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Gender Matrix In The Distracted Preacher

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Abstract: A study of the woman, Lizzy Newberry nee Lizzy Simpkins, the "irrepressible new" woman and her coming to terms with her dual personality and life.

Index Terms – New Woman, Duality of Personality, Female Psyche, Indecisiveness.

Thomas Hardy's texts, it has been observed, like women and dislike them, they depict both pleasure and pain, both arousal and anxiety (Brady, "Matters of Gender", 104). No one has created more attractive women of a certain class, women whom a man would be more likely to love or to regret loving.

The *Wessex Tales* was Hardy's first collection of short stories and the stories reflect the experience of a novelist at the height of his powers. Each of these stories has its origin in the village anecdotes but on closer examination, each deals with a situation involving love which is vitiated by life's ironies and perils and circumstance. The narratives reveal a keen psychological analysis of female behaviour within the frame work of social conditioning.

"The Distracted Preacher," the finest tale in this collection, is a longer short story divided into seven sections. Unlike the other tales, it has two endings-- one, in adherence to the accepted conventions, dated April 1879 and the other inserted at a later date, by the author, in the form of a "Note" (dated May 1912).

"The Distracted Preacher," though a comic tale, addresses the problems faced by a woman like Lizzy Newberry nee Lizzy Simpkins, in coming to terms with her dual personality and life. Described as "a widow-- woman," she is the "irrepressible new" woman, a delightful creature reminiscent of Bathsheba, Herminia and other kindred Hardyian heroines. The tale, thus, becomes an exploration of a woman torn between conventionality and the radical possibility of exerting independence by pushing against the limits set by a male dominated society. Beautiful and seductive (without any apparent effort) impulsive and daring, she captures the heart of the Wesleyan minister, a lonely young fellow, called Stockdale:

Before Stockdale had got far with his meal, a tap sounded on the door behind him, and on his telling the enquirer to come in. a rustle of garments caused him to turn his head. He saw before him a fine and extremely well- made young woman with dark hair, a wide sensible, beautiful forehead, eyes that warmed him before he knew it, and a mouth that was in itself a picture to all appreciative souls (144).

With an "expression of liveliness," she has come to check out her new boarder, because she wanted to "see if (he) was looking good."

The Lizzy that Stockdale gradually falls in love with, is a woman whose presence plays havoc with his great senses and whose absences completely drives him to distraction. Mischievous, tinged with genuine concern, prompts her to cure his cold by making "the inland man, the son of a highly respectable parents and brought up with a single eye to the ministry" (146) to venture out into the night to "steal" some rum from one of the barrels hidden by certain strugglers of Nether Moynton. Stockdale is appalled by his introduction to the dark side of the new Parish he was assigned to guide spiritually. His "innocent ignorance" and strong sense of duty contrasted sharply with Lizzy's nonchalance "Well I have never particularly thought it as a duty; and, besides, my first husband... used to know of their doing, and so did my father, and kept the secret. I cannot inform in fact, anybody" (148). So, Stockdale succumbs to the temptation, sips the rum and is instantly recovered from the cold.

Again, he discovers, to his puzzlement, that she had an annoying habit of "biding upstairs in bed because 'tis her way sometimes." When she does appear he was honoured with meeting her several times one day. On these occasions, "There was something in her smile which showed how conscious she was of the effect she produced, though it must be said that it was rather a humorous than a designing consciousness, and savoured more of pride than of vanity" (151). The relationship seemed to be in an advancing state when Stockdale learns that Owlett, Lizzy's cousin, had spoken to her about matrimony. This confession prompts Stockdale to press, most fervently, for a commitment from Lizzy:

"Let it be Yes or No between us Lizzy, please do!" And he held out his hand, in which she freely allowed her own to rest but without speaking.

"You may be my sweetheart, if you will." "Why not say at once you will wait for me until I have a house and can come back to marry you?"

"Because I am thinking-- thinking of something else," she said with embarrassment. "It all comes upon me at once, and I must settle one thing at a time." (153)

Lizzy's hesitation stems from a fierce loyalty she has towards Owlett and the men (the smugglers of Nether Moynton) she refuses to endanger or to put them into the hands of the custom-men, although they use her premises sometimes to hide the tubs. That the "distracted preacher," has also won her heart cannot be doubted, but she had other obligations to fulfill before she can make any promises to Stockdale. His discovery, by accident, of the story behind "The Mysterious Great-Coat," takes the relationship between the two, to another level. Stockdale had begun to notice a certain irregularity in the life of fair landlady, "For a week or two she would not be visible till twelve at noon, perhaps for three or four days in succession; and twice he had certain proof that she did not leave her room till half-past three in the afternoon" (154). Following this unexplained, strange behaviour, she usually looked pale and tired. Stockdale fondly attributed it to ill-health but was flippantly informed by Lizzy that it was "pure sleepiness" and nothing else. So they continued as indefinitely affianced lovers:

