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Gender Matrix In Barbara Of The House Grebe

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Abstract: A study of the girl Barbara and how she does not marry her chosen one but finally ends up with the husband of her family's choosing and only finds an ambiguous love.

Index Terms – Romantic Notions, Lack of Depth in Feelings, Emotional Immaturity.

A Group of Noble Dames (1891), is a collection of short stories that portrays the lives of ten Women as narrated by members of a Wessex Field and Antiquarian club, who are ensconced at an inn after a rainstorm delayed their outing. Thomas Hardy described the contents of *A Group of Noble Dames* as “I may say it is to be a Tale of Tales—a series of linked stories—of a somewhat different kind from the mass of my work of late” (Letters VII, 113). These stories are placed in “a contrapuntal structure” so that “with a few exceptions, each story can be seen as a re-patterning or ironic refutation of the ostensible moral of the one preceding it.” (Brady, 53)

In his Preface, dated June 1896, Thomas Hardy elucidates that the narratives contained in this collection have been derived from “the diagrams on pages of county histories” of the “pedigrees of country families.” By transforming “this dryness as of dust” into a palpating drama through a careful comparison of dates alone, the frame work of the motives, passions and personal qualities of these extraordinary Dames, most of the stories have “arisen and taken shape.” These “curious tales of fair dames, of their loves and hates, their joys and misfortunes, their beauty and their fate” offer a rich quarry for a study of the gender matrix in Hardy’s shorter fiction.

Dame the Second, “Barbara of the House of Grebe,” is narrated by the old surgeon. This story forms a contrast with *The First Countess of Wessex*, where a young girl is not allowed to marry a man of her choice but eventually finds happiness with the husband her mother had arranged for her, whereas in “Barbara”, the heroine does marry her chosen one but finally ends up with the husband of her family’s choice and finds “only a very ambiguous love” (Ray, 95).

Lord Uplandtowers’ interest in Barbara sprang “more from an idea than any real passion” (68). This opening statement in the narrative strikes the keynote to this tale of cold calculative cruelty that is unleashed upon a woman of a mild and tender, though shallow, nature. Her initial unreciprocated love is ultimately overpowered, into mindless submission by the sheer force of Uplandtowers’ evil mind. When he disclosed his resolve to marry her, to a friend, the latter’s remarks shed light on Barbara’s character: “You’ll never get her-sure: you’ll never get her! She’s not drawn to your lordship by love and as for thought of a good match, why, there’s no more calculation in her than in a bird.” (69)

If Betty Dornell (*The First Countess of Wessex*), like all Hardyian heroines, attempts to control her destiny by defying those who threaten her happiness, Barbara’s elopement with Edmond Willows, however, reveals the myopic vision of a lady prompted into action more by romantic notions than by depth of feeling. In her letter to her parents she states that:

...she had taken this extreme step because she loved her dear Edmond as she could love no other man, and because she had seen closing round her the doom of marriage with the Lord Uplandtowers unless she put that threatened fate out of possibility by doing what she had done (74).

Barbara’s elopement with Edmond has brought shame and dishonour to her family because of social issues rather than moral ones, the obvious disparity in the social status of the young couple portends doom and tragedy. To marry beneath one’s social standing in the nineteenth century Britain tantamount to sacrilege—a woman will never recover from the censure and reproach that follows such a union. Edmond, on the other hand, in spite of his good looks and honest nature could not boast of his blood which was: “... of no distinction whatever, whilst hers, through her mother, was compounded of the best juices of ancient baronial distillation.” (75)

Little did Barbara know that her “love” will be severely tested with the passage of time and that she will fail miserably. Barbara had married below her station and this “disgrace” was felt keenly by her parents. Edmond is an honest man of an honest father but he is unsuitable for Barbara, in her parents’ estimate, because he is ill-educated. The snobbery of the time is closely examined in this tale, for the desire to redress Edmond’s “flaw” will eventually lead to the tragedy that causes endless woe and suffering to their beloved daughter. Hardy’s description of the descending scale of happiness experienced by the young couple in London, reveal the author’s deep insight into the complexity of the man-woman relationship:

In the meantime the young married lovers, caring no more about their blood than about ditch-water, were intensely happy—happy, that is, in the descending scale, which as we all know, Heaven in its wisdom has ordained for such rash cases; that is to say, the first week they were in seventh heaven, the second in the sixth, the third week temperate, the fourth reflective, and so on; ... a lover’s heart after possession becomes comparable to the earth in its geologic stages... first, a hot coal, then a warm one, then a cooling cinder, then chilly... (76).

