S. Ü. Fen - Ede. Fak.
Edebiyat Dergisi 1992 - 1993, 7 - 8. Sayı

FANNY ROBIN : A TRAGIC FIGURE

Yrd. Doç. Dr. Gülbün ONUR (*)

Far From the Madding Crowd was first published monthly and anonymously in **The Cornhill Magazine** in 1874. It is one of Hardy's major novels which has collected warm critical response since its publication. "The victorian critics wanted" Hardy to write it "over and over again, and referred back to nostalgically when they were deploring the 'pessimism' of **Jude** and **Tess**" (1).

> The novel is remarkable for its rustic characters, its closely detailed, accurate, and more importantly, evocative depicitions of sheep-raising, and its correlations between man's repetitious but sometimes ferocious forces of nature (2).

Studies on most of these aspects and on the major characters of the novel have been carried out. However, there are certain scenes in **Far From the Madding Crowd** that neither the critic nor the reader can do without mentioning their intensive impact on the overall impression of the novel. Apart From the "Storm" and "Sheep-shearing" scenes, one always feels himself obliged to say something about the "barracks" scene and the ones related with Fanny Robin's death. In fact, as Jeckel puts it, "no analysis of **Far From the Madding Crowd** would be complete without mention of Fanny, the poignant and doomed early castaway who makes her trudge to Casterbridge" (3). My aim in this study is to point out the emotional intensity with which her appearances are depicted in the novel in order to display her tragic capacity as a tragic figure.

(*) S. Ü. Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Anabilim Dalı Öğretim Üyesi.

(1) Merryn Williams. **Thomas Hardy and Rural England** (London : Macmillan, 1972), p. 130.

(2) Dale Kramer, **Thomas Hardy : The forms of Tragedy** (London : Macmillan, 1975), p. 24.

(3) Pamela L. Jekel, **Thomas Hardy's Heroines : A Chorus of Priorities** (New York : Whitson, 1986), p. 71.

Although **Far From the Madding Crowd** is not counted among Hardy's tragic novels, it is possible to consider it as a stepping-stone to their creation. The happy union of the hero and the heroine at the end is one of the reasons which leads one to be optimistic about the novel. However, the happy end is caught in the final chapter to which Hardy does not even dare to give a brighter title: "A Foggy Night and Morning — Conclusion". In spite of its happy ending, what really underlies their love is an exhausted passion, a "sorriness", a serenity reached after all the passion is spent.

The critical dicussions which refer to the pessimism of Hardy's tragic novels mainly deal with the major characters' advances towards their tragic ends. In considering the fate of the characters of these novels one cannot ignore the sadness underlying their expectations in life. It can be claimed that Hardy explores his characters in **Far From the Madding Crowd**, and in the succeding novels develops them into complex tragic beings. Although Fanny is one of the minor characters in the novel, it is possible to trace in her a capacity for suffering and endurance which enhances the intensity of pathos like those of the major characters of the tragic novels. In this respect, the particular type of woman Hardy chooses to create as Fanny Robin can be considered as a prototype. Fanny shares the same sort of loneliness with Eustacia, Tess and Sue. When they all confront the bitter reality of their love, we have them bearing their suffering alone, and, no doubt, paying high for it with their lives in the end. Fanny Robin is Hardy's first tragic figure who knows but never puts into words that she has fallen in love with the wrong man. She never admits it openly even to herself, but readers are made aware of the fact that she knows it all the way through her suffering. Fanny, like those heroines, has made a wrong choice for what Hardy calls "the grandest thing" in her life.

When one reaches the end of the novel, surprisingly, he sees to what extent the writer's understanding of art has actually been illustrated in Fanny's story. Hardy speaks of the "bussiness of the poet and novelist" by stating an obligation: "to show the sorriness underlying the grandest things, and the grandeur underlying the sorriest things" (4). In his novels, the reader becomes aware of the different colours of life, but at the same time he is made to pick out the darkest one which indicates, as he puts it, "the heart and inner

(4) Miriam Allott, **Novelists on the Novel** (Norwich: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 132.

meaning" of the "intensified expression of things" (5) and for Hardy the heart and inner meaning always bears something heart-aching in it. It can be said that there always lies a "sorriness" in the core of his major novels and it stands out as concrete as his signature.

