

## Hardy's 'Aged Child'<sup>1</sup>: The Problem of Interpreting Little Father Time

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*There's more for us to think about in that one little hungry heart than in all the stars of the sky*<sup>2</sup>

Soon after the emotional "homecoming" of the neglected and nameless boy, Sue Bridehead makes the above remark. The couple, Jude and Sue, take in the 'strange' boy in a spirit of magnanimity, professing that all children are entitled to collective care and happiness. For an early twenty-first century reader thus begins a standard gothic formula for disaster, but during Hardy's times, this event fed into a Dickensian sympathy for the neglected child as well as contemporary concerns over proper childrearing. Jude declares at one point that "excessive regard" for one's children is as regressive as "class feeling, patriotism, 'save-your-soul-ism', and other virtues" (264). Aaron Matz argues that, despite the promotion of a pro-child, collectivist attitude towards childrearing, *Jude the Obscure* (1895) seems to display a marked ambivalence towards children in general (Matz 7). It appears to be a warning against procreative abundance in a world apathetic, even antagonistic to human happiness and well-being. The "little hungry heart," Hardy might intend, is a jolt to the mindless traditional rituals of marriage and reproduction which run counter to the ruthless workings of nature. In a consolation letter addressed to writer Rider Haggard whose ten-year-old son had just died, Hardy famously wrote: "Please give my kind regards to Mrs Haggard, and tell her how deeply our sympathy was with you both in your bereavement. Though, to be candid, I think the death of a child is never really to be regretted, when one reflects on what he has escaped" (Hardy, qtd. in Shuttleworth 145). Sue makes a similar statement when she says after the children's deaths: "Better that they should be plucked fresh than stay to wither away miserably!" to which Jude adds, "Some say that the elders should rejoice when their children die in infancy" (328). Rather than anti-natalism, this is a feeling quite consistent with contemporaneous views, as Jen Baker argues (63), popular in late nineteenth-century discourses of population control and degeneration.

There is – it becomes apparent on closer reading – no ambivalence in the novel's attitude to children. The text itself is strikingly clear about the plight of children born without their asking, so to speak, into a life of lack. The profound absence of ambivalence in Hardy's treatment of the climactic murder-suicide scene is the closing argument of the novel regarding its stance on childhood. This paper examines the episode in detail, interrogating the implications of Time's act. What is the nature of the actions he commits? Is it childish recklessness or an outbreak of homicidal mania; Christ-like sacrifice, as the text seems to imply; is it euthanasia, a killing in order to save; or is it cold blooded murder? Why does he do it, what are his motives and influences? Is it faulty education, heredity, or natural precocity? My aim is to map the meaning of this pivotal scene in the context of the sea change that has come about in the attitudes towards childhood from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century.

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<sup>1</sup> Hardy 286.

<sup>2</sup> Hardy 268.

Within the narrative, the abruptness of the episode is unremarked upon, its brutality left undescribed, the details of the box-cord and the suicide note censored, while the narrative is rushed through in order to bring the tragic ‘turn’ in the novel. The descriptive realism of Hardy’s prose becomes clinical and clipped. The immediate reactions of the couple following the event appear strange, unrealistic, and even as though they had unconsciously wished for it. The way the scene is built is quite melodramatic: Sue, being the focal character after the fatal conversation with Father Time, returns with Jude to prepare breakfast, and thinking that the children might be still in bed since “all was quiet in the children’s room,” she goes upstairs to wake them (324). Abruptly ending the omniscience Hardy’s narrator had heretofore enjoyed, the narrative point of view immediately shifts to that of Jude, staying with him downstairs to hear Sue shriek. We are delayed further from the cause of the scream by the sequential observations of Jude. Rushing to the scene, he discovers that the door of the children’s room goes heavily on its hinges, Sue is on the floor inside, and the beds are empty. Looking around the room, he discovers first the bodies of Sue’s children suspended from garment hooks behind the door and then, a little farther, next to an overturned chair, hangs Time, all three with box-cords around their necks. The description ends with the observation whose relevance will be apparent later: “his glazed eyes were slanted into the room; but those of the girl and the baby boy were closed” (325). After the narrative goes on to describe the arrival of the helpers and the doctor, the examination of the children’s corpses, and the parents’ later conjectures about the reason for the act (for which Sue takes the blame on herself), it is revealed rather belatedly that a suicide note had also been found in the room with the notoriously ingenuous words: “Done because we are too menny” (325).<sup>3</sup>

