

## Some Visual and Cinematic Qualities in Thomas Hardy's Novels: A Short Survey

Dr Oindrila Ghosh

Assistant Professor in English, School of Humanities, Netaji Subhas Open University, Kolkata, West Bengal-700064, India

**Abstract:** Thomas Hardy's visual imagination, his eye for colours, play of light and shade and the sweep from the vast spaces to the finite human world is present in every page of his novels, which makes his novels so easily transformable into movies. His developing interest and fascination for painting and the visual arts which enriched his mode of writing fiction and also provided a different dimension to the reader to be able to read his novel in more innovative and experimental modes. Hardy's love for rural England and his rarified and fictionalized setting for his novels – Wessex – and his depiction of the customs, folklores and colours of a rustic world rapidly transforming at the advent of industrialization finds life in his pictorial mode of descriptions. His novels are like moving pictures enacted in the mind of the reader and therefore film adaptations borrow heavily from these pictorial aspects of his novels, which accounts for the popularity of his novels with film makers across the globe.

**Keywords:** visual imagination, cinematic qualities, Wessex

### DISCUSSION

In December 1886 Hardy wrote this comment on the Impressionists which has since been quoted widely:

. . . what you carry away from a scene is a true feature to grasp; or in other words, what appeals to your own individual eye and heart in particular amid much that does not appeal, and which you therefore omit to record (*Life* 184).

Though a comment on Impressionism, it is, obliquely, also Hardy's comment on his own art of narration and his ability to paint visually powerful and striking images, settings and characters in his novels making them easily transmutable into the cinematic medium. Most people think Hardy's novels did not make it to the cinema until 1967, when John Schlesinger's film of *Far from the Madding Crowd* was released. However, during the silent era, many motion pictures based on Hardy's fiction were made, and Hardy's works continued to attract the interest of filmmakers after the introduction of sound – though only one English-language film based on a Hardy source appeared between 1929 and 1967. What is interesting then is the question that what made Hardy's novels such popular subject for transformation and adaptations into the film medium, even in the era of silent movies? The answer to this can be only one. Thomas Hardy's novels were deeply inspired by his deeply visual imagination and the cinematic quality of his narration. Hardy's novels reveal the visual potential of fictional narrative and critics have pointed out his deep interest in painting and his conscious use of its techniques in his narrative. It is also widely known that the serial installments of Hardy's novels were illustrated by noted illustrators such as Helen Paterson Allingham and Arthur Hopkins and the inherent pictorial qualities in his texts made the illustrator's

work that much easier. In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* the episode of Tess's rape/seduction in The Chase is shrouded in mystery and glossed over chiefly owing to the compulsions of the strict taboo on sexual references in novels in Victorian society. Hardy makes use of the metaphor of drawing to describe the violation of Tess:

Why it was upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive; why so often the coarse appropriates the finer thus, the wrong man the woman, the wrong woman the man, many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain (*Tess* 91).

Incidentally *Tess* has been acclaimed by critics as one of the most visually vivid novels of Hardy, where the male narrator becomes, along with the chief male characters in the novel Angel and Alec, also a voyeur of Tess's sensuousness and her virginal beauty. Hardy's involvement with his heroine and the influence of Turner's paintings upon him are evident in his descriptive details of Tess in her changing settings from Talbothays, where she attains an indistinct and nebulous form, to Flint-Comb Ash, where she suffers physically and mentally. The techniques used to picturise Tess are borrowed from painting and foreground those elements which were later to become the prerogative of cinema. In Talbothays the soft intonation of the natuescape and Tess's mentalscape are symbolically united:

Whilst all the landscape was in neutral shade his companion's face, which was the focus of his eyes, rising above the mist stratum, seemed to have a kind of phosphorescence upon it. She looked ghostly, as if she were merely a soul at large. In reality her face, without appearing to do so had caught the cold gleam of day from the north-east (*Tess* 167)

and in Flint-Comb Ash the colour spectrum is reversed with the soft shades and the light and colour effects being replaced with hard forms and outlines. These elements borrowed from painting, lend a particularly cinematic quality to Hardy's novels making them visually powerful narratives. So also do Hardy's almost graphic descriptions of Tess with the sensuous descriptions of her 'mobile peony mouth and large innocent eyes' and her changing iris with 'the deepness of her ever-varying pupils, with their radiating fibrils of blue, and black, and gray and violet' and the insides of her mouth when Angel saw 'she was yawning, and he saw the red interior of her mouth' with effects that maybe apt subject for a painter and also captured with ease on celluloid. There have been several versions of the novel made over the centuries the most famous being Roman Polanski's version starring Natasa Kinski, a rather shoddy adaptation of the novel by RK Films called *Prem Granth* and the recent adaptation by Michael Winterbottom – *Trishna*, which however has an Indian setting and an Indianised plot to suit an audience habituated to Bollywood melodrama and excess. What is interesting to note here is the appeal of Hardy's story and narration to cinema. Alastair Smart is fully justified in his remark that 'Hardy, indeed, had the eyes of a painter; drawing the outlines of his forms as consciously as he filled them with substance and with colour; giving them their proper texture and lighting; fixing them firmly in a definite space; and relating them in scale to their surroundings' (Smart 262).

