

Sara Lyons. "Thomas Hardy and the Value of Brains." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 48. 2 (2020): 327-359.

While others have examined the subject of brains in Hardy's work, Sara Lyons is particularly interested in intelligence. Interestingly, Lyons focuses on intelligence as a biopolitical concern, building upon research into Victorian examination culture and intelligence as an innate quality by critics such as Gillian Sutherland and Simon Szreter. Jacques Rancière's theories on intellectual equality and the politics of the novel are also used as a lens through which to view *The Woodlanders* and *Jude the Obscure*. In this way, Lyons develops a brilliant argument to demonstrate that both novels are simultaneously complicit in and sceptical of the late-Victorian biopolitics of intelligence, but that ultimately Hardy annuls the distinction between elite and common minds (353).

While Lyons notes her indebtedness to Emily Steinlight, who previously read Hardy using Rancière's theories in "Hardy's Unnecessary Lives" (2014), Lyons' article explores the brain through this lens in a way that has not yet been attempted. Beginning with *The Woodlanders*, Lyons writes about Edred Fitzpiers, the gentleman scientist with an interest in craniometry, as a collector of interesting brains, reminding the reader that brains do hold real value in Hardy's novels. The two brains Fitzpiers "collects", Grammar Oliver's and Grace Melbury's, are unusual and therefore interesting to Fitzpiers because they do not appear to fit the theory, supported by anatomist Paul Broca, that the brains of women and the lower classes were naturally inferior. It has been argued, as Lyons points out, that craniometry was the direct precursor to intelligence testing (333), but Lyons highlights the fact that craniometry also associates Fitzpiers with anthropology and colonialism, as well as causing the villagers to view him as a sort of necromancer.

There is an ironic contrast, Lyons writes, between Grammar Oliver, the "superstitious rustic", and Fitzpiers, the scientist whose thinking is formed by metaphysics and who struggles to distinguish between reality and fantasy. The unseparated use of science and the supernatural in relation to Victorian studies of the mind has been previously acknowledged and that connection is certainly visible here. Phrenology is referred to as a form of fortune telling in *The Woodlanders* and Lyons points out that craniometry was sometimes seen as the new phrenology, taking on the challenge of explaining the connection between the mental and physical after phrenology had largely been rejected as a serious scientific subject. These subjects are presented as dubious, Lyons points out, as are the men who subscribe to them. The historical link between phrenology and craniometry has been discussed elsewhere and, although this is a relatively brief comparison by Lyons, it serves to position the novel's exploration of the brain in the larger context of scientific studies into the subject throughout the nineteenth century.

With the unreliability of the nineteenth-century science of the brain established, Lyons builds an excellent argument to demonstrate Hardy's rejection of class-based models of intelligence, which were supported by Galton's eugenics and Spencer's social Darwinism, in favour of a biological and evolutionary model, which is visible in the egalitarian politics of *The Woodlanders*. By comparing descriptions of Grace and Fitzpiers with those of Marty and Giles, the "rustic knowledge" of Little Hintock is revealed as the only knowledge worth having. It is the only knowledge which allows

characters to flourish and grow and this metaphorical connection between the trees and human growth is also wonderfully integrated by Lyons to conclude that Hardy represents intelligence in a way that evokes “a Romantic sense of the immeasurability of minds”.

In section two, which focuses on *Jude the Obscure*, Lyons highlights the issues with responses to Jude that focus on evaluating his mental qualities. She argues instead that Hardy actually contests the idea that the “natural abilities” of a working class boy like Jude are discoverable (346). Jude’s intelligence is of little importance in this argument in comparison to his view of education. Jude, Lyons argues, sees education as a magical transmutation and, in doing so, represents the ideology which enforces class inequality. Lyons agrees with Patricia Ingham’s argument that Jude can be read as a criticism of Samuel Smiles’ model of self-help, and that various social and psychological factors contribute to a system where no amount of individual striving could truly overcome existing systematic oppression. However, she also argues that Jude is the victim of a sense of fatalism surrounding contemporary discourses about hereditary intelligence, and that the novel actually captures a kind of cognitive dissonance that was created by the mid-Victorian model of self-help becoming entangled with the scientific determinism of the fin de siècle.

“Thomas Hardy and the Value of Brains” draws upon a number of subjects and theories surrounding the mind, with Lyons succinctly explaining and seamlessly weaving them into the overall argument. As a result the argument is thorough and convincing, adding brilliantly to existing scholarship on Hardy’s representation of the mind and brain.

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