Later in the novel, the episode is referred to merely as “the tragedy of the children” (344). “This is terrible!” Jude admonishes Sue at a later point, “It is monstrous and unnatural for you to be so remorseful when you have done no wrong!” (339) Remarkably, what is terrible, monstrous and unnatural is Sue’s religious guilt and masochistic suffering. Time’s act does not merit any adjectives nor any ruminations over its motives, it exists like a patch of the irrational on a realistic narrative; even the narrator is at a loss when it comes to the psychology of the child Time. On its publication, however, the novel earned flak not for the representation of a young boy who takes the lives of his siblings and commits suicide, but for its allegedly immoral views on sacred institutions like marriage, family, religion, and Oxford classism. Critical commentary has found the incident quite embarrassing in what is otherwise touted as one of the earliest psychologically realistic novels. The “narratorial incongruity” of the scene “overshadowed the ethical dilemma” of the scene for contemporary readers and reviewers (Baker 70). It has been described as “preposterous” (Yevish 240), farcical, and “a kind of rude phantasmagoria” (Matz 7). An angry review in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, viewing the murder-suicide episode as a sort of Swiftian “modest proposal”<sup>4</sup> asks satirically:

Does Mr. Hardy think this is really a good way of disposing of the unfortunate progeny of such [illegitimate sexual] connections? does[sic] he recommend it for general adoption? It is at least a clean and decisive cut of the knot, leaving no ragged

<sup>3</sup> In the earlier, serialised version in the family-oriented *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, published in the US, Sue and Jude only have Father Time and an adopted child (Baker 78).

<sup>4</sup> The notorious satire by Jonathan Swift, “A Modest Proposal For preventing the Children of Poor People From being a Burthen to Their Parents or Country, and For making them Beneficial to the Publick” (1729), exhorted the poor to sell their children as food to the rich.

ends; but then there is no natural provision in families of such a wise small child to get its progenitors out of trouble (Oliphant 273).

One of the novel's rare positive reviews classed together Arabella's dimple-making, the pig-killing, the boy suicide and homicides, Jude's drunken second marriage and Sue's self-surrender to Phillotson, as incidents that "make us shiver with horror and grovel with shame" but that "are deeply founded in the condition, if not in the nature of humanity" (Howells 266-67). The jarring effect the episode now has, it may safely be surmised, was absent upon its publication.

As Jeffrey Berman points out, there is a dearth of criticism regarding Time's double murder and suicide despite its pivotal significance in the novel (155). Significantly, recent research has tried to explain away the episode thematically and ideologically. At the textual level, at least two reasons are given for Father Time's actions: the premature lessons of life offered by his faulty upbringing and an evolutionary increase in sensitivity. The eighteenth-century Rousseauist belief that the child's personality could be moulded by the environment had suffered a backlash in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to the spread of positivism, ideas of genetic inheritance and biological determinism; nature was, more or less, the final word in child rearing. Parenting or child rearing was a struggle against nature; the family had the responsibility of suppressing the negative, undesirable aspects of the child's personality and shape behaviour so as to create conforming, well-adapted members of society. In the 1890s, G. Stanley Hall's pioneering study on children's psychological health raised the bar for parental involvement in each distinctive stage of their children's growth. Child-rearing demanded "special parental skills .... to cope with [the] newly discovered psychic complexity" of the child (Zelizer 28).

The traditional scapegoat for Father Time's actions thus has been Sue Bridehead. The narrative structure makes it explicit that it is her evening chat with the little boy that triggers the violence of the following morning. The blame she has acquired over the years for her lapse in proper mothering, her prematurely offered life-lessons and her lack of natural femininity have stamped the whole incident as a faux pas, founded on a misunderstanding. Indeed, the conversation between Sue and Time is filled with inappropriate and ambiguous follow-ups from Sue's side. A visibly upset Time, seemingly "seized" by "a brooding undemonstrative horror," torn by the fact that they could not find a lodging that accommodates the whole family and that Jude has to stay elsewhere for lack of room, remarks: "It would be better to be out o' the world than in it, wouldn't it?" and Sue assents, "It would almost, dear" (322):

"'Tis because of us children, too, isn't it, that you can't get a good lodging."

"Well – people do object to children sometimes."

"Then if children make so much trouble, why do people have 'em?"

"O – because it is a law of nature."

"But we don't ask to be born?"

"No indeed."

