old Testament story, King Saul and his son Jonathan had become bitter enemies not even reconciled by the danger of the battle in which they both died. The irony in applying this passage to Olive

<sup>4</sup>Thomas Hardy: A Study of His Writings and Their Background (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 4.

and Steve lies in the fact that they were separated by choice and united only by refusal to choose, and that although "in death they were not divided," in life they had been, because of their following a momentary impulse at a wedding party.

Kardy's use of a Biblical reference in "The Winters and the Palmleys" is far more striking than the foregoing instance: at the funeral service for young Jack, the sermon was preached on the text "He was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow" (LLI, p. 246). This was precisely the case with Jack and his mother, and sounds appropriate until contrasted with its original context in Luke 7:12, in which the situation is considerably different. The Biblical story tells of Christ's encountering a funeral procession in the street. The people are unknown to him and do not even seek his help, but Christ perceives that the corpse they bear was the only son of his widowed mother; as an act of compassion and understanding, he restores the young man's life. In "A Few Crusted Characters" the situation is an ironic parody of the New Testament story; Jack has been condemned for a crime he did not intend to commit, of whose implications he was unaware. The Biblical passage is quoted just after the groceress has related the details of Jack's hanging:

"The day o' young Jack's execution was a cold dusty Saturday in March. He was so boyish and slim that they were obliged in mercy to hang him in the heaviest fetters kept in the jail, lest his heft should not break his neck, and they weighed so upon him that he could hardly drag himself up to the drop" (LLI, p. 245).

This particular passage seems to me to be one of Hardy's most masterful ironic accomplishments. Because it deals with religion and execution, injustice and hypocrisy, the very real possibility exists that the reader could have felt the experience as being "forced" upon his attention, as being overstated, melodramatic, or sentimental. The remote and icy stance of the narrator, however, enables a reader to participate in the impersonal attitude, and to make his own estimation of the ironic and emotional success of the story.

Hardy's ironies, taken separately in the stories, often seem to go no farther than the specific occurrence of social or religious ironic episodes. From the base-line provided by the frame, they combine to form the observation that men regard choice, justice, and religious principles as beyond their ability.

Finally, the frame of "A Few Crusted Characters" provides Hardy with an opportunity to demonstrate his exact ironic distance from his subject. At the same time, the

frame enables him to demonstrate his attitudes regarding the role and influence of chance as a controlling force in life.

To understand the ironic distance assumed by the frame's narrator, it is helpful to review the stance of the most remote secondary narrator, the aged groceress. Likewise, determining the exact traits and motives of this figure helps the reader to understand Hardy's attitude about the role of chance in life, for the groceress is probably his personification of destiny or fate, and a recurrent character in Hardy's work. As I showed in Chapter II, the aged groceress preceded the other passengers in securing her place in the van, but was passive and silent until called upon for information that no one else could remember, at which time she seemed to receive a "vision" from a supernatural source. Her narrative tone was utterly lacking in emotion, and she made no value judgments, condemned no crimes, justified no motives. In addition, she emphasized her role of observer, rather than of participant, in describing the scenes at which she had been present in earlier times. Hardy intended her to represent an omniscient, impartial observer, passive and extremely remote, perhaps to represent his personification of destiny or fate.

Hardy makes an important reference to such a personage in his Notebook; in an entry dated 30 October, 1870, he says, "Mother's notion (and also mine)--that a figure stands in our van with arm uplifted to knock us back from any pleasant prospect we indulge in as probable" (p. 23). Critics who see Hardy as deterministic credit him with a belief in the actively malignant force that he describes here. They overlook the passive and silent figure of the kind represented in "A Few Crusted Characters." Assuming Hardy to mean what he says in this descriptions of fate, and in his description of the groceress, the only logical conclusion is that he changed his outlook over the twenty-year period, because the figure in "A Few Crusted Characters" is one with "folded lips and arms," and who is silent, passive, and uninvolved. That Hardy's main narrator in "A Few Crusted Characters" stands at a yet more remote point of view than the groceress, that through his narrative, he manipulates her speech, attitudes, and very existence, is a vitally-important issue here. Hardy thus illustrates, through his primary narrator, where mankind stands in relation to chance and choice.