It was Leslie Stephen, the editor of **The Cornhill Magazine**, who first considered Fanny Robin as a remarkable figure that might disturb the peace of mind of the reader. Stephen generally found Hardy's "descriptions of the country life admirable", but at the same time be "became anxious that the Fanny Robin story should be handled gingerly" (6). Fanny is the only minor character to whom Hardy devotes eleven chapters, in the first five of which she is depicted before and at the time of her death. In the later six we see her image haunting the minds of the characters. She dies in a workhouse, but the author draws one of the most tragic scenes of his to show Fanny approaching her death in the chapter "On Casterbridge Highway". Although she is never given a chance to go beyond her social role as a servant-girl, her death causes a crisis which can never be resolved between Bathsheba and her husband Troy. It is with her death that the novel takes a different course. As in Shakespeare's **Julius Caesar**, her death is constantly made visual in the mind of anyone who has ever heard of it, and it is her soul which takes her revenge on those who have made her suffer. She dies while giving birth to her illegitimate child, but everyone knows that this is not the only cause of her death. In fact, she dies of tiredness and starvation, in other words, through neglect and ill-treatment.

As is usually the case with Hardy's tragic heroines, the reader is immediately made aware of Fanny's "singularity" by her first presentation in the novel. Following the lively drawn memorable fire scene, she appears in the deep silence of the night as a siluette behind an ancient trunk of a tree in a grove near a churchyard wall. It is the hero of the fire scene Gabriel Oak who, on his way to the malthouse, first comes across with her when he "accidentally kicked a loose stone" (7). As her name Robin indicates, she is startled like a bird by the noise of the bounding stone and she makes herself visible to him with her "slim, rather thinly clad" figure (8). Their conversation is held in the silence and darkness of the night. She utters her "low and dulcet note" to respond Gabriel Oak's sincere salu-

(5) F. B. Pinion, **A Hardy Companion : A Guide to the Works of Thomas Hardy and their Background**, (London : Macmillan, 1978), p. 143.
(6) Ibid., p. 27.
(7) Thomas Hardy, **Far From the Madding Crowd** (Bungay : Pan, 1978), p. 394.
(8) Ibid., p. 60.

tation. Her "fragile" nature is highlighted through their delicately composed conversation on which a conventional nature image is formed as one inevitably thinks of their names, Robin and Oak, in the same framework.

In the dark backdrop they both produce the melodious notes of a short duet. The conversation is worth quoting:

"Good-night to you,' said Gabriel Heartily.

'Good-night', said the girl to Gabriel.

The voice was unexpectedly attractive; it was the low and dulcet note suggestive of romance; common in descriptions, rare in experience.

'I'll thank you to tell me if I'm in the way for Warren's Malthouse? Gabriel resumed, primarily to gain the information, indirectly to get more of the music.

'Quite right. It's at the bottom of the hill. And do you know--' (...) 'Do you know how late they keep open the Buck's Head Inn?' She seemed to be won by Gabriel's heartiness, as Gabriel had been won by her modulations.

'I don't know where the Buck's Head is, or anything about it. Do you think of going there to-night?'

'Yes--' (...) 'You are not a Weatherbury man?' she said timorously.

'I'm not. I am the new shepherd-- just arrived.'

'Only a shepherd -- and you seem almost a farmer by your ways.'

'Only a shepherd,' Gabriel repeated in a dull cadence of finality. His thoughts were directed to the past, his eyes to the feet of the girl. (...)

'You won't say anything in the parish about having seen me here, will you-- at least for a day or two?'

'I won't if you wish me not to,' said Oak.

'Thank you, indeed,' the other replied. 'I'm rather poor, and I don't want people to know anything about me.' Then she was silent and shivered.

'You ought to have a cloak on such a cold night,' Gabriel observed. 'I would advise 'ee to get indoors.'

'O no! Would you mind going on and leaving me? I thank you much for what you have told me.'

'I will go on,' he said; adding hesisatingly, — 'Since you are not very well off, perhaps you would accept this trifle from me. It is only a shilling, but it is all I have to spare.'

'Yes I will take it,' said the stranger gratefully.

(...)

'What is the matter?'

'Nothing.'

'But there is?'

'No, no, no! Let your having seen me be a secret!'

'Very well; I will. Good-night, again.'