"And what makes it worse with me is that you are not my real mother, and you needn't have had me unless you liked. I oughtn't to have come to 'ee – that's the real truth! I troubled 'em in Australia; and I trouble folk here. I wish I hadn't been born!"

"You couldn't help it, my dear." (322-23)

Father Time exclaims wildly: “I think that whenever children be born that are not wanted they should be killed directly, before their souls come to ‘em, and not allowed to grow big and walk about!” (323). Sue does not reply to this, but ponders a little and adjudges it the right time to be candid to him about her forthcoming child. To Time’s hysterical and ominous parting remark, “If we children was gone there’d be no trouble at all!,” Sue replies “rather peremptorily”, “Don’t think that, dear [....] But go to sleep!” (324).

Hardy, however, without discrediting Sue’s role in the tragedy, offers an alternate Schopenhauerian explanation - Jude consoles Sue soon after the appalling tableau scene:

“It was in his nature to do it. The doctor says there are such boys springing up amongst us – boys of a sort unknown in the last generation – the outcome of new views of life. They seem to see all its terrors before they are old enough to have staying power to resist them. He says it is the beginning of the coming universal wish not to live” (326).

The increased sensitivity and precocity of future generations will result in collective suicides, a pervasive death-wish. A vitriolic (unnamed) reviewer, rejecting the theory posited by the “advanced” doctor (326), declared, “We all know perfectly well that baby Schopenhauers *are not coming into* the world in shoals. [...] such a portrait as little Jude Fawley, who advocates the annihilation of the species, and gives a practical example of it at a tender age, do not present itself as typical of a devouring philosophy” (qtd. in Cox 288).

Nevertheless, there is a greater textual emphasis on the innate ‘nature’ of the individual rather than on the ‘nurture’ element in justifying the event. The child’s precocity, in fact, eclipses any other characteristic that Time might have had. Notwithstanding this, what is extraordinary is that readers found it perfectly reasonable and possible that a young boy is able to (mis)understand that children are redundant in the world of the poor and proceeds to literally make himself and his siblings scarce, indirectly causing the death of Sue’s unborn baby too. Sue remarks quite matter-of-factly, “You may say the boy wished to be out of life, or he wouldn’t have done it. It was not unreasonable for him to die: it was part of his incurably sad nature, poor little fellow!”<sup>5</sup> (328) Edmund Gosse wrote in an 1896 review that Father Time, “whose habitual melancholy, combined with his hereditary antecedents, has prepared us for an outbreak of suicide, if not of murder” kills ‘several’ children in a ‘fit of infantile mania’” (Gosse 279). The medical category of infantile mania that emerged in the 1860s had by then assimilated into popular knowledge. British psychiatrist J. Crichton Browne argued that children are susceptible to adult diseases of the mind, manifested as various forms of mania, including monomania, demonomania, homicidal insanity, nymphomania, kleptomania and pyromania, and that children who behave in non-normative ways are probably victims of mental illness and not voluntarily being rebellious (320). Melancholia was a sure sign of potential child suicides. The lowest recorded suicide age c.1860, claimed Browne, was five, and death by hanging or drowning were the most prevalent methods among child suicides (Browne 317). Browne lists gloominess, taciturnity, indifference, and acute susceptibility to influences as symptoms of melancholia; the illness is

<sup>5</sup> Sue remarks at one point, “‘It is strange, Jude, that these preternaturally old boys almost always come from new countries” (270).

aggravated both by harsh treatment which makes patients feel unloved and alienated, as well as by sympathetic treatment which emphasises their worthlessness and burdensomeness (315).

As Sally Shuttleworth argues, child suicides, thought to be increasing in numbers, was a popular topic of cultural concern and debate in the late Victorian age. They were believed to be caused by two factors: heredity and education (Shuttleworth 140). Both factors are implicated in Time's suicide. Faulty education is apparent in his early life of neglect in Australia with Arabella's parents and his premature introduction to a bleak and terrible life via a foster mother, Sue. According to the nineteenth-century evolutionary psychologist Henry Maudsley, moral and mental defects, believed to run in the family, could be manifested in successive generations as various neurological disorders; a propensity towards self-destruction and melancholy is exhibited by Jude as well as Jude's mother who also reportedly commits suicide (Maudsley 337). Jude prefigures Time in the brief description of the former's own childhood; he was also precocious and grave in demeanour: "his face [wore] the fixity of a thoughtful child's who has felt the pricks of life somewhat before his time" (5).

