2006 First Place Persuasive Research Paper

A More Balanced Interpretation of Sergeant Francis Troy

Numerous critics have argued that Sergeant Francis Troy displays an antagonistic relationship with nature in Thomas Hardy’s *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Because of Troy’s longstanding relationship with city life, they say, the pastoral environment is depicted with negative connotations in his presence (see Babb 152 and Squires 309). But the fact that the bulk of literary critiques assert that Troy clearly does not enjoy perfect harmony with nature demands the answer to a seemingly simple question: does the Sergeant only possess dishonorable traits, or do critics merely focus on his negative traits and ignore or overlook his good qualities?

An investigation of this question reveals that a more accurate view of Troy’s character is achieved by not irrevocably labeling him as a “bringer of death” (Brooks 166) with “the devil’s power to distort human dignity” (Brooks 170). A thorough analysis of *Far from the Madding Crowd* proves that in reality, Troy is often explicitly related with the natural environment in a positive manner and deserves sympathy, rather than condemnation, for his weaknesses; uniting this information with the mountains of evidence provided by well-known literary critiques which point to Troy’s questionable intentions produces a more well-rounded and correct interpretation of Troy’s character as it reflects Hardy’s societal views.

**Troy and Nature**

Literary analyses of the role of setting in *Far from the Madding Crowd* generally acknowledge “the intertwined relationship of man and Nature” (“The Mirror and the Sword” 331). Accordingly, tracing the details of setting with a character yields a better understanding of the reasons for their successes and failures in Hardy’s world (“The Mirror and the Sword” 334). Although it has already been shown with great detail that Troy’s overall relationship with nature is “marked from beginning to end by distortion” (Brooks 167), a critical search for positive correlations between him and the natural world blurs this seemingly simple picture of the Sergeant.
One scene significant in assessing Troy’s relationship with nature occurs on the night in which he first meets Bathsheba. Hardy says that the soldier “was brilliant in brass and scarlet” and that “his sudden appearance was to darkness what the sound of a trumpet is to silence” (Hardy 127). In addition, “Gloom…was now totally overthrown, less by the lantern-light than by what the lantern lighted” (127). Thus, Troy is depicted as a source of light in the night which is described as “black as the ninth plague of Egypt at midnight” (126). Jean R. Brooks argued that this was a “transformation…into something below the human level” (Brooks 166), and it is true that Troy’s light is emanating from his clothing, which is “brilliant in brass and scarlet,” rather than his skin, emphasizing his artificial nature. But when juxtaposed with the fact that the workfolk of Weatherbury are also praised as being sources of light, this characterization of Troy proves especially important because it indirectly compares him to characters intimately involved with the natural environment (Squires 322-23). The best argument against this interpretation (and interpretations of other scenes similar to it) is that this scene, for the most part, is told through Bathsheba’s perspective; therefore, the narrator’s characterization of Troy could by tainted with Bathsheba’s initial attraction to the dashing soldier (Carpenter 88). But this illuminating quality shared by Troy and the workfolk has yet gone unnoted in any of the previously analyzed critiques, and suggests that Hardy does not certify total condemnation of Troy. Some critics also might argue against the overall worthiness of the workfolk when faced with this comparison (see Morrell 69, for example), but the narrator’s attitude towards them in this specific instance clearly praises their unity with the environment (Squires 324).

Troy continues courting Bathsheba by offering seemingly genuine assistance to the pastoral environment on her farm: “It was the gallant sergeant, who had come haymaking for pleasure; and nobody could deny that he was doing his mistress of the farm real knight-service by this voluntary contribution of his labour at a busy time” (Hardy 133). Even the stubborn Bathsheba checks herself in desiring to say something harsh to Troy because “the assistance he was rendering forbade a harsh repulse” (133). The reader also notices that Troy is at least trying (even if he is doing so with “instinctively” dishonorable intentions (Mahon 25)) to fit into the pastoral scene when he says, “I may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb (an old country saying, not of much account, but it will do for a rough soldier), and so I will speak my mind” (Hardy 135). In light of the previous
chapter in the novel, in which the reader learns that the Sergeant’s “intentions were as honourable as could be wished” (131), this effort can be seen with admiration.

