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Peter Swaab

Abstract

This article is a revised version of a talk given at the 'Study Weekend' on Thomas Hardy and Sylvia Townsend Warner held in Dorchester in February 2024. It compares the two writers as ironists, focusing especially on Hardy's collection of short stories *Life's Little Ironies*. It explores the use of titles by both authors and their deployment of what Auden called a 'hawk's vision' of narrative situations. The article ends by comparing the writers' treatments of sexuality and coincidence. It argues that Warner's sense of the human world is no less ironic than Hardy's but that her prevailing tone is less tragic and more celebratory, and that the heart of her writing lies in a relish for 'the oddness of the world and the surprisingness of mankind'.

Keywords Thomas Hardy; Sylvia Townsend Warner; irony; *Life's Little Ironies*; *The Corner That Held Them*.

When I was first thinking about what to present to this mini-conference on Hardy and Warner I was struck by the title of Hardy's collection of short stories, *Life's Little Ironies*, first published in 1894. The idea that both authors are ironists suggested a specifically literary kinship to complement the more accidental one of their long-term shared residence in Dorset, which for Warner at least was partly down to mere bad luck when the lease was not renewed on the house she and Valentine Ackland loved and rented in Norfolk early in the 1930s. Otherwise, she would probably have been a Norfolk-based writer and not a Wessex one.

To think of Hardy and Warner as ironists is a large topic for a short talk, but it opens a window on a literary relationship that has seldom been discussed – and on those few occasions generally in reference to Warner's poetry, in particular her two volumes published in the 1920s when Hardy was still alive. This discussion will instead focus on their prose fiction and explore the affinities and differences both in the ironies they register as onlookers and those they exercise as narrators.

Some of Hardy's titles advertise himself in terms of the possibility of the laughable: among them not only *Life's Little Ironies* but *Time's Laughingstocks* and *Satires of Circumstance*. All these titles pose a question of attribution. Hardy assigns the ironies, laughingstocks and satires to life, time and circumstance respectively. But how about Thomas Hardy? Does he not have a role? In publishing the books he puts himself forward as the author of these cases as well as their narrator. We could see him then as a certain kind of author, a specialist in narrating the misfortunes born of time, circumstance and life's ironies. That's to say, he is in the position not of a victim but of a narrator and anatomist, somebody who utilises life's ironies for the kinds of satisfaction they can offer to his readers, and presumably himself. As with authors as different from Hardy as Samuel Beckett and Evelyn Waugh, the world of gloom is met with an answering and partly compensatory literary practice in which the author is owning it. He has an investment in the classical and traditional pleasures involved in contemplating what Wordsworth in the *Lyrical Ballads* 'Preface' called 'pathetic situations and sentiments'.[1]

Alan Manford's scholarly edition of *Life's Little Ironies* surveys some suggestive contemporary responses to the book. Hardy coined the phrase 'life's little ironies', which has since become proverbial; but to several reviewers Hardy's 'ironies' looked like a provocatively misleading term. William Archer argued in the *Westminster Gazette* that each story 'might just as well have been termed a tragedy', while 'D.S.' in *To-Day* judged that the stories 'are mostly tragedies, not little ironies'. Walter Raymond in *The Bookman* thought 'many of the stories are too deep for irony – they are unutterably sad'. Manford notes that Archer also 'questions the use of *Little* in the volume's title', while the *Athenaeum* reviewer thought it a relief to turn from the main stories, with 'their weight of implacable doom',[2] to 'A Few Crusted Characters', stories whose page-count and emotional scale fit more easily with the idea of littleness. These responses to the book suggest that Hardy intended its title as a challenge and it was duly taken as one. But in spite of such contemporary misgivings about the title the book was a great

commercial success, first published on 22 February 1894 and reprinted five times in a short space of time.