The main narrator in "A Few Crusted Characters" stands beyond the other characters in point of view; in relation to space, time, and understanding he is their superior.

He observes the market-town where the empty van awaits passengers and driver; he accompanies the vehicle on its trip through the Wessex countryside and watches as it enters the valley where Longpuddle "straggles." Although not a passenger in the vehicle, he sees the aged groceress herself enter the van, and as the other passengers arrive, he notes their appearances, their speech, and their positions in the coach. He notices that Twink "schools" himself to a "tone of actuality," and that Mr. Day "apologizes" before beginning his narrative; the mannerism and oddities of the characters do not escape him. He says at the beginning of the introduction that the time is almost four in the afternoon, and at the end of the series he states that the van's trip is fifteen years in the past. Minutes and years seem much the same to this narrator who moves so readily from one to the other. He moves with equal ease into the minds of his characters, usually by his report of their narratives, but once, by the actual description of thought processes. He says of Lackland, standing the churchyard, that he "began to feel himself amid the village community; and that he "perceived" his alienation. This ability to penetrate the thoughts of others places Hardy's primary narrator in a category beyond that of the aged groceress, as one who also "sees" and includes even

the groceress, herself, in that which he "sees." Remote as she is, he is even farther removed from the fiction.

This stance of the primary narrator, in relation to the other narrators and characters, especially the secondary narrator who represents fate, provides a key to understanding Hardy's philosophy regarding determinism. As the narrator's point of view controls the groceress' own point of view, in this fictional representation of reality, so men control fate and destiny, in Hardy's estimation: by removing themselves far enough from life's conflicts to understand them clearly, by exercising the choice they possess, by acting on those choices and then accepting the responsibility for the consequences, men make their own destiny. This clarification of his ironic stance, in life and in fiction, is the contribution made by a study of "A Few Crusted Characters."



## CONCLUSION

Hardy's use of irony is both his strength and his weakness: his strength because it accounts for most of the impact of his work and his weakness because it produces much confusion about or misunderstanding of his meaning. J. I. M. Stewart acknowledges this tendency of Hardy's to "hit hard" yet fail to transmit full meaning to the reader. Stewart cites a much-disputed passage of Hardy's, the authorial comment that ends Tess of the d'Urbervilles: "The President of the Immortals had ended his sport with Tess." Stewart then admits, "There is no nonsense about this; we are being hit hard. Only, when we have finished our reading of Hardy, we are not quite sure what has hit us. What are we being asked to believe, or processed to subscribe to?" (p. 34). Other critics, not quite so ready to give Hardy the benefit of the doubt, either accuse him of pessimism or fatalism, or occasionally, of artistic ineptitude or intellectual pride. The most extreme instance of such a stand appears in Frank Chapman's evaluation of the same phrase from Tess, when he says of Hardy's purpose in using the passage, "This seems to me grossly theatrical. Hardy, in his

endeavor to be impressive, deserts his own conception of the 'Immanent Will' to drag in literary references."<sup>1</sup> Thus, from the more tolerant of the critics to those who have relegated Hardy to the ranks of the pretentious, misconceptions still exist.

Even Morrell and Southerington, who have found optimism in Hardy's writing and integrity in his attitude, nevertheless base their findings on somewhat limited aspects of his work, or conclude on a dubious note where his craftsmanship is concerned. Morrell, in showing Hardy's belief in free-will and in man's ability to direct his own destiny, relies largely on instances from Far from the Madding Crowd, the least pessimistic or deterministic of Hardy's novels. Southerington questions the ability of Hardy's "chosen form"--folk themes, ballad-like plots, rural characters--to stand successfully under such heavy application of irony as Hardy uses, provided, as Southerington says, that Hardy genuinely means to be ironic throughout his work.