The contrite pair soon returned to Chene Manor House, after being assured by Barbara’s parents, of a pleasant welcome. The Grebes been credibly informed that “an ancestor of plebeian Willowses was once honoured with intermarriage with a scion of the aristocracy who had gone to the dogs” (77). In a matter of a few weeks Edmond was sent with sufficient funds, to travel a year on the continent in the company of a tutor till he became “polished” inwardly and outwardly to the degree required in the husband of a lady like Barbara.

Barbara, according to Kristen Brady, is an “infantile woman” incapable of nurturing feelings deep enough for abiding love. Willowses’ absence could not sustain the thrill of sexual experience of her passion for him cools down rapidly— “Edmond’s letters were as affectionate as ever, even more affectionate, after a while, than hers were to him. Barbara observed this growing coolness in herself... it troubled her so much that she prayed for a warmer heart.” (80)

Horrified by this discovery, Barbara urges her husband, whose face and physical appearances have faded into a blurred past, to send her a portrait of himself. Her limited capacity to feel connected to Edmond her stunted emotional growth and average intelligence, led Barbara to believe that a copy of her husband’s face would revive her earlier infatuation and justify her desire to be faithful to him. This request serves to underscore the shallowness of Barbara’s character and prepares the reader for the imminent drama that will unfold with tragic consequences. Barbara is a pathetic but accurate representation of many women of her times—women who lacked the vision and willpower to break-out of the suffocating influence of a deadening society that prohibits them to express their freedom through the right to love and to be loved unconditionally. Even the feeblest attempts made towards an acknowledgement and expression of their sexuality is ruthlessly stamped out by an unseen but accepted code of behaviour that lurks in the shadows. Barbara’s emotional immaturity makes her an easy victim of the rigid patriarchal society existing then.

A fire broke out in the theatre, and Edmond Willowses was fearfully burnt when he heroically entered the blazing tornado to save two senseless sufferers of this terrible catastrophe. Ironically, Willowses escapes death under the effective ministrations of skillful surgeons; he however loses his good looks:

Lady Grebe blurted out what Sir John and Barbara had thought but had too much delicacy to express “Sure, ‘tis mighty hard for you, poor Barbara, that the one little gift we had to justify your rash choice of him—his wonderful good looks—should be taken like this, to leave ‘ee no excuse at all for your conduct in the world’s eyes... well, I wish you’d married t’ other—that do I! (83)

To escape the uneasy self-stultification within her, Barbara seeks refuge in the cottage that had been prepared for Edmond’s return. Escapism does little to strengthen her for her disfigured husband’s imminent arrival home, instead, it renders her vulnerable to the evil design of the rejected suitor who is watching the turn of events in malicious delight. While Edmond satisfies all the qualities of a conventional hero, Barbara lacks “the stuff of which great women are made of.” (*Far from the Madding Crowd*)

She has been enamored by Edmond’s handsome, good looks and once these were gone she is incapable of delving deeper to find the intrinsic good qualities he possesses. He returns—romantically assured of the “divine” nature of her love only to discover that Barbara is not only repelled by the disfigurement to his face but could barely contain the tremors of revulsion that coursed through her body:

The poor lady stood beside him motionless save for the restlessness of her eyes. All her natural sentiments of affection and pity were driven clean out of her by a sort of panic; she had just the same sense of dismay and fearfulness that she would have had in the presence of an apparition. She could nohow fancy this to be her chosen one—the man she had loved; he was metamorphosed to be a specimen of another species. “I do not loathe you,” she said with trembling. “But I am so horrified—so overcome! Let me recover myself. Will you sup now? And while you do so may I go to my room to—regain my old feeling for you? I will try... yes, I will try!” (91)

Barbara runs away to recover from the “spectacle” her beloved had become and when she has recovered sufficiently, she braces herself to confront him again in the early morning light, for “by daylight she had less fear than in the dark” (92). But to her dismay, her husband was long gone. Edmond’s sensitive nature had been dealt a mortal blow by his beloved’s reaction and the note he left behind sums up the depth of his anguish:

MY EVER BELOVED WIFE—the effect that, my forbidding appearance has produced upon you was one which I foresaw as quite possible. I hoped against it, but foolishly so. I was aware that no HUMAN love could survive such a catastrophe. I confess I thought YOURS DIVINE: but, after so long an absence, there could not be sufficient warmth to overcome that too natural aversion. It was an experiment and it has failed. I do not blame you; perhaps, even, it is better so, Goodbye. I leave England for one year. You will see me again at the expiration of that time if I live. Then I will ascertain your true feeling; and, if it be against me, go away forever (*EW*, 93).

