

Killing the Letter: Alternate Literacies and Orthographic Distortions in *Jude the Obscure*

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ABSTRACT

When *Jude the Obscure* (1895) was published as a single volume novel, Hardy added the biblical epithet ‘the letter killeth’ to the title page. In *Jude* and across his works, Hardy revels in moments in which literacy seems to undo itself. This article traces Hardy’s attempts to ‘kill the letter’ through non-standard engagements with orthography as part of a larger proto-modernist approach that destabilizes the fixity of meaning. There are several concerns linked to the growing primacy of literacy that appear time and again in Hardy’s novels, specifically: the alternative literacies of the lesser educated, semiotic multiplicities, and the transformative potential of spelling mistakes. I suggest that Hardy’s treatment of these themes demonstrates a sustained effort to ‘kill the letter’ and challenge the assumption of progress made by the various educational reforms that had taken place in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

KEYWORDS: literacy, spelling mistakes, Thomas Hardy, education reform, class, illiteracy

Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life¹

The biblical epithet, ‘the letter killeth’, that accompanies the title page of Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1895) is taken from the above verse of the Second Letter of St Paul to the Corinthians. In this verse St Paul draws an antagonistic opposition between letter and spirit in relation to sharing the New Testament: the implication is that the importance of the written text lies in the message conveyed – the reception of the Holy Spirit – as opposed to the material, printed word on the page. In the preceding verses, Paul undermines material text as he declares that Christ’s epistle is ‘written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.’² The epigraph was added as Hardy prepared the proofs from the serial version of the novel that was published in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* (December 1894–November 1895) for the first book edition that was published by Osgood, McIlvaine and Company in November 1895. It is commonly understood to be a wry proverbial nod to the fate of the novel’s eponymous protagonist, Jude, as his autodidacticism has served only to alienate him from his peers and been the source of great frustration and tragedy. Other readings have cast the epigraph as an indictment of the letter of the law and, in particular, marital law.³ In this article, however, I argue in favour of a more literal reading.

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¹ King James (Authorised) Version, 2 Corinthians 3:6.

² In its original context, the verse condemns ritual and slavish obedience to the letter of law of the Old Testament, but advocates for the spiritual interpretation of the New Testament. *KJV*, 2 Corinthians 3.

³ Dennis Taylor, ‘Introduction’ in Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. xvii. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

Across his works, Hardy revels in moments in which literacy seems to undo itself. This article traces Hardy's attempts to 'kill the letter' through non-standard engagements with orthography as part of a larger proto-modernist approach that destabilizes the fixity of meaning. Proto-modernism anticipates tropes that became common features of the modernist movement in the early twentieth century, in particular modernism's social scepticism and its heightened experimentation with form.⁴ Hardy's depictions of low-level literacy and the tensions created by educational difference in the latter decades of the nineteenth century seem to anticipate the more overt forms of textual experimentation that would come to characterize the modernist tradition. There are several concerns linked to the growing primacy of literacy in contemporary society that appear time and again in Hardy's novels, specifically: the alternative literacies of the lesser educated, variable semiotic understandings, and the transformative potential of spelling mistakes. I suggest that Hardy's treatment of these themes demonstrates a sustained effort to 'kill the letter' and disrupt the assumption of progress that had accompanied the various educational reforms that had taken place in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Engagement with non-standard literacies and orthographic variations have tended to be underexplored in Victorian Studies in comparison to the body of scholarship on formal experimentation in modernism and later literatures. Arguably, the nineteenth-century discourses on educational progress and the seeming commonality of illiteracy have distracted scholars from some of the subtle, complex interplays with non-standard literacies that feature in many canonical texts.

Reading literally, 'the letter killeth' becomes a comment on literacy and a condemnation of the supposed value of the limited forms of education offered to the poor. By returning the epithet to its biblical context, tensions between spiritual knowledge (in this case, knowledge of Christ) and written text emerge. There is a viscerality to knowing Christ in these verses: the evocative image of the 'fleshy tables of the heart' emphasizes the vitality of a 'living', embodied understanding of the Word thereby deadening the representation of written text as it appears in 'ink' or 'stone'. The implication of this for *Jude the Obscure* is the suggestion that it is better not to wish for a formalized education that 'killeth'. To use another Biblical aphorism, in Hardy 'with much wisdom is much sorrow; as knowledge increases, grief increases' as his rural characters tend to suffer once they are formally educated.⁵

1. EDUCATION REFORM FOR EVERYONE?

Jude the Obscure, as Johnathan Godshaw Memel explains, has featured as a divisive cultural reference point in debates about university access from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.⁶ The centrality of educational discourses in the novel gestures to a persistent pre-occupation with the institutionalization of elementary education and its wider effects on rural and impoverished communities, as represented by the fictional region of Wessex. Educational reform was a central social and political issue during the period that Hardy was writing his novels and the preceding decades. The Newcastle Commission of 1861 had investigated the state of public education in Britain and found that the provisions for elementary education were inadequate.⁷ The commission recommended that a grant be given

⁴ Greg Sevik, 'Protomodernism and Rhyme: Dickinson and Hopkins', *Style*, 54 (2020), 223–40 (p. 225).

⁵ *KJV*, Ecclesiastes 1:18.