A bitterness attaches to the word 'little' in Hardy's title because the ironies in these stories are not at all little for the individuals whose lives are recorded there; these are ironies that shape and most often blight their lives. If we are to find them 'little' that must be from the point of view of 'Life' – or, as Hardy puts in his poems 'Hap', 'Crass Casualty' and 'Time'; these are 'Doomsters' that are indifferent whether they scatter bliss or bale:

> —Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,
> And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan …
> These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
> Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.[3]

Within the stories of *Life's Little Ironies* one kind of irony arises from the gulf between the perspectives of Life and of the individual agents, and from the consequent gap between the scales of significance in the recorded events. 'On the Western Circuit' has such a moment; the young man and woman at the centre of the story are riding separately on a fairground roundabout:

> Each time that she approached the half of her orbit that lay nearest him they gazed at each other with smiles, and with that unmistakable expression which means so little at the moment, yet so often leads up to passion, heart-ache, union, disunion, devotion, overpopulation, drudgery, content, resignation, despair.[4]

The diminutive 'so little at the moment' is weighed against a blatantly substantial sequence of ten nouns. From one point of view the list makes perfunctory work of the vicissitudes of love in a life, with just two lines for the course of two such lives and their offspring. But from another perspective, even this listing has its unexpected moments that give us pause about the moment that 'means so little'. The sequence of 'heart-ache, union, disunion, devotion' plots not just a downhill slide but a recovery of love. So too within 'drudgery, content, resignation, despair' there is a story of resilience before the final despair. And 'overpopulation' cunningly conjoins a sociological perspective on a fertile marriage with a glimpse of a particular overcrowded domestic space. Hardy has carefully wrought a slippage between a generalised sense of this story and a more

painful reckoning with what trapped individuals endure. The narrator's momentary assumption of a lofty, indifferent perspective prompts responses other than indifference from the readers. The irony recoils from such a perspective as well as reckoning with it.

William Empson has some relevant thoughts about such questions of scale and the idea of life's little ironies. He was prompted by Arthur Waley's translation from a Chinese poem: 'Swiftly the years, beyond recall. / Solemn the stillness of this spring morning':

> The human mind has two main scales on which to measure time. The large one takes the length of a human life as its unit, so that there is nothing to be done about life, it is of an animal dignity and simplicity and must be regarded from a peaceable and fatalistic point of view. The small one takes as its unit the conscious moment, and it is from this that you consider the neighbouring space, an activity of the will, delicacies of social tone, and your personality. The scales are so far apart as almost to give the effect of defining two dimensions…[5]

Empson's terms suggest two dimensions of Hardy's irony: the 'peaceable and fatalistic' sorrow that recognises inevitability and also the energies of bitterness within his social critique of Victorian inequities of class.

Warner's titles seldom offer such provocative interpretations of the world as *Life's Little Ironies*, *Time's Laughingstocks* and *Satires of Circumstance*. Take for instance two of the titles she considered for the novel that became *The Corner That Held Them*, namely 'People Growing Old' and 'Shadows on a River'; these suggest her more equable and less pointed evocation of the passing of time.[6] Similarly, the titles of her story collections *Winter in the Air* and *Swans on an Autumn River* indicate a seasonal atmosphere but without telling us much about it. The collections *A Stranger with a Bag* and *The Museum of Cheats* proffer something unfamiliar to interest their readers but these titles also remain enigmatic.[7] Her late collection *The Innocent and the Guilty* (1971) looks a little more ironic, quizzically hinting that innocence and guilt may not be transparently opposite qualities, but even here the title maintains its discretion about how we will be invited to assess these contraries.

