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Human Universals and Literary Meaning: A Sociobiological Critique of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Villette*, *O Pioneers!*, *Anna of the Five Towns*, and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

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Reproduction is central to the logic of evolution, and as a result, it is central to human motivational systems. Any given culture organizes reproduction in a way specific to that culture, but evolutionary anthropologists and psychologists have identified certain sex differences that hold good across diverse cultures, and they cogently argue that these "human universals" reflect species-typical motivational structures. In all known societies, males are dominant. Males engage in the preponderance of all combat, and females take primary responsibility for the care of the young. In seeking mates, males tend to give priority to youth and beauty (signals of reproductive potential), and females tend to give priority to wealth and social status (indications of an ability to provide for her and her offspring). Males are more open to casual, promiscuous sex, and females tolerate sexual infidelity in their mates more easily than males. Males are sexually jealous and possessive; females are more jealous of emotional commitments. Broad characteristics such as these provide a common foundation for the way any given culture organizes reproductive relations (Goldberg, Symons, Daly and Wilson, Brown, Buss, Geary).

Literature reflects and articulates the vital interests of human beings as living organisms. Because reproduction is central to human motivational systems, it is central also to the organization of meaning in literary representations of human behavior. That is, literary representations commonly organize themselves around problems of reproduction, especially mate selection and family relations. Accordingly, critics who have attempted to link literary study with sociobiology or evolutionary psychology have tended to concentrate on the depiction of reproductive behavior. Understandably, they have also frequently conceived of their task as that of examining literary texts in order to identify the representation of sociobiologically typical behavior (Fox, Nesse, Whissel, Thiessen and Umezawa). L. Brett Cooke enunciates this conception:

> Sociobiological research often begins by examining phenomena which are statistically non-random, such as the greater age of husbands over that of their wives, the huge disproportion between the numbers of polygynous and polyandrous societies, and the differing roles played by the two sexes. Literary scholars can begin by looking at these same

phenomena and then by searching for their occurrences in fictive texts. ("Sexual Property" 185)

Similar conceptions enter into the recurrent effort among sociobiological critics to summarize the basic findings of evolutionary psychology (Boyd, Roele and Wind), to delineate a "biogrammar" or "deep structure"of human behavior (Storey; Carroll, "Deep Structure"), or to identify some basic set of human universals correlative with symbolic "archetypes" or common themes and story patterns (Wilson, *Consilience*; Cooke, "Promise"; Carroll, "~~Human Universals~~ UNIVERSALS").

Identifying species-typical forms of behavior offers a reasonable starting point for sociobiological literary study, but it is not in itself sufficient to account for literary meaning. Literary texts do not limit themselves to representing species-typical behavior, and literary representations are never merely transparent revelations of behavior. Literary representations are interpretive models that are mediated through the perspectives of the authors who fashion them. Each individual author is necessarily limited by the horizon of his or her own values and perceptions, and these values and perceptions are crucially influenced by individual temperament, by the accidents of personal experience, and by the thoughts and feelings available within the cultural order to which the author belongs. Homer cannot think and feel just as Virginia Woolf thinks and feels. Their temperaments, social positions, and sexual orientations are different, and the values of the cultural orders within which they operate are also different.

If meaning is constrained by differences both of individual identity and of cultural context, how can critics make use of those statistically non-random phenomena that sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists seek to identify? What relevance do human universals have for the interpretation of specific literary texts? All behavioral norms consist in some particular organization of elemental biological dispositions. Examples of such dispositions include the need for social interaction, the desire for sexual intimacy, the drive toward dominance, the desire for wealth and status, the love of one's own children, the creation of social coalitions, the demand for justice, and the creation of cognitive order through such means as religion, myth, philosophy, literature, art, and science (Brown; Tooby and Cosmides; Wilson, *Moral*; Damasio' Mithen; Pinker; Griffiths; Arnhart; McGuire and Troisi; Wilson, *Consilience*; Buss, *Evolutionary*; Carroll, "Deep Structure"). By definition, universals or species-typical behaviors are those behaviors that are common to all cultures; they are the core of every cultural norm, but all forms of cultural organization involve conflict, and all cultures elaborate their values in ways that create tension among elemental dispositions.