⁶ Johnathan Memel, 'Making the University less Exclusive', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 10 (2017), 64–82 (p. 65).

⁷ *The Royal Commission on the State of Popular Education in England* [Newcastle Commission], *Parliamentary Papers*, 1861, XXI, pp. 293–328; in *English Historical Documents, XII(1), 1833–1874*, ed. by G. M. Young and W. D. Hancock (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 891–97.

‘to promote the education of the children belonging to the classes who support themselves by manual labour.’⁸ However, the emphasis of the report, as Ivor Morrish observes, was that this necessary education had to be ‘cheap’ which ‘posed certain limits which stultified any imaginative or even realistic thinking about the necessity and extent of education for all classes of society.’⁹ On the surface, the task of extending education to the lowest classes may have seemed progressive, but the central tenets of the project were still haunted by the legacy of the Benthamite, utilitarian notion that the role of education should be for ‘the poor to work intelligently and the middle-classes to govern intelligently.’¹⁰ In that respect, the education given to a certain class had to maintain their position in the social hierarchy and preclude any chance of widespread advancement.

In terms of access to education, the succeeding 1870 Education Act is generally regarded as the most significant act of its kind. The Liberal MP, William Forster, introduced his bill with the following rhetoric: ‘What is the purpose of this Bill? Briefly this: to bring elementary education within the reach of any English home, age, and within the reach of those children who have no homes.’¹¹ The passing of this bill established local education authorities with the aim of providing universal access to elementary education. That said, there were many regions where the passing of the act did not provide significant changes to their existing educational provisions, but for those regions that were more deprived, the act has been framed as a means of ‘mopping up’ and ensuring that there was parity in elementary educational provision.¹² Dorset, Hardy’s home-county and the inspiration for the fictional Wessex of his novels, was one of the most depressed regions of England in the 1870s; the county had both the lowest wages in the country and the highest levels of pauperism.¹³ As such, ‘national measures for improvement [were] taking time to reach Dorset’ and there was a marked disparity between the general level of educational attainment in Dorset and that of the more affluent regions.¹⁴ The earlier Revised Code of 1862 had established the ‘payment-by-results’ system of deciding school funding by the attainment levels of the students; this practice continued until 1897 and meant that there was immense pressure for regional schools to deliver results in line with national standards.

Tensions created by educational difference saturate Hardy’s novels.¹⁵ He frequently undermines the standards of elementary, working-class education that were championed by contemporary educational reform movements. His focus, however, is not on what is being taught; instead, he challenges the effects of the limiting mode of pedagogy that was promoted by the reform agenda. Hardy challenges the homogenizing effects of these agendas by casting doubt on the status of the written word in his novels – essentially, ‘killing the letter’. Jonathan Memel argues that on the one hand, Hardy was implicated in the educational system as he served as

⁸ *Royal Commission*, pp. 293–328.

⁹ Ivor Morrish, *Education Since 1800* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970), p. 16.

¹⁰ John Lawson and Harold Silver, *A Social History of Education in England* (London: Methuen, 1976), p. 231.

¹¹ Morrish, *Education*, p. 19.

¹² Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800–1900* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press), p. 172.

¹³ Phillip Collins, ‘Hardy and Education’, in *Thomas Hardy: The Writer and his Background*, ed. by Norman Page (London: Bell and Hyman, 1980), pp. 41–75 (p. 53).

¹⁴ Collins, ‘Hardy and Education’, p. 53.

¹⁵ The pairing of characters who represent the educated and uneducated factions of Wessex society is a common trope. For example: Michael Henchard and Donald Farfrae in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), Grace Melbury and Marty South in *The Woodlanders* (1887), and, in *Jude the Obscure*, Sue Bridehead and Arabella Donn.

an honorary school inspector, but, on the other hand, 'he expressed discomfort with the idea that literary writing overlapped with the operations of the state . . . Hardy maintained that the purpose of his writing was to challenge rather than support the more conservative actions of the state'.¹⁶ Indeed, the pressures of the reform agenda could constrain elementary learners as well as – or in extreme cases, rather than – broadening horizons; Hardy's novels treat this legislated mode of academic accomplishment with marked cynicism.

2. MISREADINGS AND ALTERNATE LITERACIES

Exceptional characters in Hardy have often mastered alternative literacies to those that we associate with educational reform. Rather than responding with learned systemic behaviours such characters can use these alternative literacies to interpret the signs of their immediate environment and to respond accordingly. In *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874), Gabriel Oak is outstanding not because he is a literate rustic, but because he is able to read the signs in nature to predict foul weather and to 'tell the time as well by the stars as we can by the sun and moon'.¹⁷ Similarly, Marty South and Giles Winterbourne of *The Woodlanders* (1887) exhibit an 'intelligent intercourse with Nature'; they are 'able to read its hieroglyphs as ordinary writing' and to collect 'those remoter signs and symbols which seen in few were of runic obscurity, but all together made an alphabet'.¹⁸ The conspicuous use of words and phrases associated with literacy suggests that proficiency with the written word ought not to be considered the sole marker of intelligence. Educational difference is a constant source of tension in Hardy's novels, and it is frequently the educated party who fails to meet the standards of the wider community. On one level, this tendency reverses the classist maxim that assumes that education grants the individual superior understanding. Additionally, this trope complicates how meaning itself is constructed within the world of the novels.