The sword exercise, in which Troy proceeds to display his military prowess with hopes of impressing Bathsheba, soon follows the above scene. Preceding his visual demonstration, Troy educates her about the cuts he will perform in terms of nature, saying, “Well, next, our cut one is as if you were sowing your corn…Cut two, as if you were hedging…Three, as if you were reaping…Four, as if you were threshing” (143). Again, Hardy goes out of his way to show Troy endeavoring to understand and apply nature for Bathsheba’s sake. Jean R. Brooks has offered valid criticism concerning Troy’s explanation of the swordplay in terms of nature (Brooks 167), but it does not hold up in the face of Hardy’s bold statement that “never had [Troy] been in such splendid temper for the performance as now in the evening sunshine among the ferns with Bathsheba” (Hardy 145). Troy feels at home with nature. One critic, C. J. P. Beatty, has offered an interesting explanation of why Hardy would relate Troy to nature so blatantly; he quotes Hardy, who says, in Chapter XX, “‘Peace and war kiss each other at their hours of preparation—sickles, scythes, shears, and pruning-hooks ranking with swords, bayonets, and lances, in their common necessity for point and edge’” (Beatty 26). Beatty’s implications diminish the importance of Troy’s seemingly happy experience with nature because “war” refers to the Sergeant, and therefore, Troy only experiences peace (with nature) during the “hours of preparation”—symbolically, this would be before Bathsheba and Troy are married and have their falling out. But this is not the case, as will be illustrated later in this essay: Troy does experience similar harmony with nature later in the novel, even after he has left Bathsheba. Thus, Beatty’s argument does not hold true for the entirety of the book, and thus, has questionable relevance.

Another valid scene occurs in Chapter XXXIII, when Cain Ball is telling the workfolk about seeing Bathsheba and Troy in the city: “‘Twas a very winsome sight; and her hair was brushed splendid. And when the sun shone upon the bright gown and his red coat—my! How handsome they looked. You could see ’em all the length of the street” (Hardy 172). In analyzing this scene, Douglas Brown, in Thomas Hardy, cites one of the work folk, who says, “‘The boy’s maning…is that the sky and the earth in the kingdom of Bath is not altogether different from ours here. ’Tis for our good to gain knowledge of strange cities’” (Brown 51). Both of these
quotes can function to lessen the gap between Troy and nature. Admittedly, criticism similar to that of the scene in which Bathsheba and Troy first meet can be submitted. One could point to the sun’s illumination of their clothes as opposed to their flesh. Furthermore, the credibility of Cain Ball and the workfolk can be called into question, as they are “not associated with ‘weakness’ or strength” (Gregor 57) by Hardy (one critic goes a step further, condemning their “easy-going country morality” (Morrell 69)). But even then, this instance of admiration for Troy’s appearance in the sun, in conjunction with the claim that city and country life are not overly different, invites doubts concerning the loads of criticism heaped on Troy’s character.

Following Troy’s separation from Bathsheba, Hardy still includes a sign that obscures the traditional views of Troy’s relationship with nature. The narrator says of Troy, “He descended and came to a small basin of sea enclosed by the cliffs. Troy’s nature freshened within him; he thought he would rest and bathe here before going further” (Hardy 247). Hardy thus inserts a passage in which Troy seems to draw strength from the natural world. The fact that a strong current confuses his course once he begins swimming somewhat detracts from Hardy’s faith in Troy’s future, but still, he indisputably and deliberately correlates Troy with nature in a positive way.

Perhaps the most telling sign of Troy’s character not being wholly abhorrent occurs in Chapter LII, “Converging Courses.” On the night in which Troy dies, he says, in talking with Pennyways about his plans for the evening, that “when I go in the guests will sit in silence and fear, and all laughter and pleasure will be hushed, and the lights in the chamber burn blue, and the worms—Ugh, horrible—Ring for some more brandy Pennyways, I felt an awful shudder just then!” Troy’s words are nothing short of a premonition: he describes with remarkable accuracy the sequence of events as they will soon take place, and then “shudders.” The chill that runs through him symbolizes his impending death. This experience can be seen as a sign from nature, as it is reminiscent of Oak’s admonitions from the Great Mother to cover all the hayricks on the night of the Great Storm as mentioned by Howard Babb in “Setting and Theme in Far from the Madding Crowd” (158). The critical difference between Troy and Oak is that Oak recognizes the origin of his feelings, while Troy does not. Nevertheless, Troy’s brief communion with some supernatural force on the night of his death necessitates the belief that Troy cannot be completely foreign to the natural world.
In conclusion, it is clear that Hardy does include evidences of a positive or semi-positive relationship between Troy and nature. However, an important question remains: why would Hardy characterize Troy as exhibiting varying degrees of harmony with nature? This is done to more fully represent Hardy’s views of the city-country contrast, for although Hardy believed that the pastoral world boasted the best way of life, he nevertheless conceded that the rising city life had some positive traits (Squires 301). Michael Squires says that Hardy’s view of the “city and country is more complex than to sanction total condemnation” for urbanity. Thus, because Troy essentially represents the city (Squires 307), Hardy would naturally grant him some positive traits so that his personal views of societal structure would be more fully represented in the novel. Those critics exploring this topic bent on having a completely one-sided interpretation of Troy’s character, in which Troy is either completely opposed to nature or completely in harmony with it, cannot fully understand the complexities of Troy’s character as illustrated in his mixed relationship with nature. For them, it is a radical interpretation—because of the seeming contradiction of other textual evidence—to assume that when Hardy says that “the gallant sergeant…had come haymaking for pleasure,” Troy actually was enjoying his time spent in the pastoral environment (Hardy 133).