Authors make use of species-typical norms as a common framework of understanding, and they define their own distinct identities in relation to these norms. They are sometimes sympathetic to species-typical norms, and sometimes alienated from them, and they are sometimes sympathetic and sometimes

hostile to their own cultural orders. Often, but not always, they align themselves with some particulart set of species-typical norms, under the rubric of "human nature," and they use these norms as a means of adopting a critical perspective on the conventions of their own cultures. By appealing to elemental dispositions that answer to their own idiosyncratic psychological organization, they can adopt a critical perspective on species-typical norms, on their own cultures, or on both.

In order to integrate the idea of interpretive models into the analysis of individual texts, we need always to pose two questions. First, what is the relation between the represented subject matter and the author's own interpretive vision? And second, what is the relation between the reader's point of view and that of the author? To codify these questions, I shall use two special phrases. I shall say that when we answer the first question, about the author's interpretive vision, we identify the total structure of meaning in a literary text. When we answer the second question, about the reader's critical assessment of that vision, we identify the total meaning situation. (Hirsch makes similar distinctions.) I'll elaborate briefly on these special phrases.

Meaning in literature is always meaning for some specific person, from some specific point of view. Characters behave, but they also think and feel. They interpret their own behavior and that of others, and authors frequently give us to understand that these interpretations are partial, incomplete, biased, or distorted in some fashion. Characters offer differing and sometimes conflicting interpretations of the same events, and authors create total structures of meaning that encompass the thoughts and feelings of all the characters in their works. Authors mediate among the characters, often aligning themselves with some characters and distancing themselves from others. Within his or her own total structure of meaning, each author is necessarily dominant; he or she constitutes a supreme authority.

Authors negotiate with the meaning systems of their characters, and they negotiate simultaneously with the expectations, values, sympathies, and antipathies of their putative readers. A literary text is a communicative act. The author can control the organization of meaning within his or her own story, but he or she can only partly control the way readers will respond to what he or she has written. In the degree to which an author is astute, persuasive, and charming, or to which a reader is impressionable or passive, the reader's viewpoint, at least while he or she is reading, converges with that of the author, and this convergence, this willing submission to the "authority" of the author, is part of the total meaning situation. In the degree to which the author excites suspicion or disbelief, the reader's separate and distinct sense of meaning becomes part of the total meaning situation. Readers' beliefs, feelings, and values often conflict with those of the author. The total meaning situation for any literary text thus consists of two parts—the author's communicative act and the way this act is received

and interpreted by the reader. The reader is an integral part of the larger communicative event, and thus part of the total meaning situation.

In order to give a comprehensive sociobiological critique of a literary text, we must take account of the total meaning situation, and to do this we must analyze the relations among elemental dispositions, species-typical norms, cultural norms, and individual structures of meaning. To illustrate the sort of analysis I have in mind, I shall compare the depiction of normative heterosexual couples in five novels: Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*, Arnold Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns,* and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Four of these novels are British and one American, and all were written in the nineteenth or early twentieth century. All five depict the personal development of a female protagonist, and in all five cases the problems of personal identity culminate in the question of choosing a mate. All five display prominent instances of the kinds of sexual motivations and situations sociobiology teaches us to expect. Strong men of high status gain sexual access to young and beautiful females. In three of the novels, Hardy's *Tess*, Bennett's *Anna*, and Cather's *O Pioneers!*—sexual competition leads to lethal violence. Such matters are the bread and butter of fictional representation, and these novels are in this respect perfectly commonplace.

Why consider these specific novels? The first four—Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Brontë's *Villette*, Cather's *O Pioneers!*, and Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns*—occupy points on a scale in the author's treatment of the normative heterosexual couple. The scale runs from the simple and straightforward to the complex and problematic. In the fifth novel, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy's stance toward the normative heterosexual couple is not itself problematic, but Hardy does not share Austen's confidence in the normative authority of the traditional cultural order. To create a structure of meaning adequate to his story, Hardy must make explicit appeal to elemental biological dispositions and set them in contrast to the cultural conventions of his time.