Stockdale persuaded himself that his hesitation was owing to the postponement of the ordained minister's arrival, and the consequent delay in his own departure, which did away with all necessity for haste in his courtship, but perhaps it was only that his discretion was reasserting itself, and telling him that he had better get clearer ideas of Lizzy before arranging for the grand contract of his life with her. She, on her part, always seemed ready to be urged further on that question than he had hitherto attempted to go; but she was none the less independent and to a degree which would have kept from flagging the passion of a for more mutable man (158).

This state of affairs would have continued indefinitely had Lizzy's great secret remained unrevealed to Stockdale. The unraveling of her nocturnal adventures, by then, has become inevitable.

It all started with a mistake committed by Martha, the maid, in leaving a "long, drab great-coat" and a pair of breeches in Stockdale's room. He correctly identified them as belonging to Lizzy's dead husband but was totally unprepared to see Lizzy airing and dusting them, outside, one morning. Stockdale opened his bedroom window and looked out, and Mrs. Newberry turned her head: Her face became slowly red; she never looked prettier or more incomprehensible." The fact, that, the tails of the great coat bore "fresh pedestrian splashes" was noticed by him and he broke out in cold sweat at the apparent deception of his beloved. A week later, at night, he saw a form, attired in clothes which Lizzy had been brushing, vanish around the top of the stairs. A few moments later, rushing into Lizzy's room, he found it unoccupied. He realized that the man he had spied earlier was none other than Lizzy-- "It was she; in her husband's coat and hat." Following her, along a torturous route to the sea, he found her eavesdropping into a conversation between some men about "luggers" and "Owlett's share." He immediately concluded that "my darling has been tempted to buy a share by that unbeliever Owlett... Oh it will be the ruin of her" (163). He ran back, to the house, to await her arrival. In the powerful and poignant scene, that followed, between the two lovers, we are led to witness the clash between two personalities who come from two entirely different worlds. Stockdale is painfully forced to face a reality that was totally alien to him. Lizzy, however, the New Woman, is not ashamed to be caught "partly in man's clothes... I have got my own dress under just the same-- it is only tucked in" (164). Firm and resolute, she will not be influenced by Stockdale's tender attempts to persuade her to change her ways. "I must do my best to save the run," she said, getting rather husky in the throat, "I don't want to lose my venture. I don't know what to do now. Why I have kept it so secret from you is that I was afraid you would get angry if you knew" (165). She is torn between love for Stockdale and loyalty to Owlett and the men she had known all her life. Nor could she give up, too easily, the call of adventure that is in her blood-- "it is in my blood, and I can't be cured." The dilemma here, for Lizzy, is not about making choices but about losing her freedom and independence and the "joie di vivre". She explains it with frank candour: "My father did it, and so did my grandfather, and almost everybody in Nether-Moynton lives by it, and life would be so dull if it wasn't for that, that I should not care to live at all" (166).

Stockdale, realizes then, that fascinating though Lizzy was she was not cut-out to become a minister's wife. So he contemplates, sadly, "If I had only stuck to father's little grocery business, instead of going into the ministry, she would have suited me beautifully" (166).

Unable to give her up, he follows Lizzy and meets with her "nocturnal friends." The easy camaraderie that exists between Lizzy and the men plunges him into further depression. It would only be natural, he concluded, judging by shared "tastes and pursuits", for Lizzy to answer "Owlett's long standing question on matrimony in the affirmative". He decides to make one last effort to win her away from this nocturnal crew to correctness of conduct and a minister's parlour in some far-removed inland country.

Lizzy's adventure reaches its climax in the great search at Nether-Moynton's. The minister is duty chastened by the realization that when Latimer and the king's officers came to the village there was no male villager in sight-- his faithful congregation were all involved-- in the illegal runs. IN this play of wits, the villager wins, each running away with his own share, Latimer and his men needed to be rescued by the bewildered minister. After the excitement has died down, Stockdale attempts, for the last time, to persuade Lizzy to give up "this business" for love's sake. Lizzy replies: "Don't ask that," she whispered, "you don't know what you are asking. I must tell you, though I meant not to do it. What I make by that trade is all I have to keep my mother and myself with" (186)

Though stunned by this revelation, Stockdale relentlessly continued,

"What is money compared to a clear conscience?" "My conscience is clear. I know my mother but the king I have never seen. His dues are nothing to me. But it is a great deal that my mother and I should live." "Marry me, and promise to give up. I will keep your mother." "It is good of you," she said, moved a little. "Let me think of it by myself. I would rather not answer now" (187).

