

Caroline Sumpter, “On Suffering and Sympathy: *Jude the Obscure*, Evolution, and Ethics.” *Victorian Studies* 53.4 (2011): 665-687

Generations of literature and science scholars have recognised Thomas Hardy as a crucial intersection between Darwinian evolution and Victorian fiction. Much of their attention has focused on the puzzling discrepancy between the bleak Darwinian pessimism of Hardy’s novels of the 1880s and 1890s and his self-identification as an ‘evolutionary meliorist,’ a tension in his corpus which has yet to be conclusively resolved. However, in an astute and intelligent article, Caroline Sumpter has proposed an answer to this question involving what might initially appear to be that most un-Hardylike of concepts: sympathy. Concentrating on his controversial 1896 novel, *Jude the Obscure*, Sumpter resuscitates Hardy as a key contributor to debates surrounding the evolutionary significance of sympathy and social feeling. Exploring the tension between pessimism, progressivism and determinism in *Jude*, Sumpter argues that Hardy “offered a stronger defence of morality based on biological determinism than Darwin, but this determinism was linked to an unexpected evolutionary optimism” (665).

Identifying the presence of sympathy as a neglected locus of hope in *Jude*, Sumpter contends that Hardy’s oft-ignored evolutionary optimism, nurtured through his engagement with the ethical writings of his mentor, Leslie Stephens, grew increasingly vital in shaping his understanding of the author as an enlarger of “social sympathies,” (665) capable of championing ethical progress through aesthetic endeavour. Sumpter’s reading thus proposes *Jude* as a rebuttal to familiar knee-jerk assumptions of Hardy’s pessimism, instead asserting the novel’s sympathetic protagonists as harbingers of Hardy’s latterly professed evolutionary meliorism.

The crux of Sumpter’s article, her most valuable contribution to the field of literature and science, is to reassert alongside the established evolutionary triad of Darwin, Spencer and Huxley the importance of Leslie Stephens’s biological conception of sympathy to Hardy’s ethical beliefs. Analysing *Jude*’s famous ‘pig slaughter’ scene, Sumpter juxtaposes Arabella’s indifference to animal suffering against Jude’s sympathetic bond with the condemned swine, illustrating how it reflects Hardy’s belief in the shared continuum between human and animal emotion proposed by Darwin in the *Descent of Man* (1871), yet also his endorsement of Stephens’s more provocative assertion in *Darwinism and Divinity* (1872) that “morality might be an evolutionary or adaptive trait, rather than the product of reason or evidence of divine justice” (667-668).

Consequently, for Sumpter, it was “Hardy rather than Darwin who provided the stauncher defense of a morality based on biological determinism rather than rule-making” (672). In *Jude*, “Individuals are endowed from birth with variable levels of sympathy; such responses seem not to be made by choice, nor are they often pleasurable” (675). Indeed, Jude and Sue’s sympathetic disposition renders them as vulnerable as Arabella’s pigs. In concordance with Stephen’s philosophy, Jude’s excessive sympathy renders him “too good to live” (676): he is crushed by his inability to adapt to an indifferent Huxleyan nature, itself devoid of sympathy. Far from an adaptive advantage, in *Jude*, sympathy is seemingly “blind and irrational,” (679) an evolutionary disadvantage for the individual.

So far, sympathy is characterised pessimistically. Yet, in the second half of her article, Sumpter challenges this mordant interpretation of the sympathetic ‘instinct’ in

Jude. Quoting the psychologist Henry Maudsely, whose work Hardy consulted on the origins of self sacrifice, Sumpter argues that “intellectual and moral progress depended on the aberrant: the ‘Benefactors and at the same time martyrs of humanity’” (677). Given time, the meek might yet inherit the Earth. Exploring Hardy’s engagement with the positivist philosophy of Comte and Cotter Morison, Sumpter argues that if Hardy does not unreservedly endorse Comte’s arguments for the progressive evolution of human sympathies, his late novels “do not deny the slow evolution of the human sympathies” towards universal altruism and understanding (681). *Jude*’s protagonists are therefore avatars of a better human future, ripe with sympathy.

Significantly, Sumpter attributes Hardy’s newfound evolutionary optimism to his devotion to Leslie Stephens’s *Science and Ethics*, rather than Comte or Darwin. Indeed, Sumpter persuasively argues that Hardy imbibed Stephen’s moral philosophy to such a degree that he considered literary achievement as synonymous with sympathetic instinct, the author, in Stephen’s words, able to “advance or retard the moral development of the race” (qtd. in Sumpter 684). Hardy’s evolutionary meliorism thus exists in continuum with his pessimism, rather than as a distinct break. Yet *Jude*’s hostile reception convinced Hardy that, just like his titular protagonist, his moral sympathies were ahead of his time, shattering his faith in “fiction’s progressive capabilities” (684).

This is not a fate this well researched and genuinely innovative article should suffer. For recovering the influence of sympathy in Hardy’s work, and for asserting the impact of Stephen’s biological thought on his aesthetic development, Hardy scholars owe Caroline Sumpter a great deal of sympathy indeed. Yet Sumpter’s article also adds valuably to existing analyses of the Darwinian influence on Victorian ethical debates, rendering it essential reading for those interested in the reception of evolutionary science in this period. Cutting a path for others to follow, Sumpter’s original handling of Hardy will surely encourage further study on the importance of sympathy in post-Darwinian evolutionary discourse.

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