Pride and Prejudice provides a base of comparison for the treatment of the normative heterosexual couple. The emotional interest of the author and reader are directed toward a successful courtship leading to a happy marriage. In Brontë's *Villette* and Cather's *O Pioneers!*, the weight of emotional interest shifts away from the normative heterosexual couple and the authors use the novels to fulfill their own idiosyncratic emotional needs. *Villette* enacts a process in which emotional energy is deflected from erotic fulfillment and concentrated in the narrower sphere of self-affirmation, and *O Pioneers!* centers its emotional interest in the relations of a sociobiologically atypical couple. Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns* also depicts atypical sexual psychology, and both Cather and Bennett leave explanatory gaps that require the reader to fill out the total meaning structure with speculative interpretation. Bennett's novel illustrates the problems of interpretive modelling at every level: conflict between a protago-

nist's behavior and the protagonist's own conscious views, conflict between the perspective of the protagonist and that of the author, and conflict between represented behavior and the expectations of readers.

These five novels present an emotional range extending from cheerful romantic comedy in *Pride and Prejudice* to tragic anguish in *Tess*. The protagonist of *Pride and Prejudice* marries her ideal mate and thereby achieves wealth and status; the protagonist of *Tess* is reduced to harlotry and then executed for murder. Cather's *O Pioneers!* has two main stories, one a tragedy and the other a romantic comedy, and both *Villette* and *Anna of the Five Towns* conclude in an emotionally ambivalent way. Given the evidence of these novels alone, it should be clear that the pleasure specific to literature does not limit itself to vicarious participation in fantasy fulfillments. As obvious as this point should be, it remains theoretically uncertain both in traditional Freudian criticism and in some of the theoretical commentaries of evolutionary psychologists (Freud, Pinker, Buss, *Evolutionary*).

Pride and Prejudice and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* occupy a canonical position much higher than that of the other three novels. Comparing these novels thus offers an occasion for considering the issue of literary merit or the evaluation of quality. Sociobiological critics have only begun to consider the question of evaluation, and as with the analysis of themes, the considerations thus far have focussed on the presence of universal themes or sociobiologically typical behaviors (Wilson, *Consilience*; Turner; Cooke, "Promise"). Turner has suggested that value can be correlated with the sheer number of such themes, and Cooke has identified literary merit with the representation of conflicting biological predispostions ("Promise" 55). Countering the emphasis on universals, Easterlin argues that "many factors" come into evaluation and that the presence or absence of "biologically based" content or form does not "predict or determine the value of a given work" (247). Wilson, Turner, and Cooke are right in seeking sources of power in elemental themes, but Easterlin is also right in resisting the reduction to the elemental.

The multitude of factors that enter into evaluative judgments can be grouped into three main categories: the significance of the represented action, the mind and temper of the artist, and formal aesthetic organization. The represented action consists not just of elemental or universal themes but also of circumstantial conditions—including both natural and social environments—and the individual identities of characters. The significance of a represented action depends on the integration of all three aspects of the action: elemental themes, circumstantial conditions, and individual identities. All represented action is mediated through the mind and temper of the author and manifests itself as a quality of experience. Style and form make the quality of experience available to the imagination of a reader, and they also satisfy intrinsic cognitive needs—needs we identify as "aesthetic" (Eibl-Eibesfeldt; Dissanayake; Carroll, *Evolutionary*; Barrow). Of these five novels, only *Pride and Prejudice* and *Tess*

d'Urbervilles are likely to be familiar to an educated general audience, and the details of all novels grow dim in memory over time. Bearing this in mind, I'll summarize the stories as necessary.

Pride and Prejudice presents a classic instance of romantic comedy. It is in various ways a highly sophisticated novel. In its integration of individualized personalities and universal motives within a vividly particularized set of social conditions, in its fine meshing of style and theme, and in the elegant economy of its narrative, *Pride and Prejudice* displays a mastery amounting to rare genius. But in the relation of the author to her subject and to her implied audience—the audience created by the writer's expectations of response—*Pride and Prejudice* is ingenuously simple and straightforward. The central perspective within the represented action is that of the protagonist Elizabeth Bennet. Austen frankly likes Elizabeth and expects us to like her and to wish her well. The beliefs, values, feelings, and perceptions of the author and her protagonist are very similar. The few differences that Austen registers are mainly those of inexperience on Elizabeth's part, and one can chart the course of Elizabeth's development by assessing the way in which her own perspective comes gradually into a near perfect convergence with that of her author. Austen has no detectable ulterior purposes. The central interest of the novel is the love story between Elizabeth and Darcy, and the principal satisfaction Austen proposes, for herself and for the reader, is to participate vicariously in the satisfactory resolution of their differences.

The marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy embodies and reaffirms the normative principles within their whole cultural order, and the satiric humor directed at other characters registers deviations from those normative principles. Austen confidently anticipates that her readers will recognize her ironies and participate in her implied judgments. The story thus culminates in a harmonious concord among all the factors within the total meaning structure and the total meaning situation: the protagonist, the author, and the implied audience are brought together in a single community of discourse. The protagonists satisfy normative sociobiological expectations and at the same time embody the normative virtues of their own culture. The fulfillment of their happiness thus strongly suggests an ideal concord between their specific cultural order and the elemental aspects of human experience. Readers who fall under the spell of this novel (Van Ghent; Litz; Duckworth; Butler; Johnson, *Jane Austen*) tacitly accept the idea of this concord, at least while the spell lasts. Readers who are hostile either to Austen's cultural order (Harding, Mudrick) or to the idea of a normative heterosexual romance (Auerbach, Fraiman), must either distance themselves from Austen's perspective or find some way of interpreting her perspective that makes it seem more alienated than it actually is. Austen's total structure of meaning is exceptionally clear, and the degree of consensus among her critics exceptionally high.

Most differences of interpretation amount to little more than variations in tonal emphasis or thematic focus. The largest part of most interpretations are overlapping and complementary.

Austen herself never married, but her fiction betrays little personal frustration. Her generosity of feeling, bouyed by her humor, enables her to rise above her personal situation and to identify with the fulfillment of a normative heterosexual relationship. Charlotte Brontë, like Austen, was a spinster (she married in her late thirties, in the last year of her life). She was physically unattractive, socially obscure, and financially insecure. Unlike Austen, she had little sense of humor. She suffered intensely from her sexual marginalization, and her frustrated yearning fundamentally constrained the kind of fiction she wrote. She had a despairing need of intimate sexual affection, and she was at the same time fiercely proud. She was, as a result, egoistically self-preoccupied and absorbed in defensive self-affirmation. These are all characteristics shared by the protagonist of *Villette*.

If we were to approach *Villette* looking only for examples of normative heterosexual couples and illustrations of sexual psychology concordant with sociobiological expectations, we would find what we were looking for, but we would also fail to identify the total meaning structure of the novel. To identify this structure, we have to ascertain what kind of psychological function the novel fulfills for its author. The emotional center of the novel is the narrator and protagonist whose personal characteristics and circumstances are taken from Brontë herself. Like Brontë, the narrator goes to teach in a Belgian school for girls, and then for the next few hundred pages, nothing happens. That is, nothing happens to her. She sits and watches quietly, largely unnoticed, while two love stories are played out around her. The male protagonist of these love stories is a young doctor who attends the girls at the school. He first falls in love with a frivolous and worldly flirt, and then is fortunate to have his attention drawn instead to a young lady who fits the pattern of Victorian heroines. This second girl is beautiful, cultivated, feminine, modest, discreet, and devoted. The doctor succeeds in making an appropriate sexual choice, and the flirt gets her just deserts by marrying a degenerate for the sake of his aristocratic rank. The plot thus fits the pattern of a standard romantic comedy, but almost no reader would call this novel a romantic comedy. The love stories I've described do not constitute the center of interest in the novel. The center of interest is lodged instead in the quiet, neglected narrator. She is herself secretly in love with the doctor, and her story, for several hundred pages, is mainly an experience of passionate suffering and intense self-suppression. If she were merely a passive sufferer, the story would be unbearable, but the protagonist has a sustaining purpose, that of affirming or validating her own sense of identity, and it is this purpose that forms the central organizing principle in the story. The normative heterosexual romance that she observes provides her with an occasion of psychological self-

discipline, relatively easy in the first phase, when she can scorn the flirt and pity the doctor, difficult and even heroic in the second phase, when she must acknowledge the value of a romantic norm from which she herself will forever be excluded. This part of the story constitutes a process of psychological adjustment to a painful reality. Through her fiction, Brontë enacts a process that it is psychologically necessary for her to complete.

In the final phase of the novel, the protagonist accepts the attentions of an older man who is, like herself, sexually marginalized. The protagonist-narrator makes a clear distinction between the normative heterosexual romance from which she is excluded and the kind of relationship that emerges at this lower level of romantic interest. She says that "the love, born of beauty was not mine; I had nothing in common with it," but affirms her readiness for "another love, venturing diffidently into life after long acquaintance . . . this Love that laughed at Passion" (Chapter 39). Even at this lower level of romantic interest, the protagonist is denied sexual fulfillment. The older man dies before the marriage can take place. The appended story of a successful courtship nonetheless seems to vindicate Brontë's potential for some sort of intimate sexual bonding.