Jude the Obscure is full of moments where different characters read the same signifier in different or, even, oppositional ways according to their educational background. Often, the reading of the specific signifier by the educated subject is not the dominant reading understood by the community of the novel. This strategy of semiotic ambiguity is a feature of the novel's proto-modernist experimentation that destabilizes the fixity of meaning and demonstrates the subjective nature of understanding. It is important to emphasize that, by this schema, there are no misreadings, but a multitude of readings. By extension, as I discuss below, a spelling mistake is never merely a mistake, but a textual feature that demands an alternative reading. Early in the novel, Hardy seems to mock those that look for singularity of meaning. Prior to receiving the Latin and Greek grammars from Physician Vilbert, Jude reasons that 'the grammar of the required tongue would contain, primarily, a rule, prescription, or clue of the nature of a secret cipher, which once known, would enable him, by merely applying it, to change at will all words of his own speech into those of a foreign one'.¹⁹ He is despondent once he discovers that there is 'no law of transmutation' (p. 30); this childish rationale is analogous to the assumption that there is one singular method of decoding signifiers and that one should be prepared for variable modes of reading and interpretation.

¹⁶ Jonathan Memel, 'Writers in Residence: Women Teachers and the Formation of Character in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, in press (2021), n.p.

¹⁷ Thomas Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 109.

¹⁸ Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 297.

¹⁹ Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 30.

Contrary to the young Jude's original approach to education, one of the starkest examples of semiotic plurality occurs in the scene where Arabella Donn throws a pig's penis at him, an act which reveals the discrepancy in the characters' sexual literacy. Prior to the appendage landing on his jaw, Jude is too captivated by his mental calculations of what his next course of study should be to reach Christminster to notice that he has been addressed as 'Hoity-toity' (p. 37) twice by Arabella and her pig-farming peers. He muses that only in Christminster 'I shall so advance, with the assistance I shall there get, that my present knowledge will appear to me but as childish ignorance' (p. 37). He is utterly focused on his education and thus does not notice the women. When he is struck with the 'piece of flesh' (p. 38), however, he turns his attention to Arabella in particular 'almost certain that to her was attributable the enterprise of throwing the lump of offal at him' (p. 39). In the 1903 and 1912 editions, this line is revised to 'attracting his attention from his dreams of the humaner letters to what was simmering in the minds around him', a change that emphasizes the respective differences in focus.²⁰ Jude has some awareness of the sexual drives of the women, but his expression is coy and steeped in learned allusions, observing 'with his intellectual eye' (p. 42) that 'it had been no vestal who chose *that* missile' (pp. 42–43). There is further evidence to suggest a disparity in how the two characters interpret the encounter. As Arabella prepares to cross the bridge 'she gave, without Jude perceiving it, an adroit little suck to the interior of each of her cheeks, by which curious and original manoeuvre she brought as by magic upon its smooth and rotund surface a perfect dimple' (p. 39). This 'curious' ability indicates that she is very aware of how to make herself appear pleasing; the reference to sucking before receiving the appendage from Jude also implies that she has sexual knowledge. The fact that this occurs 'without Jude perceiving it' emphasizes his practical sexual ignorance. This innocence is detected by one of the women, who comments: 'he's as simple as a child. I could see it as you courted on the bridge, wi' that piece o' the pig hanging between ye – haw-haw!' (p. 42). The conspicuous echo of Jude's earlier reference to his 'childish ignorance' indicates that these lesser-educated women can see his limitations where he cannot. The varied levels of reading that occur during this scene implies that the semiotic act is highly subjective, a mutability that functions even at the level of the individual letter.

3. REAPPRAISING THE SPELLING MISTAKE

For those who have been formally educated, communicating via the written word is dependent on a singular and shared understanding of the semiotic significance of each letter and the expectation that words will adhere to a pre-determined standard of orthography. As such, the spelling error is a further evolution of this wider 'letter killing' trope in *Jude the Obscure* and other major works of Hardy, where orthographic errors function as a direct challenge to the authority of written text. By framing constructions of letters, and misspellings, as not merely textual aberrations, but as reworkings of traditional literacy that serve the subject and communicate their specific meaning, letters and standards of orthography are thus rendered subjective, as these supposed misspellings act as loci of resistance to the oppressive social agenda of education reform.

An important example of this trend comes from a seemingly innocuous paragraph that introduces Henry Fray, one of the rustics drinking in Warren's Malthouse, in *Far From the Madding Crowd*.²¹ While several rustics are introduced to Gabriel Oak in this scene, the

²⁰ Taylor, 'Introduction', p. 414.