One of Warner's titles, though, in which we may find a pointed irony is her best-known short story, 'A Love Match'. Warner called this her 'nice calm story about incest',[8] in this case the sibling incest of Justin and Celia Tizard, a brother and sister living maritally in a quiet English country town between the wars. The title here includes irony by being

anti-ironic; the reader who realizes that it is a story of sibling incest might take the title to be ironical, and it's certainly not the approved social usage of the term 'love match'; but the story dispassionately represents Justin and Celia as authentically the love of each other's lives, including their sex lives. 'Loving each other criminally and sincerely,' as Warner unforgettably puts it, 'they took pains to live together happily and to safeguard their happiness from injuries of their own infliction or from outside.'[9] The syntax differentiating between these kinds of injury is careful and even prim, very much in sympathy with the painstaking approach of the loving couple. This is love as a way of life, intelligently fostered, not seen as symbolically transcendent or revolutionary in the European traditions of for instance P. B. Shelley, Wagner or Cocteau.

In their deaths Justin and Celia are not divided; they are killed in an air raid during the Second World War, and their crushed bodies are found lying together in a double bed. The masterly final paragraph of the story records their discovery.

> The wavering torchlights wandered over the spectacle. There was a silence. Then young Foe spoke out. 'He must have come in to comfort her. That's my opinion.' The others concurred. Silently, they disentangled Justin and Celia, and wrapped them in separate tarpaulin sheets. No word of what they had found got out. Foe's hypothesis was accepted by the coroner and became truth.[10]

The timed revelations of wavering, silence, speaking out and concurring are nuanced and vivid. The seriously believable and exquisite ironies surrounding this cover-up are not at the expense of Justin and Celia, and they do not entail Hardyesque thoughts of folly or doom; they concern instead the social construction of English 'truth', and what 'became truth' gets the final word in this story.

Such titles as *Life's Little Ironies* suggest an overview of the human scene, and in 1940 W. H. Auden famously praised Hardy for his 'hawk's vision'.

> What I valued most in Hardy, then, as I still do, was his hawk's vision, his way of looking at life from a very great height, as in the stage directions of *The Dynasts* or the opening chapter of *The Return of the Native*. To see the individual life related not only to the local social life of its time, but to the whole of human history, life on earth, the stars, gives one both humility and self-confidence.[11]

At times, both Hardy and Warner entertained such high views. Consider first a moment from Hardy's story 'The Son's Veto' in which an expensively educated son ruins the life of his widowed low-born mother by forbidding her from remarrying happily beneath her new station:

> His education had by this time sufficiently ousted his humanity to keep him quite firm; though his mother might have led an idyllic life with her faithful fruiterer and greengrocer, and nobody have been anything the worse in the world.[12]

Auden found in the hawk's vision a Christianising provision of 'humility' and a therapeutic one of 'self-confidence', but there were other elements too, to which by 1940 he was less responsive; we should not overlook the anger and bitterness within Hardy's high perspective on the petty English world of class. There is a powerful irony here in the precision of 'sufficiently', as though ousting humanity were one of the approved official aims and outcomes of English education, and Hardy the Ofsted inspector checking off its outstanding success. The modulation of this contempt into the pathos and world perspective of the second half of the sentence is one of Hardy's memorable effects. He offers us here a hawk's vision of an idyllic life that never actually happened. Warner's angry ironies about social selfishness, censorious narrow-mindedness and class injustice bear comparison with such moments in Hardy; these are not confined to her most activist decade of the 1930s, but continue throughout her writing life.

Another such moment of Hardy's hawk's vision comes in the same story when we first meet Sam, the young gardener who will become Sophy's 'faithful fruiterer'. Sophy is at this point the local vicar's parlourmaid and she has news of the death of the vicar's wife.

> As she opened the white swing-gate and looked towards the trees which rose westward, shutting out the pale light of the evening sky, she discovered, without much surprise, the figure of a man standing in the hedge, though she roguishly exclaimed as a matter of form: 'O Sam; how you frightened me!'
>
> He was a young gardener of her acquaintance. She told him the particulars of the late event, and they stood silent, these two young people, in that elevated, calmly philosophic mood which is engendered when a tragedy has happened close at hand, and has not happened to the philosophers themselves. But it had its bearing upon their relations.[13]

The delicious comedy of her 'roguishly' pretending 'as a matter of form' that Sam has frightened her moves back into a more sombre view of 'these two young people'. We have several perspectives here: our sense of the two of them at this moment in the narrative, our intimation of their future through the ominous last sentence and their own 'calmly philosophic' understanding of the death of the vicar's wife in ignorance of the wreckage it will make in their lives. The ironies around our calmly philosophic view of their 'calmly philosophic mood' are rich and complex.