The protagonist of *Villette* is not a heroine in a normative romance, but she is a figure with which most readers can sympathize and even identify. Her motives are clearly recognizable within the framework of our common human nature. She years for intimacy, seeks to sustain her dignity, has to come to terms with diminished expectations, and then ultimately must renounce even those expectations. She defines her own position in relation to a normative model of romance, but she also provides in herself a model for the affirmation of personal integrity in the face of insuperable obstacles to happiness.[1]

The narrator's relation to her subject in *Villette* is fairly complex, but there is little uncertainty in the outcome. The emotional development in the narrator's point of view follows a clear causal trajectory, and the meaning of that trajectory is available to both the narrator and the reader. In the next novel I shall consider, Cather's *O Pioneers!*, the meaning structure is much less determinate. Cather was an exceptionally masculine woman, and in all likelihood a lesbian. The influence of her sexual orientation appears in the relation between two main love plots. Cather does not explain and perhaps does not consciously understand the emotional logic in the relation between these two plots. Consequently, the reader must fill a gap in Cather's structure of meaning.

I shall summarize the story. The protagonist is Alexandra, a strong, masculine woman who has inherited her father's farm in the closing years of the nineteenth century. While growing up, Alexandra has a tender attachment to a boy who is sensitive, artistic, and effeminate, and who is several years her junior. His family returns to the east, and she loses touch with him for a number of years. When he comes back to Nebraska, he forms an adult attachment with Alexandra, but then again leaves to make his fortune. For most of her adult life,

Alexandra's emotions have been focussed on educating a younger brother. Like the boy who moved away, the brother is artistic and intellectual. Alexandra sends her brother to the university, but while on vacation at home he falls in love with a neighbor, the wife of a violently possessive husband. The husband finds the brother and wife together and murders them both. The sensitive and artistic man Alexandra loved in the past then returns once more, and they decide to marry. Alexandra vows to seek a pardon for the man who murdered her younger brother.

The central dramatic event in this sequence, the jealous murder, is not the emotional culmination of the novel. The emotional culmination is the belated, middle-aged romance between a masculine woman and a younger, effeminate man. This atypical romance has no clear causal link with the romantic tragedy that precedes it. The two stories seem like separate and discrete lines. Beneath these lines, though, there is an emotional logic that connects them. The love triangle that ends in murder represents normative heterosexual love, and within the logic of Cather's own emotional economy, the death of Alexandra's brother and his lover removes this kind of love from the imaginative landscape of the story. It is as if Cather has to eliminate the normative heterosexuals in order to make way for the kind of romance that satisfies her own imagination—the romance of the middle-aged, sexually equivocal protagonists. If this is the case, it would help explain why Alexandra forgives the man who murders her brother. He is merely an instrument in her own fantasy structure.

Although Alexandra's love story does not appeal simply and directly to sympathetic identification with a normative heterosexual romance, the emotional structure of the novel nonetheless depends crucially on Alexandra's relation to a normative heterosexual couple. Moreover, while Cather reverses the typical sex roles in her protagonist's own romance, the roles are themselves familiar within the framework of normative heterosexual expectations. A dominant personality in command of worldly resources forms an intimate domestic partnership with a person who is younger, more sensitive, more delicate, and dependent. Beneath her participation in this common form of an intimate dyadic relationship, Alexandra shares the common human need for intimate bonding with another person. Her griefs and fulfillments remain intelligible within the framework of a common human nature.[2]

The atypical sexual psychology in Alexandra's love story makes sense in terms of Cather's own sexual psychology. Arnold Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns* presents another instance of atypical sexual psychology, but Bennett was unequivocally heterosexual, and the peculiar psychology of this story requires a different sort of explanation. In order to identify the nature of the problem, I'll again quickly summarize the story. The protagonist Anna, a young woman of marriageable age, is a severely repressed Methodist who has been raised by a cold, tyrannical father. She is courted by and accepts a man who is an alpha

male—confident, poised, successful, charming, reliable, and even kind—but at the end of the novel we are told that she is in fact in love with an ultra-low-ranking male, a young man who is timid, awkward, submissive, and generally hapless. She still marries the alpha male, ostensibly out of a respect for her prior commitment.