²¹ Positioning this paragraph within these anecdotal descriptors parallels the marginalization of the uneducated within written text; ironically, the marginality of this paragraph adds to the resistance which comes from distorting the written word.

descriptions that accompany each of them tend to be anecdotal and jovial; for example: Joseph Poorgrass is known for blushing, and his poor luck, and Jan Coggan ‘appeared on the marriage register of Weatherbury and neighbouring parishes as best man and chief witness in countless unions’ (p. 59). The description of Henry Fray is similarly jocular in tone, but it features an assault on institutional standards of literacy. This detail is somewhat jarring as it appears within an innocuous pub scene that is otherwise fuelled by anecdote and cider. We are told by the narrator that ‘Henry’ (p. 59):

[A]lways signed his name ‘Henery’ – strenuously insisting upon that spelling; and if any passing schoolmaster ventured to remark that the second ‘e’ was superfluous and old-fashioned, he received the reply that ‘H-e-n-e-r-y’ was the name he was christened and the name he would stick to – in the tone of one to whom orthographical differences were matters which had a great deal to do with personal character (p. 59)

One can assume that Henry was indeed christened ‘Henery’ due to the pronunciation of his name in regional dialect. This literal observation allows him to triumph intellectually over an imagined schoolmaster, who represents the standards of educational reform. To be ‘old-fashioned’ in relation to spelling within this educational *zeitgeist* is to reject the transition from orality to literacy. By prioritizing the spelling that reflects local pronunciation over that which conforms to written regulations, Henry champions the oral and its associations with his class and educational status. Where the written form of his name renders him identifiable and, by extension, definable to the literate, his distortion of its spelling allows Henry to defend his own subjectivity. The fact that this is achieved through the addition of a letter, as opposed to substitution or loss, demonstrates that he is attempting to gain independence from one of the key mechanisms of the educational reform agenda: the standardization of language. In this case, ‘orthographical differences were matters which had a great deal to do with personal character’ and, respecting this, the narrator refers to Henry Fray by ‘Henery’ thereafter.

Orthographic distortion is a characteristic of the lesser educated and is used in *Far From the Madding Crowd* to separate the mass of rustics that reside in the background of Hardy’s novel from the intelligent (read: deserving) poor. When Gabriel Oak meets with some of his lesser-educated rustic peers they observe that Oak is ‘a [sic] extraordinary good and clever man’ (p. 109). Matthew Moon quantifies Oak’s intelligence by discussing his proficiency in several tasks, including his ability to ‘prent folks’ names upon their waggons almost like copperplate, with beautiful flourishes, and great long tails’ (p. 110); this prowess is compared to his contemporary, Joseph Poorgrass, who had previously labelled the waggons, but would confuse the letters ‘J’ and ‘E’ and write them backwards. This short scene serves several functions. Firstly, it provides some comic relief through the rustics’ reverence for Oak’s ability to perform relatively banal tasks; it emphasizes the difference in skills between Oak and those of the same social class. This differentiation between protagonist and rustic population is a common motif throughout Hardy’s novels, as Rosemary Jann argues: the ‘characteristic behaviours [of Hardy’s rustics] help to define by contrast the kinds of subjectivity that justify the higher social positions of more central characters.’²² Secondly, the rustics are not commenting on Oak’s ability to write coherently or to express his thoughts legibly, but rather the

²² Rosemary Jann, ‘Hardy’s Rustics and the Construction of Class’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 28 (2000), 411–25 (p. 411).

thing that impresses his peers is the form of the written characters. This focus on the ‘beautiful flourishes and great long tails’ indicates that letters carry meaning for these men with demonstrably low levels of literacy, but that the meaning is not determined principally by their ability to decipher written text. This perspective shifts the onus from decoding the letter to construct meaning, a process accessed only via literacy, to an interpretative observation of aesthetics that does not require prior knowledge of the letter. This operation does not kill the letter per se – the rustics are still using the letters to perform an act of reading – but they see the beauty of the letter over its normative function.

The lettering is another example of the proto-modernist leanings within Hardy as the text legitimizes two seemingly oppositional modes of reading: the aesthetic appreciation of the uneducated rustics and the literacy of the landowner. The task of labelling the waggons invites a comparison between Gabriel Oak and Joseph Poorgrass, the rustic formerly charged with this duty. Poorgrass himself, as Jane Mattisson argues, is one of the ‘most representative of the rustic labourers’ as even his surname ‘suggests a down-to-earthness which is linked with poverty – a poverty which is not only financial but also social.’²³ His poverty – in both senses – is what makes his misspelling unforgivable in the eyes of his master. The act of labelling property asserts the owner’s status as their name indicates ownership, wealth, and status, but, when the landowner’s name is written with the ‘J’ and the ‘E’ facing backwards, the name loses its prestige and becomes an object of ridicule for those able to recognize the error. In these terms, this typographical error is an unintentional act of class-based aggression; ‘Farmer James would cuss, and call thee [Joseph] a fool’ (p. 110) as his higher social status has been undermined by the simple transformation of the letters of his name. In this instance, letters do not kill, but when standards of literacy are expected, they are a source of conflict.

In Hardy, spelling mistakes carry semiotic significance; most often, these misspellings imbue the word with wry humour and an ironic position on either the failings of an individual character, or their relationship with the dominant ideologies of their contemporary society. When Kevin McLaughlin argues that the subtitle of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) refers to a ‘man of character’, he employs the double meaning of ‘character’ to accentuate the role of the written word in the novel.²⁴ He argues that, while character in terms of morality is central, the fact that ‘character’ also refers to a written character emphasizes the shift from oral to literate culture that the two mayors of Casterbridge, Michael Henchard and Donlad Farfrae respectively, represent.²⁵ Even in death, Henchard is unable to master text. His will is full of spelling mistakes as he instructs ‘that no flours be planted on [his] grave.’²⁶ In this case, the spelling mistake is indicative of the limitations of Henchard’s life experience in that his understanding was of traditional rural industries – of grain and flour and little else. Relatedly, the catalytic narrative event of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Henchard’s drunken decision to auction his wife, takes place in a furmity tent that is advertised by a sign that reads ‘Good Furmity Sold Hear’ (p. 8). Essentially, the narrative hinges upon the Henchards’ decision to visit the tent on a promise made by a spelling mistake. The substitution of the homophone ‘hear for ‘here’ transforms the advertisement into the prophetic pronouncement ‘Good Furmity Sold Her’ when read in Wessex dialect, the effect of which is to proclaim quite literally that the ‘Good

²³ Jane Mattisson, *Knowledge and Survival in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (Lund: Lund Studies in English, 2000), p. 214.