"A Few Crusted Characters" contributes substantially to clearing up the misconceptions that have surrounded Hardy's work, especially in understanding his stance in

<sup>1</sup>"Revaluation (IV) Hardy the Novelist," Scrutiny, III (June, 1934), p. 23.

regard to destiny and free will, and irony is the key. The frame-story works entirely through Hardy's customary Wessex setting and characters, showing his themes to be universal, the situations and problems timeless. A more consistent example of his "chosen form" could hardly be found, or a more successful application of ironic technique to that form. Once a reader understands Hardy's irony in this selection, he is well on his way to understanding Hardy's whole philosophy of life and art.

The little world of Wessex is well-represented by the passengers in the van: the curate and clerk, a local landscape painter, the registrar the groceress, the seedsman, the local prankster, the driver, and the traveller. The narrations cover the entire spectrum of human experience: marriages, births, deaths, courtings, hangings, murders, visions, and the endless ways and means by which people influence their own fortunes and assign the outcomes to fate. The minister as well as the driver blame circumstance for what obviously resulted from choice and intent in the stories they tell. Whether the tone is comic or tragic, the contradictory twist of irony shapes almost every outcome of every situation: wrong choice or the refusal to choose at all, innocent victims and guilty victors. Hardy shows the reader how reality appears to the narrators of

the separate stories: first, to the gullible Curate, immersed in and deceived by the appearance of things as he wishes them to be. Hardy then presents a different world through the eyes of the alert and ironish master-thatcher, who understands the human condition well enough to play pranks with truth and still have a firm grasp of it. A third and completely different view is revealed to the reader through the narrative of the groceress, who sees years and miles, persons and situations, as if they were characters in a drama, from a cold distance. She herself seems timeless and omniscient, like the fate whose personification Hardy probably intends her to be.

Because of the groceress' narration, the final stance of Hardy's own narrator (the frame's narrator) can be inferred, and from that inference, an important clue to the author's opinions concerning the role of destiny emerges. The frame's own narrator stands beyond the groceress in point of view, including her presence and narrative in what he himself sees and hears. That she is distant and passive in regard to the characters in her story, that she knows all but seeks to control nothing, characterizes her as the type of fate that is subject to be challenged, if not overcome, by the will of man. That Hardy as narrator and artist has created her, disarmed her, and revealed her

impotence, suggests that Hardy the man felt free-will, responsible choice, and conscientious action to be the superiors of destiny. When this philosophy is tentatively applied to other works of Hardy's, many formerly obscure points become more clear, including the quotation from Tess: having shown people carrying out their choices, victimizing and preying upon one another, the author then comments upon this cruelty of a non-existent cosmic gamester and doubles the original irony thereby.

Whether or not Hardy was ahead of his time is impossible to say, but certainly, he was ahead of his readers. Only recently, in a world growing more accustomed to the fact that material reality is deceptive--if it exists at all--has Hardy's all-encompassing irony come to be appreciated. An understanding of Hardy's purpose and skill in "A Few Crusted Characters" can add to that appreciation.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abercrombie, Lascelles. Thomas Hardy - A Critical Study. New York: Russell & Russell, 1912; rpt. 1964.
- Bailey, J. O. The Poetry of Thomas Hardy. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1970.
- Baker, Howard. "Hardy's Poetic Certitude," The Southern Review, VI (Summer 1940), pp. 43-63.
- Beach, Joseph Warren. The Technique of Thomas Hardy. New York: Russell & Russell, 1922; rpt. 1949, 1962.
- Blackmur, R. P. The Double Agent. Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1962.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Shorter Poems of Thomas Hardy," The Southern Review, VI (Summer 1940), pp. 20-48.
- Blunden, Edmund. Thomas Hardy. London: Macmillan and Company Limited, 1962.
- Booth, Wayne C. The Rhetoric of Fiction. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961.
- Fraybrooke, Patrick. Thomas Hardy and his Philosophy. New York: Russell & Russell, 1923; reissued 1969.
- Brennecke, Ernest, Jr. Thomas Hardy's Universe: A Study of a Poet's Mind. London: T. Fisher Unwin, Ltd., 1924.
- Brooks, Jean R. Thomas Hardy: The Poetic Structure. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Paperbacks, 1971.
- Carpenter, Richard C. Thomas Hardy. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964.
- Cecil, David. Hardy the Novelist. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1943; rpt. 1946.
- Chapman, Frank. "Revaluations (IV) Hardy the Novelist," Scrutiny III (June, 1934), pp. 22-37.