From within the framework of our evolved sexual psychology, Anna's supposed love for the omega male is aberrational. Bennett does not prepare the reader for his this strange sexual turn, nor does he offer any overt explanation of it. To provide the missing explanation for Anna's sexual feelings, we have to assume that she suffers from a severe psychological dissociation. She behaves sexually in a sociobiologically normal way—that is, she marries an alpha male—but her imaginative and emotional life have become disconnected from her behavior. She seems to associate the alpha male with the patriarchal oppression represented by her tyrannical father. Her need for self-affirmation suppresses erotic response and drives instead toward an affirmation of her own identity in tacit defiance of the dominant males in her world.

Anna achieves a sense of her own personal identity in epiphanies of Christian maternal sentiment, and her feelings for the omega male are almost wholly those of maternal pity, though these feeling briefly mingle with erotic expressions in the climactic scene of the novel. In contrast to Anna's own imaginative archetypes, Bennet himself evokes Darwinian images of man and nature locked in the toils of sexual violence, and he superimposes these images on the industrial landscape of the English pottery district (Chapters 1 and 6). Anna is deaf and blind to the romance of industrialized and sexualized nature, and she is imaginatively inert before the sexual prowess of her alpha male husband.

If we accept the idea of Anna's psychological dissociation, we can absolve Bennett of the charge of false sexual psychology, but readers might still well complain that the symbolic structure is overly subtle and too merely clever. Anna's subjectivity can be made intelligible only by supposing that she is mentally incoherent. If this supposition is correct, it registers an important aspect of her character, but Bennett does not clearly establish the relation between his own perspective and that of his protagonist. He merely juxtaposes the two conflicting perspectives. His Darwinian vision of nature reveals itself only through his symbolic imagery, and the implications of this imagery, in its relation to that of his protagonist, are left latent. The structure of meaning in the story remains polarized between male sexual passion, associated with Bennett's Darwinian vision of nature, and female maternal passion, associated with his Christian vision of a suffering humanity.

The structure of meaning in *Anna* is incomplete and inconclusive. We have no sufficient evidence to decide firmly whether the revelation of Anna's love for the omega male is an implausible sensationalistic twist or a clever revelation of the protagonist's psychological incoherence, but in either case, whichever solu-

tion we adopt, we are interpreting the novel within a common framework of assumptions about sociobiologically typical sexual psychology. Whether he intends to reveal Anna's inner incoherence or merely shock and surprise his readers, Bennett's meaning tacitly depends on these assumptions. Anna's relation to the alpha male is a standard romantic comedy, in the mode of Austen, and her secret passion for the omega male takes whatever significance it has through the sense of its deviation from normative sexual dispositions.[3]

In both *O Pioneers!* and *Anna of the Five Towns*, the protagonists and narrators suffer lapses into blankness that have to be filled in by interpretative speculation. In *Pride and Prejudice*, *Villette*, and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the structure of meaning is more complete. Of these three novels, *Tess* has to meet the greatest challenge in achieving a structure of meaning adequate to its subject. In *Villette*, the protagonist serves as a fictive extension of the author's own personal concerns, and the imaginative purposes of the story restrict themselves to the problems of her individual identity. In *Pride and Prejudice,* the marriage plot serves to affirm the normative principles within a traditional cultural order. Unlike Brontë, Hardy concerns himself with problems of nature and civilization that extend beyond his own personal preoccupations, and unlike Austen and her protagonists, Hardy and his protagonists must undergo a conscious struggle to construct an interpretive model of their world. Hardy's characters face wrenching and shattering experiences in areas of elemental concern: sex, birth, death, betrayal, and abandonment. They must overcome philosophical confusion, reject conventional values, and construct a new order of meaning, and they must meet these challenges while suffering from radical personal disorientation and sustained emotional distress.

The story of *Tess*, as Hardy presents it, has extraordinary beauty and power, and yet the basic plot of the novel, starkly summarized as I shall summarize it, is merely sordid and painful. One challenge I would propose for a sociobiological critique of the novel is to take account of the beauty and power. The protagonist is a young peasant girl, descendant of a long decayed aristocratic family. She is raped by a wealthy cad, her employer, dallies with him a few weeks, and then leaves him. She has his baby, and after the baby dies she goes to work at a dairy. There she meets and falls in love wih an educated and high-minded young man studying to be a farmer. She hides her past, and they marry, but on her wedding night she reveals her secret. Because her husband is fixated on a conventional conception of female chastity, he leaves her, and over a year later, destitute and desperate to help her family, she returns to her former lover. When her husband eventually comes back to her, she murders the former lover. She and her husband flee and have a week of happiness before she is caught and hanged.