²⁴ Kevin McLaughlin, *Paperwork: Fiction and Mass Mediacy in the Paper Age* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), p. 107.

²⁵ McLaughlin, *Paperwork*, p. 107

²⁶ Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 309.

Furnity' is to blame for the sale of Susan Henchard. Throughout the novel, Henchard's lack of proficiency with the written word means that he gradually becomes redundant as the community embraces educated modernity. Unlike many of Hardy's major works, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is unequivocally strong in its championing of literacy; the novel demonstrates that those without certain standards of education in an increasingly literate society will be, quite literally, put to rest.

The most notorious example of misspelling in Thomas Hardy appears in Little Father Time's suicide note in *Jude the Obscure*. The scene in which Sue and Jude find the bodies of their children accompanied by the note: '[d]one because we are too menny' (p. 336), was one of several scenes in the novel that appalled contemporary reviewers, as Hardy's autobiography, *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy 1892–1928*, elaborates:

The onslaught upon Jude started by the vituperative section of the press unequalled in violence since the publication of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* thirty years before was taken up by the anonymous writers of libellous letters and postcards, and other such gentry. It spread to America and Australia, whence among other appreciations he received a letter containing a packet of ashes, which the virtuous writer stated to be those of his iniquitous novel.²⁷

The murder/suicide scene continues to fascinate and frustrate critics with its implausible melodrama. For example, George Levine describes the Little Father Time episode as 'the wrong kind of Hardy'; he argues that:

There is something tendentious and merely philosophical in the extravagant excess of it all. It is the most famous example of the way Hardy's plots often strain, with whatever devices he can seize upon, toward the fulfilment of a preplanned disaster.²⁸

While it could be argued that the 'Little Father Time' episode is merely a sloppy example of one of the 'preplanned disaster[s]' that Levine identifies in many of Hardy's more formulaic novels, its importance with regard to the 'letter killeth' epithet cannot be overstated, as the implications of the note are cataclysmic.

Little Father Time is representative of the overarching fatalism that haunts *Jude the Obscure*. He is presented as an uncanny figure of prophecy; he is 'Age masquerading as Juvenility' (p. 276), 'an enslaved and dwarfed Divinity, sitting passive and regarding his companions as if he saw their whole rounded lives rather than their immediate figures' (p. 276), and he has a face 'like the tragic mask of Melpomene [Muse of Tragedy]' (p. 280). It is suggested that Little Father Time can foresee the coming tragedy of the novel, despite his limited, childish grasp of his immediate circumstances; this foresight functions in opposition to the blind determination of both Jude and Sue who continue to pursue their futile ambitions of accessing the university (in Jude's case) and continuing their relationship. Indeed, Jude places his hope in Little Father Time attending Christminster in the false hope that 'They are making it easier for poor

²⁷ Florence Emily Hardy, *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy 1892–1928* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1930), p. 39, <<https://archive.org/details/lateryearsofthom009186mbp/page/n8>> [accessed 12 March 2019]. Although the biography is published under the name of his second wife, it is commonly accepted that it was written by Hardy himself.

²⁸ George Levine, *Reading Thomas Hardy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. xiv.

students now' (p. 278). However, upon arriving at Christminster, Little Father Time makes two perceptive observations that supposedly come from his youthful ignorance: he likens the university Remembrance Day to 'Judgement Day' (p. 324) and he asks if 'the great old houses [are] gaols?' (p. 330). Ironically, these comments ring true for his father, as a prisoner of his idealization of university education, an idea that will bring about his doom. In functioning as a prophetic character, Little Father Time carries much of Hardy's nihilism as to whether or not social reform, including educational reform, could improve the lives of the labouring classes. He is bleakly literal: 'he followed his directions literally, without an inquiring gaze at anything' (p. 278). This literalism frequently functions as a discordant reminder of grim social reality and mortality against the ambitions of his parents. For example, when asked his name by Sue, he replies that he was not christened 'because, if I died in damnation, t'would save the expense of a Christian funeral' (p. 280), foreshadowing his eventual burial in a common grave. While his logic and pragmatism cannot be faulted, his response is utterly disarming as it circumvents the expectations of a formal introduction to a child.