'Good-night.' (9)

The conversation itself and the way it is narrated make it quite obvious that Hardy brings out his talents as poet and fiddler here to produce the effect of a musical piece. We see him at pains to help the reader for such an effect as he makes the narrator use words and phrases related with music. Fanny's "voice was unexpectedly attractive; it was the low and dulcet note." Gabriel asks a question "indirectly to get more of the music." He is "won by her modulations". When he repeats that he is "only a shepherd" he says it "is a dull cadence of finality". The musical piece has its begining and close, its silences and pauses. As their conversation begins and ends with their reciprocal utterence of "good-night", it gains a closed and complete form and becomes singled out.

The conversation consists mainly of monosyllabic words, yet monotony is avoided partly by occasional syllabic variation and partly by the change of vowel sounds. Synactial parallelism and mostly overlapping verbal and phonological repetitions are frequently used in the passage. The characters' utterances of "good-night", "quite right", "only a shepherd", "only a shilling" and the narrator's "common in descriptions, rare in experience', "primarily to gain the information, indirectly to get more of the music', 'She seemed to be won by Gabriel's heartiness, as Gabriel had been won by her modulations" and his words "his thoughts were directed to the past, his eyes to the feet of the girl" omitted in the quotation to save space stand out as instances of syntactical parallelism. These provide a subtler, syntax based thought rhythm to the passage and, at the same time, create a metronome effect emphasizing the time and the double aspect of the conversation as they operate with

(9) Ibid., pp. 60-2

the alternating questions and answers of the characters. Together with these structural repetitions, the phonological echo produced with "quite right" itself and with "to-night", "cold-night" and "good-night"s in combination works with the other verbal and overlapping phonological repetitions of "do you know", "only a shepherd", "know anything about", "having seen me" to enhance the musical quality of the passage.

Distinct richnes of sound texture of the passage also comes out of the repetition of vowel sounds and their combinations. The conversation abounds in long vowels of /u:/ and /i:/ as in "you", "do", "to", "two" and "keep", "seem", "seen", "least", "ee", "me" respectively. The vowel /i/ is frequently used and occasionally together with its long form as in "leaving" and "indeed". The prolific use of these vowel sounds in combination all along the passage makes them sound distinct among other phonological repetitions and marks the melodious tone of the conversation of the characters, and thus they produce the effect of singing birds which functions to enhance the verbally created bird image symbolizing Fanny.

Another remarkable auditory effect created in the passage should also be pointed out in this context. The long dipthong /ou/ and the consonant /w/, which is considered to be a semi-vowel and might be regarded as a rapidly articulated /u:/, repeatedly occur in the words "know", "go", "no", "o", "only", "cloak", "won't", "open", and "way", "where", "wish", "will", "won't", "would", "what", "will" respectively. As they produce a persistent moaning sound throughout the conversation, they suggest loneliness, suffering, and pleading and, therefore, qualify the melodious tone of the characters as pathetic.

The passage is inexhaustible in sound and sense implications. Gabriel's assonant and alliterative words 'You ought to have a cloak on such a cold night", and his "I would advise 'ee to get indoors" highlight his compassionate and protective instinct. A little later we see him "hesitatingly" offering her "a shilling". His anxious question "What is the matter?" also has a notable effect of a tragic stroke almost at the close of their piece of music. With the words of the narrator the reader is made to feel the hightening vibration when Fanny's fear becomes evident as "Gabriel's fingers alighted on the young woman's wrist, beating with a throb of tragic intensity." (10) The following words of the narrator

(10) Ibid., p. 61.

> He had frequently felt the same quick, hard beat in the femoral artery of his lambs when overdriven. It suggested a consumption too great of a vitality which, to judge from her figure and stature, was already too little, (11)

work with the rest of the passage to increase its metaphorical impact. Before their verbal music ends, the reader, like Gabriel, wants to learn what is actually operating in the strong beats of Fanny's heart. As Gabriel's question receives merely the brief reply "Nothing", Hardy subtly allows the reader to create the image of a frail bird near a tree flapping in misery and uttering the short notes "no, no, no!".

Hardy maintains an emotional intensity with the mysterious obscurity of darkness not only here but in all the scenes Fanny appears. The measure of suspense with which she is presented also provokes the reader to feel compassion for her. As David Lodge observes, in his study of suspense, for adventure stories: "narratives are designed to put the hero or heroine repeatedly into situations of extreme jeopardy, thus exciting in the reader emotions of sympathetic fear and anxiety as to the outcome" (12). In like manner she is made capable of exciting us in each scene by rising questions in our minds about her outcome and delaying the answers, although she is not the heroine of the novel and her involvement in danger is not seen as in those of adventure stories.