What makes this a great novel? Both the characters and the author in *Tess* have to confront the sordid facts I have described, and the significance of the action depends on the qualities of mind and character evoked by this confronta-

tion. The protagonists in *Tess* are sensuous, passionate, and reflective, but they find themselves in circumstances that are always a little in advance of their capacity to comprehend and control them. In response to the stress of these circumstances, both Hardy and his characters probe the relations among the elemental, instinctive basis of human nature and the effects of local cultural convention and personal circumstances. To filter out the truth of their experience from the conventional improprieties and vulgar associations of their circumstances requires extraordinary qualities of generosity, tenderness, and compassion. Hardy himself has these qualities of mind and temper, and his characters also ultimately attain them, though only through the experience of events that destroy their chances for happiness. The emotional process of the story culminates in a sensation of pathos that is simultaneously an affirmation of personal nobility. These are the affects appropriate to tragedy, and they satisfy imaginative needs as real and definite as those satisfied through the happier affects of comedy.

Qualities of mind and temper are a necessary but not sufficient condition of literary effect. To realize the latent qualities of mind and temper, style and form must be found adequate to the subject, and in this respect *Tess* is singularly successful. In all the phases of his characters' lives, from romantic intoxication to tragic despair, Hardy evokes their experience with a poetic, lyrical power that makes virtually every scene sensuously vivid. He gives a detailed evocation of the topography and atmosphere of each distinct geographic region of the story, and he envisions the characters always as living oganisms closely intermeshed with their concrete physical environments. The novel is thus far "naturalistic," but it does not, like the works of Zola or Norris, reduce its characters to bestial mindlessness. In complement to their physical immediacy, the main characters take on a complex symbolic significance, both for Hardy and for each other. As symbols, they combine the elemental or universal aspects of experience with the sense of a unique moment of cultural history. In their elemental aspects, the dairy maids, and especially Tess, constitute mythic embodiments of primal nature. And conversely, to the dairy maids, the young man embodies all higher culture, the sphere of the mind and of gentlemanly chivalry. As symbols of a unique historical moment, the characters dramatize the transition from a simpler, more naïve culture to what Hardy calls the "ache of modernism"—the moment at which thoughtful people must organize their own systems of meaning in the absence of religious belief. Altogether, the elements of Hardy's distinctive vision—his tenderness of feeling, his poetic sensuousness, his naturalistic immediacy, and the scope and depth of his symbolism—form a dense medium through which the reader experiences the events of the story. The total structure of meaning in the story emerges from the successful integration of all these elements.[4]

All five of these novels create distinctive structures of meaning and at the

same time make at least tacit appeal to elemental dispositions. *Pride and Prejudice* is simply and classically normative in the harmonious concord it establishes between the author's identity, her cultural order, and species-typical behavioral norms, but that concord is itself a rare and distinctive characteristic. Hardy has lost the sense of any such concord, but he creates a community of discourse with his readers through his appeal to an order of nature outside the conventional values of his time. In both *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and in *Villette*, the pathos and dignity of the protagonists' experience derive from the way they respond to the frustration of their desire to participate in a normative romance. The protagonists of *O Pioneers!* and *Anna of the Five Towns* define their own sexual identities in contrast with sociobiologically typical expectations, but the protagonists are nonetheless motivated by the need for sexual intimacy and for the affirmation of individual identity. Cather's Alexandra reverses typical sex roles but still seeks intimacy within typical forms of a dyadic relationship. Bennett's Anna deviates from typical female mate preferences, but she fashions her own idiosyncratic sexual identity through her elemental maternal nature. These five authors differ from one another in profound ways, but they and their readers nonetheless participate in a common understanding of normative sociobiological expectations, and beneath their differences they all share in a common human nature.