Chase, Mary Ellen. Thomas Hardy from Serial to Novel. New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1927; rpt. 1964.

Chew, Samuel C. Thomas Hardy, Poet and Novelist. New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1964.

Cox, R. G., ed. Thomas Hardy: The Critical Heritage. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1970.

Davidson, Donald. "The Traditional Basis of Thomas Hardy's Fiction," from Hardy: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Albert J. Guerard. Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1963; pp. 10-23.

From Still Rebels, Still Yankees, and Other Essays by Donald Davidson. Reprinted by permission of the Louisiana State University Press. Originally published in the Hardy Centennial Number (VI, 1940) of The Southern Review.

Davie, Donald. Thomas Hardy and British Poetry. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.

Eliot, George. The Mill on the Floss. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924.

Forster, E. M. Aspects of the Novel. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927.

Guerard, ed. Hardy: A Collection of Critical Essays. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963.

Guerard, Albert J. Thomas Hardy. Norfolk, Connecticut: James Laughlin, 1943.

Hardy, Evelyn. Thomas Hardy: A Critical Biography. New York: Russell & Russell, 1954; Reissued, 1970.

\_\_\_\_\_, ed. Thomas Hardy's Notebooks. London: The Hogarth Press, 1935.

\_\_\_\_\_, and F. B. Pinion, eds. One Rare Fair Woman. Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1972.

Hardy, Florence Emily. The Early Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840-1891. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928.

- \_\_\_\_\_. The Later Years of Thomas Hardy, 1902-1928. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930.
- Giordano, Frank R., Jr. "Secularization and Ethical Authority in Jude the Obscure," in The Thomas Hardy Year Book 1972-1973, pp. 34-40.
- Hardy, Thomas. Collected Poems. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1925; rpt. 1972.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Life's Little Ironies. New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1942.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Life and Art. With introduction by Ernest Brennecke, Jr. Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, Inc., 1925; Reprinted 1968.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Personal Writings. ed. Harold Orel. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1966.
- Natfield, Glenn. Henry Filding and the Language of Irony. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1968.
- Holland, Clive. Thomas Hardy, O.M. New York: Haskell House, 1933; rpt. 1966.
- Howe, Irving. Thomas Hardy. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937.
- James, Henry. The Art of the Novel. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934.
- Johnson, Lionel. The Art of Thomas Hardy. New York: Russell & Russell, 1965.
- Lea, Herman. Thomas Hardy's Wessex. St. Peter Port, Guernsey, C. I.: Toucan Press, 1969.
- Leavis, F. R. "Hardy the Poet," The Southern Review, VI (Summer 1940), pp. 87-98.
- Lerner, Laurence and John Holmstrom. Thomas Hardy and his Readers. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1968; rpt. 1969.



