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Notes and Documents: George Douglas Brown and Thomas Hardy

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Notes and Documents



George Douglas Brown boasted to his friends that "No one pictures the real Scottish village life...I will write a novel and tell you all what Scottish village life is like."¹ Brown, in satisfaction of that ambition, wrote *The House with the Green Shutters*, and when he is remembered, it is as the author of this grim little book. Recognizing the historical importance of the novel almost immediately, a contemporary reviewer commented, "For a thoroughly surprising book which breaks with every sentimental tradition of the British novel, we have no hesitation in recommending this book."² In Walter Raleigh's words, the novel stuck "the Kailyarders like pigs."³ Clearly, sticking the Kailyarders like pigs was Brown's motive in writing his vitriolic novel, a fact to which his personal letters attest.⁴

Although the novel's protagonist is John Gourlay the elder, Brown's strategy for debunking the Kailyarders' myth of Scotland is significantly bound up in the fate of John Gourlay the younger. Ian Campbell has made note of Brown's methods recently by observing that his "general attack on Scottish life" is not ameliorated by the appearance of a younger generation which will bring about the improvement not achieved by their elders. Campbell concludes that the younger generation in Brown's novel offers no "consolation," for they do not differ

markedly from their inadequate and petty elders.⁵ These are perceptive remarks, and a closer examination of the career of the younger John Gourlay substantiates Campbell's observations. At the same time, John's career also suggests several other major novels of the period, for the story of the two John Gourlays, father and son, may be the most extreme incarnation of the Oedipal struggle imaginable but that struggle itself is a familiar one to readers of novels of the later Victorian and Edwardian periods. Although George Meredith's *Feverels* and Samuel Butler's *Pontifex* are too civilized for such homicidal activities, they do experience the same sort of conflict and thus, in an important sense, young John's "coming of age" resembles the experiences of Richard Feverel and Ernest Pontifex. Thus Brown's novel displays important features of the *Bildungsroman* which traditionally depicts the formation of character by a maturing young man or woman.

However, an even more germane parallel might be drawn between young John and Thomas Hardy's *Jude Fawley*. Frank Giordano has called *Jude the Obscure* an "anti-*Bildungsroman*" in that it depicts the conflict of "an innocent young man against a dehumanizing society."⁶ Brown's story, however, goes well beyond Hardy's in its perversion of the typical pattern of the Victorian *Bildungsroman*. Hardy's concern with criticizing society's hypocrisy lies behind his writing of an "anti-*Bildungsroman*" since clearly *Jude* cannot achieve the sort of integration of self and society available to inhabitants of the earlier, more harmonious world depicted in the Victorian *Bildungsroman* (*David Copperfield* comes to mind as an example). Brown, who is also quite clearly criticizing an entire society, has similar reasons for writing an "anti-*Bildungsroman*," but his young man is not an innocent in the same way that *Jude* is--indeed, John is a booby, a boor, a lout--and his paternal character is not overbearing in the civilized, cultured manner that Meredith's Sir Austin Feverel and Butler's Theobald Pontifex are. What more effective way imaginable is there to demolish a mythical, and distorted, view of a society than to "pervert" the literary genre which has traditionally presented society in a positive light? The turbulent transition of the generations should eventually ebb to a soothing and even calm which keeps society flowing along like a river; in *The House with the Green Shutters* the turbulence never ebbs, the river remains a cascading rapid.

My use of metaphors of setting to describe the reasons Brown creates an "anti-*Bildungsroman*" is deliberate, for Brown himself uses setting in his novel as a primary means for explaining just why it is that John the younger comes to such a disastrous fate. The novel's central landmark, and in a sense

titular character, is carefully situated in a fully realized larger setting: Barbie, the scabrous little village in which the Gourlays reside. And, in turn, Barbie itself is carefully located by Brown in the context of what he terms in the novel "the careless world." These three aspects of setting--the House, Barbie, and the "careless world"--doom young John, who is particularly susceptible to their influences. John has no concrete opportunity to succeed in the world of Brown's novel because he is, figuratively if not always literally, a prisoner in a series of concentric prisons, none of them of his own making. Brown uses these settings to create just the sort of hate-filled environment which will lend the proper air of inevitability to the bloody resolution of the Gourlays' generational conflict.

The House itself is overtly hostile to young John, its inhospitality symbolized by its lack of a warm hearth. It is not happenstance that the color of Gourlay's shutters is green, for the house is obviously an attempt to build a monument to pride which will provoke the envy of all of Barbie. But the house is merely the innermost of the cold and dehumanizing settings which encircle John and in which he must make his way in life. The town of Barbie is equally devoid of human warmth; the very walls of the houses even reproach young John at one point. The unhealthy relationships between Gourlay and the bodies, between the almost sentient House and town, are not likely to provide a firm foundation upon which young John can build a successful life for himself.