These novels have not been equally valued by readers, and the reasons for those differences can be understood by assessing their total meaning structures and total meaning situations. *Pride and Prejudice* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* hold an unequivocal position in the highest rank of English novels. They appeal to common and basic motivational structures, create clear, complete, and coherent structures of meaning, display extraordinary stylistic felicity in the evocation of their subjects, and treat their characters with a rich and magnanimous generosity of fellow human feeling. *Villette* has a dedicated but narrow audience. Its verbal artistry alone assures it continued appreciative attention among aficionados of prose, and its preoccupation with the self-affirmation of an intelligent, sensitive, but socially and sexually marginalized woman has always tapped a certain vein of sympathetic response—a response heightened if sometimes distorted by the feminist preoccupations of the past few decades. The quality of defensive, self-absorbed egoism that assures exceptional personal identification with some readers also virtually guarantees that the novel will never have the kind of broad appeal displayed by *Pride and Prejudice* or *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. For these reasons, *Villette* holds a secure position on a second canonical tier. *Anna of the Five Towns* and *O Pioneers!* drop below that tier. They have each garnered some serious academic attention, but neither has stimulated a wide and enthusiastic responsiveness among the generally literate public. They are not favorites of "the common reader," and the common reader has her reasons. Both novels have eccentric motivational structures, and, partly

as a result of this eccentricity, their total structures of meaning are obscure, latent, or confused. The novels thus present interesting puzzles for critical analysis, but they also leave a sense of dissatisfaction. They have imperfectly mastered their subjects and have as a result incompletely satisfied the reader's desire for cognitive order. The greatest literary works most completely satisfy that desire, and for this reason they can and should serve as a central point of reference for our understanding of human nature.

Notes

[1]Commenting on Brontë's dislike of Austen, G. H. Lewes observes that "those who have little sense of humour, or whose passionate and insurgent activities demand in art a reflection of their own emotions and struggles, will find little pleasure in such homely comedies. Currer Bell [Charlotte Brontë] may be taken as a type of these. She was utterly without a sense of humour, and was by nature fervid and impetuous" (107). On the narrowly self-absorbed intensity of Brontë's work, also see Stephen and Carlisle. On its neurotic emotional quality, see Martineau; Heilman, "Innovations in Gothic"; and Tanner, "Introduction." For a detailed analysis of the elaborate verbal artistry that mediates the emotion, see Heilman, "Tulip-hood." Maynard delineates the predominating sexual themes in *Villette* and in Brontë's work generally. Feminist critiques (Millett, Gilbert and Gubar, Yeazell, and Silver) have deprecated or minimized Brontë's orientation to normative heterosexual romance and have instead emphasized her affirmation of individual female identity.

[2]On Cather's sexual orientation, see O'Brien, *Willa Cather*; Lee; Wagenknecht; and Acocella. On the composition of the novel out of two pre-existing stories, see Stouck. Some critics (Cooper, Daiches) regard the two parts of the novel as heterogeneous and unintegrated. Others have sought to vindicate the unity of the work by delineating various archetypal configurations (Charles, Baker, Moseley) or thematic formulas (O'Brien, "Unity"; Murphy; Stouck).

[3]One early reviewer registers an incisive objection to the sexual psychology in *Anna*. "Pity suddenly turns into an overwhelming love, not, be it remembered, in an unoccupied heart. We refuse to believe. The tragedy is not according to nature, but according to art" (Unsigned review, *Spectator*). Hall remarks that pity is the only love of which Anna is capable but doesn't find her feeling for the omega male convincing. Lucas remarks that "Bennett is rarely able to deal convincingly with sexual passion" (51) but perceives no dissonance between maternal pity and erotic romance. Nor do Anderson or Bauer. Drabble perceives the dissonance but rationalizes it by declaring that Anna "mistakes" pity and guilt for love (95). Stone, Anderson, and Bauer find a link between Anna's resistance to patriarchal oppression and her sexual unresponsiveness to the alpha male.

[4]Woolf offers a perspicacious account of Hardy's imaginative character. Porter gives a good impression of his moral temper. In "Colour and Movement in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*," Tanner powerfully evokes the artistic congruity of image, tone, and philosophic vision in *Tess*. Gose, Meisel, Bruce Johnson, Robinson, Beer, and Morton discuss Hardy's use of Darwinian themes. None of these crtics formulates specifically Darwinian principles of literary theory, but Robinson finely registers the integration of Darwinian naturalism and tender poetic sensitivity in Hardy's works, and he perceptively assesses the relations among mythic images, social stereotypes, and individual identities in *Tess*.

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