In Warner's masterpiece *The Corner That Held Them*, the story of an East Anglian nunnery in the fourteenth century, one of the nuns lies dying. Dame Isabel sees human affairs as from a distance:

> There is pleasure in watching the sophistries of mankind, his decisions made and unmade like the swirl of a mill-race, causation sweeping him forward from act to act while his reason dances on the surface of action like a pattern of foam.[14]

This is not so much a hawk's-eye view as the view from a bridge or parapet, looking down at the water below. We may imagine Warner watching along with Dame Isabel; human decision is not entirely powerless here, but the bigger movements of the water are beyond the determinings of reason or free choice. We could think of the pleasure in such watching, which is Warner's as well as Dame Isabel's, as ironic in the sense of the third *OED* definition of irony: 'an outcome cruelly, humorously, or strangely at odds with assumptions or expectations'.[15] Such a sense of the world generates a narrative in which the storyline too swirls around in unpredictable patterns. The ensemble of nuns is shifted around by forces beyond their control – money, plague, local accident and contingency.

For instance, the beautiful altar cloth that gets stolen from the nunnery when the Peasant's Revolt arrives there, is stolen again at the very end of the book from onboard a ship – by an old man making his first and only appearance in the novel. The altar cloth gets lost to us, and to England, and to posterity. Likewise with 'The Lay of Mamillion', the poem Sir Ralph cherishes and the narrative seems to prize as a masterpiece of English regional poetry, like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: that gets lost too. Warner's book places human projects and achievements in the context of 'the extravaganza of death' that is the Black Death, and also of the longer reaches of history that put even that catastrophe into a longer perspective.

> It had been an easy house to rule; remembrance of Prioress Isabella lasted on and reconciled the nuns to leading a humdrum life, a life stagnant but limpid. So they had lived. So, now, they were dying. For the extravaganza of death that was sweeping their world away suggested no changes to them except the change from being alive to being dead.[16]

Other plotlines run dry. Sir Ralph, the nun's priest, is an impostor, and rumours develop about that, but he is never investigated, never mind unmasked. Late in the book Dame Alice, a very stupid nun, seems almost certainly to have murdered the Widow Magdalen Figg, who was scandalously having an affair with Sir Ralph. Dame Alice seems to have overinterpreted the prioress's anger about this situation in the spirit of Henry II's knights hearing him say 'Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?' and going on to murder Thomas Becket. We find Dame Alice hauling in the drowned corpse from the nunnery fishpond:

> Dame Alice crouched by the fish-pond, bending forward as though she were landing some enormous fish. But it was Magdalen's feet that she was clasping to her bosom, and the rest of Magdalen lay face downward under the water.[17]

Dame Alice starts screaming – 'with hearty efficiency and without a trace of sensibility', as the narrator notes – but the narrator is splendidly unmoved by this grotesque and hilarious spectacle. There is no Brother Cadfael to unmask the murderer; and by a further irony the visiting Bishop Walter, an enemy of the nunnery, spots many of their minor malfeasances but never gets wind of the murder in the fishpond.

The end of *The Corner That Held Them* finds a local couple mulling over the larger and smaller happenings that they remember as the backdrop to their lives.