Little Father Time's literalism is a defining feature of his short appearance in the novel. Even in death, as Jen Baker observes, he is relentlessly literal: 'having to hang himself from a nail as there were only two hooks on the back of the door, reinforc[es] the proposition that they were indeed, as his suicide note proclaims, "too menny"'.²⁹ When he fatefully reasons 'if we children was gone there'd be no trouble at all!' (p. 334), he internalizes the Malthusian concern that over-population is the root cause of poverty and suffering.³⁰ Although Rev. Thomas Robert Malthus was writing at the end of the eighteenth century, Malthusian thought continued to be a flourishing philosophy in the latter decades of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, evidenced by the establishment of the Malthusian League in 1877 in response to the trial of Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh for republishing Charles Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy* (1832), a banned pamphlet that detailed methods of preventing pregnancy.³¹ The organization was an educative endeavour led by late-Victorian activists who drew upon Malthusian economics to campaign for the education of the poor in contraceptive methods as a means to control reproduction rates. It is unlikely that Little Father Time is drawing upon Malthusian philosophy directly, but the central tenet of Malthusian thought and the child's analysis of his situation is the same. Thus, the resulting spelling error gestures to the dangers of an education that is incomplete or overly didactic. Little Father Time has understanding enough to explain his macabre reasoning, but the misspelling indicates that he cannot escape the limitations of his insufficient education. Sally Shuttleworth notes that schooling was singled out as the primary cause of child suicide in the latter decades of the nineteenth century as 'the spread of the alphabet, it was claimed, also brought with it the spread of voluntary death' as the newly educated classes gained a deepened awareness of their miserable lot in life.³² *Jude the Obscure* disturbs this seemingly causal relationship between an increased educational provision and suffering, as suffering occurs only as the result of bad education.³³ In this instance,

²⁹ Jen Baker, 'Traditions and Anxieties of (Un)timely Child Death in *Jude the Obscure*', *Thomas Hardy Journal*, 33 (2017), 61–84 (p. 68).

³⁰ Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008).

³¹ F. D'Arcy, 'The Malthusian League and the Resistance to Birth Control Propaganda in Late Victorian Britain', *Population Studies*, 31 (1977), 429–88 (p. 429).

³² Sally Shuttleworth, *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science, and Medicine, 1840–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 341.

³³ For example, Jude's early autodidacticism was always going to cause suffering, as the barriers to learning Latin and Greek were too great. He would never have achieved the requisite level of classical knowledge to attend Christminster with no tutor and with materials 'thirty years old, soiled, scribbled wantonly over' (p. 30).

Little Father Time's literalism is left unchecked by Sue when she explains her pregnancy to him 'too obscurely' (p. 338) and through 'half realities' (p. 338), information that he processes and acts upon. In this context, the spelling error is not merely a textual aberration, but a visual paradox that connotes both understanding and limitation, a contradiction that is analogous to the insubstantial educational provision granted to the equally intelligent poor.

Before analysing the suicide note, it is important to comment upon the orthographic history of the note across the various versions of *Jude the Obscure* and, indeed, modern editions of the text. Most modern editors, including Penguin and Broadview, have returned to the spelling used in both the 1895 and 1912 manuscript versions of the novel, which use 'menny'.³⁴ However, in the earlier serial version published in *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* as *Hearts Insurgent*, the second 'n' is missing.³⁵ There is no mention of this change in the criticism that maps the textual history of the novel, perhaps, as the word remained misspelled, its potential has been overlooked.³⁶ Nonetheless, Patricia Ingham, who has written extensively on the novel's textual history, made the decision to return to the single 'n' in the 2008 Oxford World's Classics edition – without extensive explanation.³⁷ Ingham states that the Oxford edition 'presents the text of the 1912 volume with emendations both from the manuscript and from later editions, based on a knowledge of textual transmission, where error or authorial alteration can be inferred'.³⁸ Hardy continued to revise the novel after the publication of the 1912 'Wessex Edition' until his death in 1928, so Ingham's decision to return to the single 'n' may have been influenced by these latter versions, but there is no note to confirm this rationale.³⁹ While the intentionality of the spelling error is indisputable, as misspelling persists in every version of the text, each variation carries slightly different nuances that position the spelling mistake as a site of wider socio-economic tension. Whatever the 'correct' version, Hardy would probably have revelled in this orthographic ambiguity.

At the level of the word, there are two significant orthographic changes that signal this spelling error as a locus of critical resistance to dominant ideals of educational attainment and class hierarchy. Firstly, the transformation of the vowel from the 'a' of 'many' to the 'e' of 'menny' privileges phonetic spelling that suggests an inability to differentiate spoken word from its written form, a feature which is commonly associated with low social status, poor educational attainment, and intellectual limitations. However, if we are to assume that *Jude the Obscure* follows a similar creed to Hardy's other novels, it is likely that Little Father Time's use of phonetic spelling is another example of where Hardy uses non-standard language to enhance the subjectivity of the lower, traditionally illiterate classes against the homogenization of expression stipulated by the standards of the educational reform agenda. The suicide and the murder of the other children was a means of enacting the tenets of Malthusian philosophy and, thereby, to assume control of their fate as opposed to living in poverty under an

³⁴ As is the general policy of the Penguin Classics Hardy, the first volume edition is used where there are textual variations. Dennis Taylor, 'A Note on the History of the Text', in Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. xlii.

³⁵ 'Hearts Insurgent', *Harpers New Monthly Magazine*, 91 (New York, NY: June–November 1895), p. 594.