To further obstruct John's progress through life, Brown depicts the town of Barbie as a part of "the careless world." As the shadows of their domestic disaster begin to darken their lives, the Gourlays can hear the sound of a concertina being played in the town square. "That sound of the careless world came strangely in upon their lonely tragedy,"⁷ writes Brown. "The careless world" here appears to be an epithet for Barbie, but when John returns from the university, Brown notes that he passes "from the careless world where he was nobody at all, to the familiar circle where he was a somebody, a mentioned man..." (p. 499). One is compelled to read this same epithet, then, as a reference not only to Barbie but at times to something larger than Barbie, perhaps to Scotland itself. The larger society of which all Barbie's inhabitants are a part is clearly "careless" or indifferent to the problems of one family in a decaying burgh. Yet, eventually, even this enlarged view of the careless world seems limiting. It does not seem unreasonable to read "the careless world" literally to mean the entire world, or perhaps figuratively even the universe itself, as being oblivious to the Gourlays and their tragedy.

The indifference of the universe is nowhere more apparent than in the final pages of the novel when, after John, his mother, and his sister lie dead at their own hands, the House remains "gawcey and substantial on its terrace, beneath the tremulous beauty of the dawn. There was a glorious sunrise" (p. 570). The final lines of the book reiterate this ironic contrast: the House sits "dark...and terrible, beneath the radiant arch of the dawn" (p. 571). But, as with a Thomas Hardy novel, the world is not truly careless or indifferent, for if it were, then chance itself would decree that an occasional favor be bestowed upon man. Such is not the case here. When the irony of a universe smiling while man suffers is not present, then the universe does not smile at all. Thus spring, the traditional season of rebirth, is "enervating" (p. 518) and "treacherous" (p. 521), and storms fit for Judgment Day itself crash in the skies on the day of John's birth.

To compound John's troubles, he is peculiarly sensitive to his environment. His professor comments on John's writing that it "displays, indeed, too nervous a sense of the external world" (p. 498). This observation is the key to understanding John's character: he is too much affected by and too susceptible to the influences of the world around him. Always sensitive in this manner even as a child, John articulates rather haltingly at a university dinner how the capacity to create metaphor originates, an explanation which also explains how his too nervous sense of the external world operates. He says metaphor comes "from a power of seeing things vividly inside your mind" (p. 490). Although this very quality of John's proves to be the fatal flaw in his character, it nevertheless serves to distinguish him from his father, who is totally devoid of any sensitivity. Brown says of the son that "in his crude clay there was a vein of poetry" (p. 510), and so there is. This crude aesthetic sense is not unfamiliar in the protagonist of a *Bildungsroman* and is not out of place here in the protagonist of an "anti-*Bildungsroman*." It is John himself though who is "out of place," for clearly such an aesthetic sensibility, rudimentary as it may be, cannot thrive in the environment depicted in the novel.

Ill-equipped for success as he is, John nevertheless must stumble along the path trod by all *Bildungsroman* protagonists toward maturity and adulthood. When he is overwhelmed by his perceptions of a threatening world, a not infrequent occurrence in the brutal environment he inhabits, John understandably seeks escape. In fact, the impulse to flee is with him from his earliest years when, as a boy, he routinely seeks refuge from the world in the attic of the House with the Green Shutters (much like George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver in the attic of Dorlcote Mill). Brown rhapsodizes about the garret

hiding-place of young John, calling it "the true kingdom of the poet" (p. 427), but John is so hypersensitive that he soon feels threatened even in his hideaway. A pattern of unsuccessful escapes develops throughout the novel as John tries reading, the train depot, the Howff, and alcohol as methods of obtaining release from his fears of the hostile universe. None succeeds.

At root John is trying to escape from the careless world itself, patently an impossibility. The perplexities of such a flight are represented by the image of the labyrinth by John's professor during a lecture on the nature of life. After sketching the typical and understandable fears of the vast, remote, cold universe experienced by an unformed mind, Auld Tam suggests that it is the lack of thought which makes the universe appear so incomprehensible and terrifying. "But the labyrinth...the labyrinth cannot appal the man who has found a clue to its windings. A mind that has attained to thought lives in itself, and the world becomes its slave" (p. 494). John, whose mind never progresses to the level of thought mentioned by Auld Tam, remains the world's slave. It is quite easy to imagine John as lost in a labyrinth: he tends to react to the unknown passages before him by backing down familiar dead end corridors behind him. So terrified is he at one point at the idea of leaving for the unknown Edinburgh, that he actually takes solace in being in dismal, vindictive Barbie because it is at least familiar and thus comforting.