> Then their talk began again, and they laughed from time to time, not because what they spoke of was particularly merry, but because of the oddness of the world and the surprisingness of mankind.[18]

The heart of Warner's irony lies in such relish for 'the oddness of the world and the surprisingness of mankind' – an unassuming overview, perhaps, but that awkward and unusual word 'surprisingness' has its

own glint of odd surprising verbal life. Her sense of the human world is no less ironic than Hardy's but the prevailing tone is less tragic and more celebratory. As a contrast we could consider a moment from Hardy's story 'For Conscience's Sake', which includes a darkly funny and revelatory incident of sea-sickness. Mr Millborne and his illegitimate daughter are sitting beside each other on a yacht when the wind gets up; their sea-sickness brings out their shared genetic make-up vividly and unmistakably to the young man sitting opposite, who had not known their secret until this trick of nature revealed it. 'It was as if, during the voyage, a mysterious veil had been lifted, temporarily revealing a strange pantomime of the past.'[19] Where Warner discerns 'oddness' and 'surprisingness' Hardy finds a 'strange pantomime of the past'.

It would be illuminating in a fuller discussion to compare the ways that irony informs the two writers' treatment of love and sexual desire. Two of Hardy's finest stories in *Life's Little Ironies*, 'An Imaginative Woman' and 'On the Western Circuit', are especially brilliant depictions of human nature helplessly subject to the sexual impulse, combined in these stories with ironies around imagination being so powerful and delusional. Warner also has a sense of desire as imperious and incorrigible, which she observes coolly and dispassionately in some of its most disreputable forms in stories such as 'Johnnie Brewer' and 'Randolph'.[20] But her work is not similarly informed by a sense of the human subject in the grip of an unhappy and ineluctable biological destiny.

Both writers, but especially Hardy, are at times drawn to stories involving coincidence. In Hardy's story 'An Imaginative Woman'[21] the drearily married Ella Marchmill falls fantastically in love with the poet Robert Trewe, whose rooms she and her husband happen to be renting. On two occasions she plans to meet him in real life. These plans are on both occasions unluckily thwarted, then luckily reprieved, but then re-thwarted. The symbolic aptness of their never meeting is aided by excruciating narrative contrivance and sealed by a final spectacular coup of ill-timing. Ella has at last been successful in arranging to meet Robert; he will visit her with a friend for supper. But on the very day of the supper he becomes fatally despondent after the publication of a bad review of his poems – fatally in that he does actually kill himself. The story ends with a further twist of the knife, as Robert's suicide note suggests he might have been rescued by the love of just such a woman as Ella. 'To Please His Wife' is given its disastrous turn by a comparably blighting coincidence.[22] Both Joanna and Emily are in love with Shadrach, but Emily more deeply

and truly. Joanna decides to release Shadrach from his engagement to her and visits Emily with a letter to that end, but when she arrives at a freakishly unlucky moment and overhears Shadrach avowing his love for Emily, anger and envy make her reverse her decision and set the disastrousness of the plot in motion. You can hardly account for these exquisite feats of timing in terms of realistic probability any more than you can the succession of unlucky timings in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

Fewer of Warner's stories revolve around such perfections of unhappy coincidence. But some do. In 'Their Quiet Lives'[23] Audrey wants to be a nun in South Africa but is tied by duty and conscience to her horrible elderly mother. Eventually her brother persuades her to fly off. She is touched by his being unusually unselfish, only to find out at the airport that he planned her departure for his own purposes – to dilute the effect of his telling their mother that he has married his secretary. Audrey flies off to South Africa, or rather towards South Africa, but receives a telegram during her layover in Amsterdam telling her that the mother died that day going up Box Hill. In a Hardy story she might have had a disabling stroke and Audrey would never have got away. Warner's interest is less in plotting a ruined life than in the truthful blow the story delivers to Audrey's cherished sense of conscience. Coincidences of timing are also to the fore in two of Warner's stories about prevented suicides, 'Absalom, My Son' and 'During a Winter Night'.[24] In the latter, Mrs Laver has decided to clean her house before tidily killing herself; she is lucidly moved to do so by her abiding grief for her husband who was killed in an air raid and by her disappointing adult offspring. The Hardyesque coincidence in the story is excruciating and grotesque: a lodger in the building has had the same idea on the same night and has tried to gas himself. She finds him, revives him, has to clean up after him and has to shelve her resolving plan about her own life. Would it have been better if she succeeded in her plan? The story ends on a dark irony and enigma about how we should assess her 'mortification and defeat';[25] she was baffled by a trick of fate that seems to mark Warner, for all her differences of mood and tone, as a descendant of Thomas Hardy.

