

# Annie Ramel, *The Madder Stain*: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Thomas Hardy

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**The Madder Stain:  
A Psychoanalytic Reading of Thomas Hardy**

**Annie Ramel**

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“She went stealthily as a cat through this profusion of growth [...], staining her hands with thistle-milk and slug-slime, and rubbing off upon her naked arms sticky blights which, though snow-white on the apple-tree trunks, made madder stains on her skin.” (*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, [1998]. Oxford: OUP, 127 [Original work published 1891]) This study of Thomas Hardy's writing by Annie Ramel focalises on the red stain that runs through different novels (*A Pair of Blues Eyes*, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native*, *The Woodlanders*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*) and short stories (especially “An Imaginative Woman”) by the Victorian author.

The reading is psychoanalytic and the theoretical frame is Lacanian. Although this might be considered a difficulty for some readers unacquainted with psychoanalytic approaches to literary texts, it does not hinder the pleasure of going into Hardy's novels and other texts, but rather allows for an exploration of the writer's famous stories while discovering new meanings and implications.

Moreover, the marked critical bias combines with a close reading of the texts, a faithful rendering of figures of speech, of lexical fields and textual echoes, as well as a detailed evocation of narrative aspects. The poetic quality of the author's prose is finely discussed and powerfully thrown into relief.

The starting point of the study is the Lacanian Real on the one hand and Roland Barthes's *punctum* on the other, both having to do with the “lack of lack” (28). The void that should be left open to designate “the blank space of origin” (32) is filled in Hardy's writing, which leads to the dysfunctioning of metaphor and to tragedy. Tragic characters are caught in a rigid web of words and signs that keep them from achieving social success and happiness, reminding the reader that “The Letter Killeth” (19).

Whereas happiness comes to be a rarity in Hardy's novels, another form of enjoyment is undeniably present: Lacanian *jouissance*, a form of enjoyment that escapes representation as such. This “Other *jouissance*” is akin to feminine *jouissance*: an ungraspable and indefinable form of enjoyment which lies on the side of the unrepresentable Real. Such evasiveness inspires the author whose writing turns poetic. Hardy's style is feminine in that it shows what should remain hidden: the object-cause of desire, the object-gaze, the object-voice.

As to the logic of desire, some characters avoid a tragic fate by accepting not to grab and possess the desired object. They will endure desire itself and, therefore, the absence of the object. The main example of this can be seen in Gabriel Oak in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, who eventually marries Bathsheba some years after a failed initial attempt. In the meantime, she has married someone else and experienced betrayal and shame. It is only when she herself has become not so pure and untouched an object of desire – when she has been “blighted” to use a term from *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* – that happiness (or what comes close to it) is achieved and tragedy averted.

Boldwood is another male character in *Far From the Madding Crowd*. Unlike Gabriel Oak, he refuses to “find ways *around* the object of desire” (78) and is determined to take hold of it. He deems the object irreplaceable, being alien to the notion of the lack of the object, of the object as “a deceitful object” (75). To him, desiring means possessing. The object becomes “das Ding”, that “central emptiness” (Jacques Lacan [2008]. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book VII: “The Ethics of Psychoanalysis” [D. Porter, Trans.]. Abingdon: Routledge, 248 [Original work published 1986]) which is “the locus of *jouissance*” (77). Because of his blind attachment to “the *true* object of desire, the *object-cause*” (75), Boldwood throws himself into an abyss of madness – into nothingness.

This treatment of the notion of desire brings about the question of the object-gaze and the object-voice. The object-gaze is “a blind spot in my visual field” (87), it is not on the side of the gazer but on that of the object that looks at me unseen. This indescribable hollow in the visual field can be made visible in the diegesis through the use of anamorphosis in Hardy’s fiction. Being represented in the fashion of the skull in Holbein’s picture *The Ambassadors*, this blind spot allows for the onlooker to “look awry” (Slavoj Žižek. [1992]. *Looking Awry*. Cambridge [Mass.]: MIT Press) and “find ways around it”, as Gabriel Oak with his own desire.

Making the object-gaze visible and avertable paves the way for catharsis in the tragic universe depicted by Hardy. The tragic characters – Boldwood, Tess, or Eustacia in *The Return of the Native* – all fail to look awry and so are confronted with the object, the “madder stain” which “[m]ore precisely, to use strictly Lacanian terms, [...] is the gaze of the Other as identified with the subject’s eye” (115). The eye of the onlooker meets and is transpierced by the frontal rays of the object-gaze.

Other characters, like Gabriel Oak and Bathsheba, experience catharsis as the madder stain comes to be erased from the narrative: in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, the red blot left on Boldwood’s retina by the anonymous Valentine card he received is extracted from the visual field at the moment his character disappears from the scene of the novel. “In the light of Lacanian psychoanalysis, what appears clearly now is that the cleansing effect of catharsis in Hardy’s novels consists in erasing the madder stain, that is to say in *extracting the object-gaze from the field of the visible*” (109).

When not extracted from the visual field, the madder stain that marks the place from where the object-gaze looks at the subject “catches the eye with an irresistible power, and makes us hear the sound of silence” (140), in the very same way as we hear a silent cry when contemplating Munch’s *Scream*. The red blot on the ceiling that signals Alec’s murder by Tess “speaks *instead of her*” (139) and becomes her voice. The madder stain is like the novel itself, for “a literary text is first of all *a voice that makes you hear the silence*” (143).

This is the point where the poetic quality of the author’s voice can be felt. What Annie Ramel rightly calls “Hardy’s poetic prose” (158) allows the textual voice to depict beauty while revealing the unfathomable and terrifying Real. It is through the use of the sublime that the text becomes “a veil that both prohibits and shows the horror” (161), just as the swamp in *Far From the Madding Crowd* is “a noisome yet magnificent silvery veil, full of light from the sun, yet semi-opaque” (*Far From the Madding Crowd* [1986]. R.C. Schweik (Ed.). New-York & London: W.W. Norton, 232-233 [Original work published 1874]).

This detailed study of some of Hardy’s famous texts, therefore, sheds light on the author’s deep and subtle rendering of the complexity of life, the human mind, and interpersonal relationships. It also reminds us of how modern Hardy was, not only as a twentieth-century poet, but also as a Victorian writer who allowed himself to ponder questions that were to fuel the works of later writers, painters and other artists.