Our sympathy is immediately supported when one of the rustics in the malthouse announces that she cannot be found after the fire in Bathsheba's farm. In a pitiful tone he relates how the household actually feared to lock up all the doors at night leaving her out in the cold. She escapes by her own will, but this seems to have no importance for them. Her loneliness - she is without any "friends or relations" alive in the world - appears to be the concern of the rustics, but ironically she always stays beyond their reach. Although she needs help and protection more than anything else, there exists no soul in her world except the image of her seductive sweetheart Troy. With Laban Tall's and Bathsheba's anxiety in considering her case, we are only given a general hint about her obscure personality. What signifies Fanny is the fact that she is never fully and physically recognized by the reader until her walk to death or by her rival Bathsheba until she opens her coffin in order to identify her from "that yellow

(11) Ibid.

(12) David Lodge, **The Art of Fiction (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1992), p. 14.**

hair of hers" which permits "no longer much room for doubt as to the origin of the curl owned by Troy" (13). Her "fair complexion" and her being a "little" woman are the only factual descriptions of her. Although she lacks solidity, she convinces the reader with her psychological credibility. It is remarkable that she resembles "Tess at the start" with her "insignificance and vulnerability" (14) and also with her metaphoric identification with a bird.

Her second appearence is one of the most outstanding scenes in the novel. This time Hardy devotes a whole chapter for the distressful meeting of Fanny and Troy. We see that all the elements in her first appearence are accentuated in this chapter entitled "Outside the Barracks - Snow - A Meeting". Darkness, as is indicated above, exist here as well, but in this scene it is lit up by the snow which embodies a "dreariness" that "nothing could surpass (15). Fanny tries to exist between the "chaotic skyful of crowding flakes" and the "encrusting earth" as her little "slim vessel" deteriorates in identity and sight within each succeeding paragraph.

Her identity is almost doubted as she is observed first as a "shape" in slow motion and then as a "little shape" approaching the barracks in hope of finding Troy. In the next paragraph she is described as "the spot that stopped and dwindled smaller" and then a "blurred spot in the snow" which turns into a "mere shade upon the earth" (16) in the following line. The affinity between her and the natural world is frequently brought out in the novel; but in this scene her frailty is distinctively highlighted by means of the powerful nature absorbing her. She becomes a part of it; yet there still exists an impulse to act forcefully within her. Although she is described as a mere shade, her action and talk are pathetically human. When she starts speaking with the voice coming through the window, we see basically the same unidentifying atmosphere created in her first appearence. Her situation has its implications and her voice is as suggestive as before.

Curiously enough, the function of the effective snow is similar to that of the fire consuming all that it touches and transforming everything into odd abstractions. Under its effect Fanny no longer

---

(13) Hardy, p. 298.
(14) Marry Jacobus, "Tess : Making of a Pure Woman", **Thomas Hardy's Tess of the d'Urbervilles,** Modern Critical Interpretations, ed. Harold Bloom (New York : Chelsea House, 1987), p. 60.
(15) Hardy, p. 92.
(16) Ibid., p. 94.

exists as a human being but as an organism acting with impulse. At last, her hesitant and frail voice reaches Troy's invisible presence behind the dark wall and convinces him to give his word that he would marry her. A similar preternatural atmosphere surrounding Fanny has its evocations in Hardy's succeeding novels **The Return of The Native, Tess of d'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure** with their terribly isolated heroes and heroines. They are, like Fanny, victims of deception for they mistakenly believe that their beloved ones can save them from their frustrations. The ending of the scene is strikingly similar to that of her first appearence. Oak's heading to a cosy malthouse where he would meet friends is a contentment felt like Troy's among his friends after closing the window. Both characters leave behind them a "slim" and "fragile creature", who "throbs of tragic intensity" (17) in the dreary darkness.

In the novel, comments on crucial scenes are often made through the implications of odd images. The whirlpool beneath the wall of Troy's window produces sounds "which a sad man would have called moans, and a happy man laughter" (18). It functions as a sinister remark of nature made for their situation. When she has mistaken the church in which the marriage ceremony will be held, Troy waits for her at the altar-rail like a statue in his brass-buttoned red uniform. The "grotesque clockwork" in the church strikes "fitfully" with mockery, when "one could almost be positive that there was a malicious leer upon the hideous creature's face, and a mischievous delight in its twitchings" (19). Consequently, Troy punishes her because of her unfortunate mistake, declaring with a flippant tone that God would know when they would once again decide to get married. After saying that he rapidly walks away, leaving her alone in agony.