The proof of Hardy's pictorial imagination is evident from the minute observation of life and life-forms present in every novel. The opening scene of majestic Egdon Heath, in *The Return of the Native*, is his masterpiece where a mere barren landscape is brought into life by the magic brush of his powerful visual imagination. Norman Page remarks that 'Hardy's wide knowledge of, and lifelong interest in, the visual arts left their mark on his fiction at both superficial and deeper levels, and in the conception and presentation of whole episodes as well as in individual details of style' (Page 486). Hardy's novels are full of references to painters – Perugino, Durer, Raphael, Correggio, Rubens, Velasquez, Rembrandt, Turner. It is this detailed and vivid power of observation and depiction which made Hardy's novels so widely acceptable for film and television adaptations. It has been noticed and commented upon by reader and critic alike that the opening chapters of Hardy's novels are cinematic in their impact. Be it the estranged couple, Michael Henchard and Susan walking down the Casterbridge road and the narrator focusing the reader's attention on the solitary figures as they come closer to their purview, or in the compelling scenes of *Far From the Madding crowd* or *Two on a Tower* where the astronomical world beyond the human domain is time and again brought into close view as an attempt to highlight the puny stature of humanity:

Then they proceeded to scan the sky, roving from planet to star, from single stars to double stars, from double to coloured stars, in the cursory manner of the merely curious. They plunged down to that at other times invisible stellar multitude in the back rows of the celestial theatre: remote layers of constellations whose shapes were new and singular; pretty twinklers which for infinite ages had spent their beams without calling forth from a single earthly poet a single line, or being able to bestow a ray of comfort on a single benighted traveler. (*Two on a Tower* 55-56)

Thomas Hardy's visual imagination, his eye for colours, play of light and shade and the sweep from the vast spaces to the finite human world is present in every page of his novels, which makes his novels so easily transformable into movies. Hardy's developing interest and fascination for painting and the visual arts which enriched his mode of writing fiction and also provided a different dimension to the reader to be able to read his novel in more innovative and experimental modes. It has been pointed out that:

It is certainly the case that Hardy's writing accentuates the visual in ways which anticipate the advent of cinema, and which lend themselves to cinematic adaptation, perhaps more so than many of his contemporary novelists (Webster 34).

The use of pictorial modes for description is evident in all of Hardy's novels but the importance of the visual impact of a scene, an object, a human being or a situation is brought out with cinematic finesse in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, in the particular nail-biting suspense of a scene where the rationalist Henry Knight slides down precariously from a cliff face and is transfixed with the cold stare of a fossilized trilobite. In a single episode there is thus a combination of many impacts – the impact of the frozen tableaux of the trilobite's lifeless stare, the suspense of the hero hanging from the precipice for dear life and also the conjunction of the temporal and the timeless in one visual frame.

However along with this pictorial element in Hardy's narrative which makes it convenient for film makers to adapt his novels into films, rests the difficulty of his metaphorical style and the inability of translating the layers of meaning embedded in the novels like *The Return of the Native* and *The Woodlanders*, which are based on the backdrop of symbolic settings and metaphors which are difficult to translate into the medium of films. For instance the constant comparison of the trees and the human inhabitants of the woodlands in *The Woodlanders* or the deep symbolic depths which represents Egdon Heath and the relation of Eustacia, Clym, Wildeve, Diggory Venn or Thomasin with it are

impossible to depict in the film adaptations as it is can only be described best through the medium of the written word.

Thus, in the final analysis it can be said that Hardy's love for rural England and his rarified and fictionalized setting for his novels – Wessex – and his depiction of the customs, folklores and colours of a rustic world rapidly transforming at the advent of industrialization finds life in his pictorial mode of descriptions deeply tinged with his love for and use of the techniques from paintings. His novels are like moving pictures enacted in the mind of the reader and hence film adaptations borrow heavily from these pictorial aspects of his novels, which accounts for his novels being popular with film makers all over the world and the many adaptations and versions of his movies down the centuries.

invited lectures on various aspects of Hardy's works in Colleges and Universities in her State.

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#### About the Author

Dr Oindrila Ghosh is currently Assistant Professor in English, School of Humanities, Netaji Subhas Open University. Her PhD is on the treatment of motherhood in the short stories of Thomas Hardy. She has been a Charles Wallace India Trust UK, Scholar, 2009 and recipient of the Frank Pinion Award, 2014 from The Thomas Hardy Society, Dorset, UK. She has presented papers and published widely on Thomas Hardy in reputed International journals including *The Victorian*, *Hardy Society Journal*, *The Thomas Hardy Journal*, *The Hardy Review* and *Fathom-Reviews*. She is also the only Checklister from India for The Directory of Thomas Hardy's works for The Thomas Hardy Association, USA. She has also delivered several