The confrontation latent in individuals with conflicting principles is brought to the fore here. Stockdale wants Lizzy to conform to his way of life-- a life where a woman's surrender of identity and personal interests for the sake of a man is taken for granted. Matrimony, in nineteenth century Britain, does not necessitate any change in a man while the total upheaval of a woman's life is deemed to be natural and expected. Lizzy, a woman who has resisted and survived, the limitations imposed upon her by her gender, defiantly and courageously stands up against this injustice. Indeed, hers is the voice of the new woman, against the belief that a woman is never supposed to have any occupation of sufficient importance and that it is her 'duty' to give it up at the "first claim of social life". So Lizzy says passionately, "I cannot do what you wished... it is too much to ask. My whole life ha' been passed in this way." (187)

Stockdale, the stereotypical male of his time, cannot accept, and fails to comprehend a woman as modern as Lizzy. Firmly entrenched in a paternalistic society he cannot meet Lizzy half-way. So he says quietly, "Then Lizzy we must part. I cannot go against my principles in this matter, and I cannot make my profession a mockery. You know how I love you and what I would do for you; but this is one thing I cannot do" (187).

Lizzy lashes out, in an outburst that is at once poetic and passionate. She strikes at the hypocrisy prevalent in her time. Lizzy is expected to "give this business up" for Stockdale but he "cannot" give up his profession for her. So she bursts out:

"But why should you belong to that profession? I have got this large house; why can't you marry me, and live here with us and not be a Methodist preacher anymore? I assure you, Richard, it is no harm, and I wish you could see it as I do, we only carry it on in winter; in summer it is never done at all. It stirs up one's dull life at this time O' the year, and give excitement, which I have got used to now that I should hardly know how to do without it. At nights when the wind blows, instead of being dull and stupid, and without noticing whether it do blow your or not, your mind is afield, even if you are not afield yourself; and you are wondering how the chaps are getting on... And have hair-breadth escapes from old Latimer and his fellows, who are too stupid ever to really frighten us, and only make us a bit nimble" (187).

Stockdale is adamant that they part ways and Lizzy says bitterly, "You never loved me." From the start, it is obvious that Stockdale's resolution had been to either change or bring Lizzy to follow his principles or part ways. His failure to effect this change lies in himself and not in Lizzy. His inability to embrace Lizzy's life and to come to a deeper and fuller understanding of what completes her as a woman reveals that weakness and myopic vision of the young man. Lizzy is an extraordinary woman who finds the fullest expression of herself in the business that is so distasteful to someone like Stockdale. Hence, she is ready to forfeit all for the pleasure of living life on the edge. Lizzy, then, Hardy's greatest creation in *Wessex Tales* is a valediction of the strong, new women.

The first ending to the story, is Hardy's compromise with what is acceptable and conventionally correct. Disappointing, though it is, it ends with a union between Stockdale and Lizzy. Two years have passed before Stockdale returns to find Lizzy a changed woman, defeated by the system she had fought so bravely against. Highly inconsistent with the image of Lizzy, as depicted throughout the narrative, she admits that she had been wrong all along: "I have suffered for it. I am very poor now, and my mother has been dead these twelve months" (190). She is a shadow of her former self and as expected Stockdale happily takes her "away from her old haunts to a house that he has made for himself in his native country."

It ends with an image of Lizzy religiously studying her duties as a minister's wife with "praiseworthy assiduity." "It is said that in after years she wrote an excellent tract called *Render unto Caesar; or the Repentant Villagers* with an introductory story about her own experiences. As ludicrous, as this sounds, the ending must have satisfied many moral and conventional readers of that time. But, Hardy, dissatisfied and discontented with the compromise he had made inserts a "Note" to the tale, thirty years later-- this is the satisfying second ending to the tale about a strong, beautiful and daring young woman:

But at this late date, thirty years later, it may not be amiss to give the ending that would have been preferred by the writer to the convention used above. Moreover, it corresponds more closely with the true incidents of which the tale is a vague and flickering shadow. Lizzy did not, in fact, marry the minister, but-- much to her credit in the author's opinion-- stuck to Jim the smuggler, and emigrated with him after their marriage an expatriate step rather forced upon him by his adventurous antecedent. They both died in Wisconsin between 1850 and 1860.

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