

Anna Henschman, 'Hardy's Stargazers and the Astronomy of Other Minds.' *Victorian Studies* 51:1 (2008): 37-64

Hardy scholars have long concerned themselves with the writer's themes of human desperation and isolation, those psychological states provoked and then exacerbated by a profound inability to understand and, in turn, to be understood by others. Hardy's characters frequently inhabit a physical landscape inadequate for optimal vision, imprisoned in a body and a mind incapable of empathy. Anna Henschman complicates the oft-invoked argument by examining this challenge of vision in relation to Hardy's complementary interest in the stars, the solar system, the universe, and beyond. She considers the late Victorian astronomical advancements that were shedding light on the mysterious cosmos, and notes the sea of celestial bodies and massive empty spaces that appear as frequent guests on the hills and heaths of Hardy's Dorset. Henschman successfully combines her study of "Hardy's preoccupation with our capacity to register the inner loves of others," with "his lifelong fascination with astronomy and the hundreds of references to celestial phenomena in his literary works," (38) enriching the dense tome of Hardy scholarship with a thoughtful consideration of the skies beyond the reach of humanity, and the interiority of the character's psyches that the heavens mirror in Hardy's writing.

Henschman begins by outlining the developments in astronomy that Hardy witnessed, claiming that Hardy "incorporating astronomy into his literary works," to an extent "second, perhaps, only to Tennyson" (39). Henschman considers Hardy's emphasis on "the emptiness of the universe," pointing out that this new knowledge of the cosmos astounded scores of interested stargazers, including Hardy himself (40). She notes how Hardy uses this new information in his novels to underscore the fallibility of human perception and examines the subsequent obstacle this places in terms of discerning another's reality. The senses can hardly be trusted if one keeps in mind the "perceptual challenges" that Hardy invokes and Henschman documents (42). She posits that this new information suggests the following conclusions:

First, at great distances, almost all the techniques we use to perceive relative distance break down...Second, without external indicators, we find it impossible to distinguish between our own motion and the motion of the object we are observing...[and] Finally, our vision is organized in such a way that the observer always appears to be at the center of things, with the rest of the world extending out from him or her (42-43).

Henschman suggests that it is this faulty perspective that allows Alec to rape Tess, while her fellow town-goers contemplate the depth of their shadows just steps away, ignoring Tess, resulting in her eventual murder of Alec and her subsequent hanging. These "deathly lapses of attention" also occur in *The Return of the Native* (1878), as inhabitants of Egdon Heath can "see across large distances" marveling at bonfires far away, while Hardy positions them as powerless to process the suffering of the figures beside them (45). The implications of optical illusions, evidenced when observing the outer universe, are pivotal to the plot structures of Hardy's novels.

Henschman's most valuable contribution to Hardy scholarship springs from her observation that:

While even the most ardent stargazer can only obtain a momentary perception of the stars, that inability is usually seen as an intellectual problem rather than a moral one. The inability to attend to another person, however, is often thought of as a moral failure. For Hardy, then the stars provide a morally neutral example of the perpetual reasons behind the fact that a person can take up one's entire universe one week and fade into irrelevance the next (49).

According to Henschman, stars not only "express the failure of one person to register another," but they provide an excuse for the behaviour. The limitations of humans are such that we cannot be held responsible for our ocular frailties, which traject into omissions of awareness and often culminate in actual moral transgressions. Still, we live in a world where egocentricity is not without consequence, and the state of "being unable to transcend [one's] own perceptual standpoint" necessarily carries "moral implications" (51). Henschman rightly discerns that "even as Hardy creates a moral divide between the narrator and the pedestrians, he lets us feel how persistent and vivid the pedestrians' impression of their own centrality is," (52) underscoring humanity's moral ambiguousness.

Henschman could have mentioned that Hardy's interest in psychological distance and the inability to connect with one's fellow humans evidenced itself most strongly within the author himself. J. Hillis Miller's landmark *Distance and Desire* (1970) brilliantly maps Hardy's own limitations as a man: he was so often hyperaware of the people around him, a keen observer of their experiences, and yet cold to the struggles of those closest to him. Hardy often processed and experienced emotional moments at his leisure, at a later time, as documented in his "Poems of 1912-13," written in response to his wife's death. Then, he expressed all of his pent up love, although during her life, her pain and their strained relations apparently left him cold. The emptiness of the cosmos echoed his own vacuity, as the brilliant streaks of light in the heavens mimicked his powerful awareness of existence, empathy, understanding – magnificent but fleeting. All of the capabilities and limitations of humankind marked Hardy's own experience.

Finally, Henschman sets out to prove that "by looking at the ways in which Hardy's characters oscillate back and forth between different types of knowledge in the contemplation of celestial objects, we can better understand the techniques he uses to wrest his readers out of their bodies and into mental journeys of their own" (39). Although a somewhat reductive claim, to her credit, Henschman resists simply making the assertion and linking it to stargazing. Instead, she extends her rich analysis of Hardy's authorial methods, providing proofs that suggest that "[Hardy's] narrative experiments illustrate the ways in which the imagination can move quickly between vastly different standpoints, inducing a kind of productive perplexity rather than epistemological breakdown" (61). This last assertion, which includes the reader in Hardy's cosmic consideration, distracts from the crucial preceding arguments of the article, but is still consistent with the clear, methodical approach employed in this important addition to Hardy studies.

Lisa Hoffman-Reyes
University of South Florida