³⁶ For a full account of the complex textual history of *Jude the Obscure* see: Robert Slack, 'The Text of *Jude the Obscure*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 11 (1957), 261–75, John Paterson, 'The Genesis of *Jude the Obscure*', *Studies in Philology*, 57 (1960), 87–98 and Patricia Ingham, 'The Evolution of *Jude the Obscure*', *Review of English Studies*, 27 (1976), 27–37 and 159–69.

³⁷ Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, ed. by Patricia Ingham (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2008), p. 325.

³⁸ Patricia Ingham, 'A Note on the Text', in *Jude the Obscure*, ed. by Ingham, p. xxv.

³⁹ Ingham, 'A Note on the Text', p. xxv.

overstretched social system. The phonetic spelling indicates that these horrifying acts have been committed, not through an internalization of pressure from the ruling classes to reduce the population size of the poor, but through self-assertion. In the 1895 Osgood McIlvaine manuscript, a second change contributes to this interpretation: the duplication of the 'n' to form 'menny'. By doubling the letter, the intended word – 'many' – is distorted and it becomes more difficult to ascertain its meaning. This transformation is analogous to the process of over-population: as the population increases – here, represented by 'n' – society/the word is destabilized and the conditions of survival/reading become more challenging. Additionally, as Anna Kornbluh observes, the apparent pun on 'menny' serves as an indictment of the excessive sexual drive of men and the subsequent increase in population.⁴⁰

Typically for *Jude the Obscure*, the substitution of 'many' for 'menny'/'meny' could be read as a biblical allusion. As Little Father Time is associated with prophecy and fatalism, 'menny'/'meny' may be a reference to the 'writing on the wall' that appears at the feast of King Belshazzar in the Book of Daniel.⁴¹ In this book of the Old Testament, the King and his subjects anger God by drinking wine from vessels that were taken from the destroyed Temple of Solomon and by praising false idols. In response to their blasphemy, a hand appears and writes on the palace wall, but no one is able to decipher the writing. The prophet Daniel is called upon and he reads the writing as: 'MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN'; he translates this as follows:

MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom and finished it. TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting. PERES; Thy kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians.⁴²

Daniel informs King Belshazzar that God has judged his rule and his kingdom and found him wanting, so his kingdom will be destroyed by the Medians and the Persians. The 'menny'/'meny' of Little Father Time's suicide note is strikingly similar – perhaps, even a homophone – to the 'mene' of the Biblical writing, particularly when spelled with the single 'n'. Considering the wealth of Biblical allusions in the novel, it is not unlikely that the suicide note also contains a reference to Scripture – particularly, as Jude stages his own 'writing on the wall' moment earlier in the novel.⁴³ This allusion draws attention to Little Father Time's prophetic qualities and feeds into the sense of tragic fatalism that underpins the novel's nihilistic depiction of educating the labouring classes. In addition to these more general associations, Hardy plays with etymology to allude to the dynamics of poverty, judgement, and destruction within Little Father Time's Malthusian understanding of population growth and social responsibility. The words 'mene mene tek el upharsin' each refer to ancient Jewish monetary weights; this translation is significant in the context of the suicide note as poverty is a fundamental aspect of Little Father Time's philosophy.⁴⁴ In the Old Testament, Daniel interprets

⁴⁰ Anna Kornbluh, 'Obscure Forms: The Letter, the Law, and the Line in Hardy's Social Geometry', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 48 (2015), 1–17 (pp. 11–12).

⁴¹ KJV, Daniel 5:5.

⁴² KJV, Daniel 5:5, 26–28.

⁴³ After receiving a rejection letter from Biblioll College that advises Jude to remain 'in [his] own sphere', Jude writes on the college wall: 'I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you: yea, who knoweth not such things as these? *Job xii:3*' (p. 118).

⁴⁴ 'mene mene tek el upharsin', in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/245372>> [accessed 3 March 2019].

the writing by forming verbs from the etymological roots of nouns that are written on the wall, it is through this linguistic mastery that 'mene' is understood to mean 'numbered' in its fatalistic sense.⁴⁵ Similarly, Hardy utilizes the dual meaning of this translation firstly to emphasize the inevitability of tragedy and secondly to align the spelling mistake with Malthusian thought as the word 'numbered' is associated with both growth and limitations.

As I suggested earlier, the spelling mistake (as judged by standard English) functions as an epicentre of orthographic tension within the topology of the page; it is therefore necessary to consider the implications of the error, not only at the level of the word, but also, to ask how the misspelling impacts the text on the level of the sentence, the passage, the novel, and the wider socio-political contexts of education reform that inform the novel. The full sentence written in the suicide note reads: 'Done because we are too menny'. The misspelling is emphasized by the colloquial grammar of the sentence. The note is written in a grammatical shorthand that would be understood orally, but that is generally not accepted in written correspondence. This grammar highlights several factors, specifically: the age of the author, the author's level of education and the social class of the author, and is, perhaps, indicative of difficulties in separating literate expression from oral expression. The use of the past participle 'done' emphasizes the finality of the act with its blunt cadence; moreover, on a grammatical level, the word 'done' is imbued with additional meaning with regard to motive and blame. It is implied that the murder/suicide is not the fault of the offender, but the fault of the social systems that perpetuate the suffering of the poor. A past participle cannot have a subject, therefore, by employing this grammatical construction, Little Father Time is removing himself from the act; in this respect, the murder/suicide is presented as a consequence, as opposed to a crime with motive. Furthermore, a past participle is generally associated with the passive voice, the implication being that the murder/suicide was the result of external pressures – as something *done to them* versus something *he did*.