It is necessary to briefly clarify the originality of this argument before discussing evidence of Hardy’s sympathy for Troy. Basically, neither city life nor country life merits Hardy’s absolute approval (see Paterson 141 and Boumelha 131). Though they inevitably disagree on this fundamental issue, most critics who have commented on the connection between environment and character during the past century have emphasized Hardy’s positive view of the pastoral environment while simultaneously diminishing the importance of city life. This essay seeks to do the opposite, to emphasize Hardy’s approval of city life in conjunction with his sanctioning of the natural setting in an effort to promote a more balanced view of Troy’s character.

Hardy’s Sympathy for Troy

A discussion of Hardy’s frequently displayed or suggested sympathy for Troy’s character also necessitates the assertion that the Sergeant’s questionable behavior in Far from the Madding Crowd does not merit ceaseless criticism, but rather one of pity, and even admiration. It is true that numerous literary analysts have mentioned the fact that Hardy does “to some extent defend Troy’s character” (Johnson 135), and have
discussed the role of Hardy’s popular theme of fate in making it impossible for Troy to improve his character (see Child 57, Cecil 26, Seymour-Smith 197, Colman 123). This essay, however, will interpret the word “fate” somewhat differently; Harold Child’s definition of it as a force that “cares nothing whether [he] suffer[s] or rejoice[s] and thwarts without malignity” (Child 57) can be adapted to represent the “city-country contrast” discussed by Michael Squires (300). In other words, because Troy has roots in city life, Hardy makes it literally impossible for him to make any significant improvement despite his very best efforts, simply so that he can sufficiently convey his theme of bucolic superiority. But because Troy does try his best with the knowledge that he has, and because Hardy does possess mixed views of the worth of city life, this “fate” can often be viewed as sympathetic. Thus, this section performs an unprecedented analysis of the function of Hardy’s sympathy for Troy as it relates to the complicated city-country contrast, using a wide variety of textual evidence to support a more well-rounded interpretation of the Sergeant.

Chapter XXV, “The New Acquaintance Described,” consists of the narrator’s straightforward characterization of Troy, which reveals much concerning his morality. It generally expresses Hardy’s disapproval of Troy’s character, but at the same time, offers an intriguing explanation for his eccentricities. Troy is depicted as more “innocent” than evil (Hardy 131), the victim of that fate which hinders his personal progression. He has no sense of “expectation” for the future, but Hardy claims that this is not his fault, as he “never” possessed this quality to begin with: “What Troy had never enjoyed he did not miss” (131). He is in many ways a product of his environment: “…though his morals had never been applauded, disapproval of them had frequently been tempered with a smile” (131). Thus, the city life in which Troy grew up failed to provide him with a strong sense of right and wrong; he is the victim of an improper upbringing, and as a result, has little hope for significant change in his character (Beatty 19). Because of this, “his intentions were as honourable as could be wished, [but] any particular deed formed a dark background which threw [his reason and propensities] into fine relief” (Hardy 131). Critics have long castigated Troy, when in reality, it is the environment in which he grew up that resulted in his skewed morality; in reality, Troy should “far more…be pitied than…be blamed” (Cecil 27), and his best efforts should be viewed in a positive light despite the negative consequences that often follow them. He is incapable, because of his “inability to guide incipient effort,” of sound moral decision-
making (Hardy 131), and therefore unworthy of the total condemnation seen in so many of the essays that analyze his character.