Barbara, at this point, was immediately filled with deep remorse. She made enquiries as to his whereabouts, not out of love but from a sense of duty. Her love spurred on in the early days by passion and sexual discovery has flickered out into a dogged and obsessive sense of wifely-duty. Barbara can never be the celebrated New Woman; she is too weak and shallow to rise above centuries of entrapment and enslavement. Instead, the immaturity she displays at the beginning of the narrative becomes her own worst enemy. Hardy, did not leave her tale out of the collection because she depicts like the other Dames the strengths as well as weaknesses of the countless women who lived in nineteenth century Britain. Women, like Barbara, became easy prey to cold, cruel and calculative men like Uplandtowers. Thus, in the second half of the narrative, while Uplandtowers can be seen as the villain, Barbara becomes the hapless victim of her own emotional deficiency. Her marriage to this titled man, her parents' first choice, by the way, makes a mockery of all that she shared with Edmond Willows:

But human hearts are as prone to change as the leaves of the creeper on the wall, and in the course of time, hearing nothing of her husband, Barbara could sit still unmoved whilst her mother and friends said in her hearing, "well, what has happened is for the best." She began to think so herself; for even now she could not summon up that lopped and mutilated form without a shiver, thought whenever her mind flew off to her early wedded days, and the man who stood beside her then, a thrill of tenderness moved her, which if quickened by his living presence might have become stronger (94).

But he did not come again and soon she gave him up for the "man of silence, of irresistible inclusiveness, of still countenance" (95) who soon makes his move. In a passionate manner, once it was certain that Edmond Willows would never return, Uplandtowers effortlessly succeeds in making Barbara his wife. Hardy comments, "Barbara did not love him, but hers was essentially one of those sweet-pea or with-wind natures which require a twig of stouter fiber than its own to hang upon and bloom." (96)

Soon, Barbara's inability to love him and the dim hope of a successor irritated rather than hurt Uplandtowers and he subjected her to constant reproaches and insults, which she endured in painful silence. The belated arrival of Edmond's statue (a replica of his former good looks) rouses in Barbara's lonely heart a renewed passion for the man she had wronged and lost. So, she embraces the cold statue in "silent ecstasy and reserved beatification" (100), as she should have done a warm-blooded Edmond, had he been alive. "On discovery, Uplandtowers' perversity rises to the fore, as he methodically sets out in an evil and cruel way to divert Barbara's passion for Edmond to himself. He disfigures the statue in exact copy of the way Edmond Willows had looked after the accident (from a painting he had procured of this man's looks). Relentlessly and cruelly, he forces Barbara to look, repeatedly, on the maimed statue until she finally collapses, all thought of Edmond Willows driven away from her in benumbing terror. "Another dose or two and she will be cured", he said to himself—this reveals the inhuman capacity for sadistic pleasure that Uplandtowers possesses. The upshot was however:

...that the cure became so permanent as to be itself a new disease. She clung to him so tightly, that she would not be willingly out of his sight for a moment. She would have no sitting-room apart from his, though she could not help staring when he entered suddenly to her... till at length, her very fidelity became a burden to him, absorbing his time, and curtailing his liberty and causing him to curse and swear. (110)

So, Barbara lived on in complete submission and "obsequious amateness" (111) towards a perverse and cruel man and bore him no less than eleven children in the years that followed.

Barbara's Tale emphasizes the wasted life of a lady whose existence "might have been developed to a much higher purpose but for the ignoble ambitious of her parents and the conventions of the time" (110). Before she could mature into a young beautiful woman, her right to decide her life was cruelly wrested out of her hands, first, by her ambitious parents and then by a man who never loved her. The conventions of the time have successfully reduced what could have been a promising life into the diseased life the woman we see at the end of the tale. Barbara's tragedy is of a woman who realizes the true worth of her beloved only after his death. This has been stressed by the Sermon delivered upon her death by the Dean of Melchester, who dwelt upon the "folly of indulgence in sensuous love for a handsome form merely, and showed that the only rational and virtuous growth of that affection were those based on intrinsic worth." (112)

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