When the "overshadowing trees" play a camouflage on her accidental meeting with Troy and his wife on an October evening, Fanny and Bathsheba cannot recognize each other for the former is in extreme poverty and the latter appears unexpectedly in the role of a wife. It is the voices once again that give Fanny and Troy away. It means for them more than just a recognition : upon hearing him, Fanny "uttered an hysterical cry and fell down", and Troy, "in a strangely gentle yet hurried voice" (20), reflects his shock and guilt as he damns his luck and calls himself a brute. His immediate shift

(17) Ibid., p. 61.
(18) Ibid., p. 94.
(19) Ibid., p. 121.
(20) Ibid., p. 264.

into sensitivity is unexpected, but it serves to project Fanny's crucial state. When she rises to her feet, she walks "feebly" down the hill alone to reach the Casterbridge Union for the night. The chapter ends with the curious questions of Bathsheba about "the poor thing".

This is the final scene in which the people she meets pass her by indifferently. Their negligence put her in a potentially more tragic position. She is, in each scene, subject to destruction because, like Tess, "her destiny is not freely chosen but forced upon" her by the circumstances which Hardy calls Fate" (21) Fanny is essentially passive in that she never calls people for help, but her passivitiy is the outcome of her class and condition. However, she is overloaded with a power of endurance and suffers profoundly until she finally reaches the Casterbridge Union to find eternal comfort.

As a suffering figure Fanny is given expression in her final apperance "in the penumbrae of night", before falling asleep by a haystack. Hardy uses the colour black to describe the night she wakes up to. She "finds herself in the depths of a moonless and starless night" where the "unbroken crust of cloud stretched across sky, shutting out every speck of heaven" (22. Typically, there is nothing in the deep darkness except the siluettes of the milestones which stand like ghosts and the "weak, soft, glow" that identifies the location of the town of Casterbridge. Secretly, it is the dim white" milestones that encourage her to endure the painful walk. She is encouraged to walk to the next as she reaches a milestone at the point of collapsing. However, there is tragic irony in her trying to reach the milestones since each one takes her closer not to the lit town, which echoes Troy's attractive appearence in his brass - buttoned red uniform, but to death. Fanny is described as an invisible figure who could only be noticed as a human being when a carriage passes her by :

> One lamp shone for a moment upon the crouching woman, and threw her face into vivid relief. The face was young in the groundwork, old in the finish; the general contours were flexuous and childlike, but the finer lineaments had begun to be sharp and thin (23).

---

(21) Williams, p. 91.
(22) Ibid., p. 266.
(23) Ibid.

The reader can visualize her hope, sorrow and innocence accompanied with physical exhaustion. Loneliness and isolation underlie her endurance: "not a rustle, not a breeze, not the faintest clash of twigs to keep her company" (24). When she derives her strength from the crutches, we are only given "the pat of her foot, and the tap of her sticks upon the highway" (25), which enhances the sense of her loneliness.

She succeeds to drag herself to move and pursue her way under all desperate conditions:

> the pedestrian stood up, walked along, leant against a stone, bestirred herself, she bore up bravely, afterwards flagging, swayed sideways, and fell, turned round upon her knees, and next rose to her feet, essayed a step, then another, then a third, she progressed, staggered across to the first post, cling to it, holding to the rails, she advanced, thrusting one hand forward upon the rail, then the other, then leaning over it whilst she dragged her feet on beneath, passed five posts and held on to the fifth, she passed five more, 'it lies only five further', she passed five more, 'but it is five further', she passed them (26).

When the man in the Casterbridge Union opens the door, she is only "the panting heap of clothes", and with the help he calls from inside "the prostrate figure" is carried in to give birth to her child and join the eternal peace.

Her final appearance in the novel collects all the pity there is for her undeserved, continuous self-torture. As a pathetic little figure she suggests, like the bird image in **Tess of the d'Urbervilles,** the image of a flapping wounded body bearing its ache all alone until her neck is broken: "She fell forwards in a bowed attitude, her face upon her bosom" (27) at the door of the Union.

---

(24) Ibid., p. 267.
(25) Ibid.
(26) Ibid., pp. 266-269.
(27) Ibid., p. 271.