This deeper understanding of Troy’s character is required in order for later scenes to be interpreted properly. For example, the scene in which Troy and Bathsheba, after having married, meet a destitute woman on the road back to the farm reveals Troy’s genuine intentions when analyzed according to the information Hardy provides earlier in the novel. For example, when Troy offers his former fiancé money, the reader may be tempted to accuse Troy of being stingy because of the small amount that he gives her. However, the magnitude of Troy’s assistance is revealed when he says, “It is every farthing I have left” (202). Of course, Troy’s parsimonious aid to Fanny will not be enough to ensure her survival, but his professing that he is giving her everything that he possibly can is reminiscent of the narrator’s description of Troy, saying that “his intentions were as honourable as could be wished, [but] any particular deed formed a dark background which threw [his reason and propensities] into fine relief” (131). Indeed, it is not until Fanny is dead that the realization that he could have done more for Fanny first strikes him (238). In short, even when Troy tries his hardest to do the right thing—like in this scene—fate makes it impossible for his efforts to be rewarded with success. Knowing this inspires a more sympathetic view of Troy’s character and admiration for his doing all that can be expected of him.

Later, when Troy comes home to find Fanny’s coffin in his home, it becomes quite clear that his future efforts of self-reform, though doomed to fail and openly dismissed by the narrator, are as genuine as can be expected. The narrator describes his facial features as having “an indefinable union of remorse and reverence” (230). He proclaims in agony, “I deserve to live in torment for this!” Troy truly realizes “how callous and heartless he has been” (Beatty 31), and, accordingly, desires to make amends. Further evidencing his virtuous efforts “in the way of amelioration” is the fact that he gathered “every farthing he could muster” to purchase Fanny’s headstone (237). His sincere effort is emphasized by the narrator: “It was all the money he possessed” (238). But despite these true feelings of remorse, Hardy alerts the reader to the “absurdity” and “futility of [Troy’s] romantic doings” (240) and adds to the equation the role of cruel fate: “Fate had dealt grimly with him through the last four-and-twenty hours” (237). In light of this evidence, Troy cannot be criticized for his vain
and unsuccessful labors of repentance, because they represent the fruits of his greatest efforts in opposition to his essentially contemptible background in the city. As already discussed, Hardy grants the reader these seeds of sympathy to illustrate his grudging acceptance of some aspects of city life.

In addition, the gargoyle’s flooding of the grave on which Troy works so hard is, contrary to the assertions of many critics, meant to elicit the pity of the audience. On the morning following Troy’s day spent slaving away over Fanny’s grave, he stands over his work and realizes that “hated himself” (244). Hardy says that “‘[h]e that is accursed, let him be accursed still’ was the pitiless anathema written in this spoliated effort of his new-born solicitousness” (244). Troy knows of his weakness, but the knowledge that his best efforts to reform them were summarily rejected by “Providence…was more than nature could bear” (244). Roy Morrell concedes that it is “impossible” for Troy to continue on this road to improvement in the face of such opposition (Morrell 67). Thus, Hardy again inserts the stumbling block of fate as a means of explicating Troy’s failure—despite his best efforts, there is nothing he can do to escape his bleak future. But the very fact that Hardy grants him righteous ambitions, such as that of penance for his misbehavior towards Fanny, proves that there is something potentially positive in his character, even redemptive if he was allowed to see the fruits of such righteous inclinations. Similar to Troy’s complex relationship with nature already explored, these bits of hope echo Hardy’s societal views: he grants Troy’s civilized nature a potentially admirable quality to reflect his lingering faith in the capacity of urbanity to improve society (Squires 301). This sequence of events calls for a more balanced view of Troy and his righteous ambitions to redeem himself from past mistakes.

Troy’s eventual death at the hands of Farmer Boldwood confirms the widely held belief that Hardy ultimately disapproves of Troy’s relationship with nature. However, also undisputable is the fact that Hardy often sympathizes with Troy, providing reasonable explanations for his wayward morality, blaming his upbringing rather than his character for civilized tendencies, and insisting that his best efforts inexorably fail to bring about the fruition of his righteous ambitions. Why would Hardy spend so much time defending Troy if he only wanted to convey contempt for his character? Hardy purposefully analyzes the contrasting aspects of Troy’s character to better reflect his mixed views concerning the societal changes of his time.
Conclusion

Condemnation of Sergeant Francis Troy in *Far from the Madding Crowd* has been a popular subject among literary critics for the past century, but has produced remarkably similar views concerning the character’s worth; critiques seem rather unified in their assertion that Troy deserves his ignominious death at the conclusion of the novel. Although it is true that Hardy intended for the death of the Sergeant to convey his overall disapproval of his character’s representation of city life, critics yet have failed to fully apply Hardy’s rather complex societal views. Knowing that Hardy did not advocate total condemnation of city life sheds light on Troy’s positive associations with nature and on Hardy’s openly stated sympathy for him. Though this knowledge does not radically alter traditional views of the Sergeant, it nevertheless promotes a more balanced view of his actions and clarifies Hardy’s seemingly contradictory views concerning him.