Thus the entire pattern of the *Bildungsroman* is perverted: the young man is thrust from the nest by the father quite against his own wishes rather than striving to leave on his own. In fact John's career consists primarily of attempts to return to the family home. To Jerome Buckley, the protagonist of the *Bildungsroman*, his "initiation complete," may return to visit his old home to "demonstrate by his presence the degree of his success or the wisdom of his choice" to leave home for the larger world.⁶ Brown's young man, however, returns only in failure, slinking back to the cold home that he so pitifully views as his only "anchorage" (p. 474).

John never does reach full maturity, he never finds a real sense of identity, he never establishes a place in the world. How can he when the only home he knows becomes little more than a haunted house to him only to pass on subsequently to the bankers, no longer belonging to the Gourlays at all? With the House gone, there is no "anchorage" left for John who thus finds a final--and at last successful--escape from the world he cannot tolerate by committing suicide. Brown views this "doom" as "implicit" in John's character. He wrote to one of his readers: "if there is an inevitable law on earth it is the old Greek law which means that we must all bear the conse-

quences of our own action or want of action!"⁹

The most cogent criticism of the novel is directed at the idea behind this disingenuous remark. W. Somerset Maugham complains that Brown has "loaded the dice against the persons of his invention even when, by their own fault, catastrophe has befallen them."¹⁰ Maugham, I believe, is right; Brown has sought to improve upon the "old Greek law" by making certain that the Gourlays come to disaster. Brown's antipathy toward the Kailyarders provides the motivation for such loading of the dice. Ian Crichton Smith's query "who can yet survive as a human being in such an environment?"¹¹ is quite apposite. The world in which John must move, as we have seen, is one too harsh for him to be able to adapt to. His flaw, his "sensory perceptiveness in gross excess of his intellectuality" (p. 481), is just the weakness to guarantee his failure. Buffeted by the House with the Green Shutters, Barbie, the careless world itself, John never has a chance in life, and this lack of opportunity mars the realistic qualities of the novel.

But then can we be sure that Brown's ambition is to create a realistic picture of the Scottish village? If the Kailyarders err on the lighter side, then Brown, it cannot be denied, errs on the darker. However, since he offers his novel as a corrective to that rosy-tinted view of the Kailyarders, it is understandable that he has swung the pendulum so far in the opposite direction if only as a matter of balance. His bleak depiction of Scottish village life deliberately offers no consolation: at the close of the novel the family is destroyed, the new generation--the hope of the future--is dead. But throughout the novel in his use of setting Brown has established that he is determined that such will be the inevitable ends of his story, that youth will not be served, that no act of *Bildung* is possible in the world he depicts. There is no place for an artist, a person of any sensitivity, in the brutal Scotland of Brown's novel. The House, once a monument to human pride, survives, now a mausoleum to vanity; Barbie also survives, home to a group of "human pismires" (p. 479); finally the careless world too remains, still utterly indifferent to those pismires. And that is all Brown wants us to see as remaining. If youth cannot rise up and take its rightful place in society, if art cannot flourish even in its most rudimentary form, then society cannot help but stagnate. Such a society can hardly be deemed anything other than sterile. The "anti-*Bildungsroman*" motif of *The House with the Green Shutters* is intended to make such harsh points about Scottish society--that the novel not only makes these points but pounds them home is undeniable. Although the sun may make a radiant arch over the House with the Green Shutters, there

is, clearly, no glorious new dawn for Brown's Scotland.

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NOTES

¹James Veitch, *George Douglas Brown* (London, 1952), p. 57.

²Veitch, p. 151.

³W. Somerset Maugham, Introd., *The House with the Green Shutters* (London, 1938), p. vii.

⁴Veitch, p. 153.

⁵Ian Campbell, "George Douglas Brown: A Study in Objectivity," in *Nineteenth-Century Scottish Fiction: Critical Essays*, ed. Ian Campbell (New York, 1979), pp. 154-5.

⁶Frank R. Giordano, "Jude the Obscure and the Bildungsroman," *Studies in the Novel*, 41 (1972), p. 587.

⁷George Douglas Brown, *The House with the Green Shutters* in *Minor Classics of Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, ed. William E. Buckler (Boston, 1967), II, 554. All further references will appear in the text of my paper.

⁸Jerome Buckley, *Season of Youth* (Cambridge, 1974), p. 18.

⁹Veitch, p. 158.

¹⁰Maugham, p. xi.

¹¹Ian Crichton Smith, "The House with the Green Shutters," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 7 (1969), p. 6.