Note on contributor

Peter Swaab is the Editor of *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*. He teaches at UCL and he was one of the organisers of the Hardy and Warner study weekend in Dorchester in February 2024.

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Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author is current editor of this journal. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the reviewers during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

Notes

1 *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 610.
2 *Life's Little Ironies*, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Novels and Stories of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Alan Manford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023). The quotations are from p. lxxviii (Archer), p. lxxix (D.S.), pp. lxxx–lxxxi (Raymond), p. lxxviii (Manford citing Archer) and p. lxxx (*Athenaeum*).
3 Thomas Hardy, *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy, vol. 1*, ed. Samuel Hynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 10.
4 Hardy, *Life's Little Ironies*, pp. 86–7. Hardy tried out several versions of the catalogue of nouns in his manuscripts and print versions of the stories, including changing 'content' to 'discontent' to make a smoother escalation out of 'drudgery, discontent, resignation, despair'.
5 William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), pp. 23–4.
6 Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'Notes on *The Corner That Held Them*', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* 20, no. 1 (2020), p. 3.
7 *Swans on an Autumn River* was the American title for the collection published in the UK as *A Stranger with a Bag* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966). Chatto & Windus published *A Museum of Cheats* in 1947 and *Winter in the Air* in 1955.
8 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Diaries*, ed. Claire Harman (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), entry for 25 April 1964, p. 291. The story was published in *A Stranger with a Bag*.
9 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Selected Stories* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1988), p. 10.
10 Warner, *Selected Stories*, p. 20.
11 W. H. Auden, 'A Literary Transference' (1940), reprinted in *Hardy: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Albert J. Guerard (New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1963).

12 Hardy, *Life's Little Ironies*, p. 21.
13 Hardy, *Life's Little Ironies*, pp. 6–7.
14 Sylvia Townsend Warner, *The Corner That Held Them* (1948) (London: Virago Press, 1988), p. 63.
15 The *OED* gives as its third sense of 'irony': 'A state of affairs or an event that seems deliberately contrary to what was or might be expected; an outcome cruelly, humorously, or strangely at odds with assumptions or expectations.' The first example is from 1833.
16 Warner, *The Corner That Held Them*, p. 32.
17 Warner, *The Corner That Held Them*, p. 175.
18 Warner, *The Corner That Held Them*, pp. 281–2.
19 Hardy, *Life's Little Ironies*, p. 38.
20 See Warner, *A Stranger with a Bag*, pp. 28–41 ('Johnnie Brewer') and Sylvia Townsend Warner, *A Spirit Rises* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962), pp. 107–16 ('Randolph').
21 Thomas Hardy, *Life's Little Ironies*, ed. Alan Manford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 7–32; Hardy transferred 'An Imaginative Woman' from *Wessex Tales* to *Life's Little Ironies* in the reissue of the collection in 1912, and it is not included in the 2023 Cambridge University Press edition of *Life's Little Ironies* in *The Cambridge Edition of the Novels and Stories of Thomas Hardy*.
22 Hardy, *Life's Little Ironies*, pp. 119–38.
23 Warner, *Selected Stories*, pp. 57–74.
24 Warner, *Selected Stories*, pp. 168–80 ('Absalom, my Son') and *A Spirit Rises*, pp. 190–202 ('During a Winter Night').
25 Warner, *A Spirit Rises*, p. 202.

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