- Lubbock, Percy. The Craft of Fiction. New York: The Viking Press, 1957.
- McCann, Eleanor. "Blind Will or Blind Hero: Philosophy and Myth in Hardy's Return of the Native," Criticism, III (Spring 1961), pp. 140-157.
- Meisel, Perry. Thomas Hardy The Return of the Repressed. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972.
- Miller, J. Willis. Distance and Desire. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970.
- Millgate, Michael. Thomas Hardy - His Career as a Novelist. New York: Random House, 1971.
- Mizener, Arthur. "Jude the Obscure as a Tragedy," The Southern Review, VI (Summer 1940), pp. 193-213.
- Porrell, Roy. The Will and the Way. Kuala Lumpur: The University of Malaya Press, 1965.
- Muscke, D. C. The Compass of Irony. London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1969.
- Newton, William. "Chance as Employed by Hardy and the Naturalists," Philological Quarterly, XXX (April 1951), pp. 154-175.
- O'Connor, William Van. "Cosmic Irony in Hardy's 'The Three Strangers,'" in The English Journal, XLV, No. 5 (May 1958), pp. 248-54, 262.
- Halliday, F. E. Thomas Hardy: His Life and Work. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1972.
- Page, Norman. "Hardy's Short Stories: A Reconsideration," in Studies in Short Fiction. Newberry, Smith Carolina: Newberry College, Vol. XI, No. 1 (Winter 1974), pp. 75-84.
- Palmer, Kingsley. Oral Folk Tales of Wessex. Plymouth: Latimer Trend & Company, Ltd., 1973.
- Pinion, F. E. "Hardy," in The English Novel, ed. A. E. Dyson. London: Oxford University Press, 1974.

- Pinsky, Robert. "Hardy, Ransom, Berryman: A 'Curious Air,'" in Agenda, Thomas Hardy Special Issue, Guest Edited by Donald Davie (Spring-Summer 1971), pp. 89-99.
- Porter, Katherine Anne. "Notes on a Criticism of Thomas Hardy," The Southern Review, VI (Summer 1940), pp. 150-161.
- Purdy, Richard Little. Thomas Hardy A Bibliographical Study. London: Oxford University Press, Amen House, 1954.
- Ramsey, Vance. "Modes of Irony in The Canterbury Tales," in Companion to Chaucer Studies, ed. Beryl Rowland, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1963.
- Ransom, John Crowe. "Honey and Gall," The Southern Review, VI (Summer 1940), pp. 2-19.
- Roberts, Marguerite. Hardy's Poetic Drama and the Theatre. New York: Pageant Press, Inc., 1965.
- Rutland, William. Thomas Hardy: A Study of his Writings and their Background. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938.
- Ruggiers, Paul J. The Art of the Canterbury Tales. Madison, Milwaukee, and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1967.
- Sanders, Chauncey. An Introduction to Research in English Literary History. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952; rpt. 1960.
- Scholes, Robert, and Robert Kellogg. The Nature of Narrative. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966.
- Schwartz, Delmore. "Poetry and Belief in Thomas Hardy," The Southern Review, VI (Summer 1940), pp. 64-77.
- Shafer, Robert. Christianity and Naturalism. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1926.
- Southerington, F. R. Hardy's Vision of Man. London: Chatto & Windus, 1971.

- Stewart, J.I.M. Thomas Hardy: A Critical Biography. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1971.
- Summers, Richard. Craft of the Short Story. New York: Finchart & Company, Inc., 1948.
- Syrors, Arthur. A Study of Thomas Hardy. New York: Haskell House Publishers, Ltd., 1971.
- Torrens, Henry, Edward Lane, and John Payne, trans. The Arabian Nights Entertainments. New York: The Heritage Press, 1955.
- Natt, Ian, ed. The Victorian Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Weber, Carl J. Hardy in America. New York: Russell & Russell, 1966.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. "Dearest Emma": Thomas Hardy's Letters to his First Wife. London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1963.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Hardy of Wessex. New York: Columbia University Press, 1940; rpt. 1965.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Letters of Thomas Hardy. Waterville, Maine: Colley College Press, 1954.
- Webster, Harvey Curtis. On a Darkling Plain. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1947.
- Williams, Mervyn. Thomas Hardy and Rural England. New York: Columbia University Press, 1972.
- Williams, Randall. The Wessex Novels of Thomas Hardy: An Appreciative Study. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1924.
- Zabel, Martin Dauwen. "Hardy in Defense of his Art: The Aesthetic of Incongruity," The Southern Review, VI (Summer 1940), pp. 125-149.