In terms of word choice and grammatical construction, the suicide note is strikingly simple. This simplicity jars with the 'extravagant excess' found in the surrounding paragraphs that George Levine deems 'the wrong kind of Hardy'.⁴⁶ When Sue discovers the bodies of her children, she undergoes an intense emotional reaction that includes 'fainting fits' (p. 336) and she is thrown 'into a convulsive agony which knew no abatement' (p. 336). The description of her grief utilizes heightened language that focuses on the 'convulsive agony' itself, as opposed to her experience of 'agony'. This dissociation of her emotional response from her enactment of the emotion is emphasized by the archaic construction, 'which knew no abatement', which could be a phrase taken directly from Greek tragedy. This is not to underestimate the grief felt by Sue and Jude, but to accentuate the disparity between the pointed simplicity of the note and the comfort that they seek in scholarship. Indeed, in the paragraphs that follow, the descriptions of the children's bodies are saturated with both classical and biblical allusions, the references providing an emotional buffer to Jude and Sue's experiences of grief. As products of studied literacy, Jude and Sue process the world through symbolic resonance and literary allusion. To them, Little Father Time's corpse is not just the physical body of a child that they had cared for, but he is also 'their nodal point, their focus, their expression in a single term' (p. 337). Jen Baker observes that the treatment of Little Father Time's corpse is distinctly textual: 'what is specifically demonstrated through little Jude's dead body however,

⁴⁵ 'mene mene tekell upharsin', *OED*.

⁴⁶ Levine, *Reading Thomas Hardy*, p. xiv.

is a space that is no longer blank, for it has been written on.⁴⁷ She asserts that by reading the inscriptions of trauma – the marks of his suicide, the figurative wounds inflicted upon him by his parents' choice to reject conventional marital life – upon his body, Little Father Time's death is a grotesque parody of the traditional, idealized child death-bed scene in which the peaceful child displays no visual signs of suffering.⁴⁸ By focusing on the allegorical potential of the murder/suicide and citing Scripture and the classical canon, Jude and Sue comfort each other while commenting on their systemic exclusion from the university education that may have protected the family from poverty. To console Sue, Jude states: 'Things are as they are, and will be brought to their destined issue' (p. 339) which, he explains, is a quotation from Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, the first play of the *Oresteia*. This allusion refers to a comment made by Sue earlier in the novel in which she describes feeling 'as if a tragic doom overhung our family, as it did the house of Atreus [the tragic family of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*]' (p. 283) after Little Father Time advises her: 'If I was you, mother, I wouldn't marry father' (p. 283). The return to this play as a point of tragic reference encapsulates the cyclical structure of the novel that contributes to its fatalistic outlook. The quotation is, as expected, an apt choice to comment upon the deaths of the children as the play depicts the sacrifice of Agamemnon's young daughter, Iphigenia, as the catalyst for an unstoppable chain of familial murders that occur upon Agamemnon's return from the Trojan War; the play utilizes prophecy and visions to explicitly demonstrate that tragedy is predetermined. This allusion leads Sue to exclaim: 'My poor Jude . . . To think you should know that by your unassisted reading, and yet be in poverty and despair!' (p. 339), to focus their grief not solely on the loss of the children, but also the structural injustices that prevented Jude from accessing the education that could have improved his prospects and enabled him to provide for his children financially.

In contrast to the melodrama and academic posturing of the scene, the simplicity of the suicide note is jarring. The misspelling of such a basic word punctures the grandeur of Jude's allusions and, thus, becomes grotesque. There is an implicit irony to the fact that, though Jude also wrestles with predeterminism and moral responsibility, these concepts are not exclusively the intellectual property of the educated. Little Father Time demonstrates that even those with a low level of literary – even those who cannot spell 'many' – can grasp these philosophical concerns. In a sense, the murder/suicide is the result of a convergence of reading styles: Little Father Time's literalism meets Sue's reported obscurity. Here, Hardy offers another bleak reading of the novel's epithet, 'the letter killeth', as neither elementary literacy nor autodidacticism can remedy the systemic oppression of the partially educated working class. Instead, reading under these conditions offers only an increased sense of one's own subjugation.

4. CONCLUSION

A literal reading of 'the letter killeth' epithet enables a reading of *Jude the Obscure* that is saturated with proto-modernist tensions at the level of the letter. Across his works, Hardy attempts to 'kill the letter' by subverting our understanding of literacy: by depicting alternative forms of reading, by engaging with the multiplicity of semiotic interpretation, and by positioning the spelling mistake as a locus for socioeconomic tensions. Non-standard literacy is, for Hardy, a means of exploring the diversity of experience and enabling intellectual expression outwith

⁴⁷ Baker, 'Traditions and Anxieties', p. 69.

⁴⁸ Baker, 'Traditions and Anxieties', p. 69.

the strictures of the stifling uniformity of the forms of elementary education offered to the poor by the educational reform agenda. Hardy's depictions of low-level literacy and cases of intellectual dissonance – where intelligence outweighs educational attainment – gesture to the complex relationship between ability and understanding, a disparity that is heightened by the structural barriers of class and economic status.

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