As 'reasonable' as Time's suicide may be, the unaddressed inexplicability of the child-on-child murder series is a glaring gap in interpretations of Hardy's most notorious work. Formalist explanations have been given by Matz and Franco Ferrucci. Matz argues that the novel being anti-procreative performs its own theme, acting as "the moral-aesthetic proxy for contraception" (Matz 27). He argues that it is an anti-natalistic novel narrating "the error of procreation" by killing off all the children it generates (Matz 23). Franco Ferrucci argues that Time's actions are a subversion of the Romantic myth of the child who becomes significant to the plot only in its death (Ferrucci 117). The myth has taken a "sadistic twist" in the late nineteenth century and Time's act represents "a symbolic retortion after one century of slaughtered infants" (Ferrucci 129). Remarkably, Hardy and the critics have been careful to dispel Time's centrality in the whole issue such that interpretation twists and turns around him, but refuses to touch him nonetheless, leaving him morally untainted; even when the possibility of 'psychic disorder' is raised, it is his environment and ancestry that are to be blamed.

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Critics have described Time as "a macabre creation" (Yevish 240), "a time spirit" (Gordon 299), "a shadow from the past," "a grotesque monster, a Christ figure, a prophet of Doom, the choric voice of History, and a symbol of the Modern Spirit" (Edwards 32). He is thought of as a persona for Hardy and an echo of Jude himself. He represents for some, the past, and for others, futurity. Jude and Arabella's son is introduced abruptly in a letter towards the middle of the novel, and is as such a mysterious arrival to readers as well as to Jude and Sue. He had been abandoned in Australia with Arabella's parents since his birth, after her separation from Jude. Her parents, no longer willing to "be encumbered with the child any longer, his parents being alive" (263), sends him to England. He lacks a name to save the expense of Christian burial; nicknamed Little Father Time for his aged-looking face (270), he is called little Jude after his adoption, and for general purposes he is merely addressed by the narrator as "the boy." He is described as having a "small, pale child's face" with "large, frightened eyes" (265); elsewhere his face is described as being aged-looking and not beautiful; his agedness comes from his facial expression and his speech (286). The narrator unequivocally claims

that he is a symbol; he was Time himself, donning the appearance of a child: “He was Age masquerading as juvenility, and doing so badly that his real self showed through crevices” (266). This “old soul” in a child is not treated as horrifying, but as a sign of premature wisdom. The word ‘masquerading’ may simply have the meaning of disguise, devoid of the negative connotation it has now. More than the aged weariness of Time, the unsettling factor for the parents is that he is incapable of being treated as a child; he seemed to be “singularly deficient in all the usual hopes of childhood” (278). He does not react or emote like ‘other’ children, whom he sometimes tries to simulate but fails (266). His actions are impersonal, non-inquisitive, mechanical and efficient.

The narrator remains reticent and severely limited in omniscience when it comes to dealing with Time’s psychology. He is quite often reported to be looking or staring at something unseen, something beyond ordinary vision. During his solo train journey to Arabella, the passengers laugh at a playful kitten; Time, however, “regard[s] the kitten with his saucer eyes” that seemed to say “All laughing comes from misapprehension. *Rightly looked at* there is no laughable thing under the sun” (265-66, my emphasis). Like Time who ‘sees’ with an unnatural precocity, the narrator looks at the boy with hindsight and sees instead a metaphor, a vehicle of fate, a messenger of Death or even Death itself. He is always looked at, his persistent, unsettling stare is reported from the adult perspective, wondered about, and his thoughts merely speculated upon. He is constructed as a mystery, clouded, strangely aloof from the narration as well as from the narrator: “Him they found to be in the habit of sitting silent, his quaint and weird face set, and his eyes resting on things he did not see in the substantial world” (270). He does not allow transparency, what he sees and comprehends is beyond the narrator’s capacity or willingness to know. The only exception is when Time is allowed to be heard during the conversation with Sue in which Time is at his most eloquent and passionate. The incident itself dispels the opaqueness of his psychology and the aura he had been enveloped by and shows him for what he is: a child, resolute, single-minded, literal.

Time is likened to Melpomene on account of his woeful expression (270); he is also inclined to the dramatic in other instances. When he disembarks from the train journey during which he is introduced, he sets out nonchalantly to meet Jude Fawley despite the night-time, falling into “a steady mechanical creep ... without an inquiring gaze at anything”; the journey culminates with the question “Is this where father lives?” (267). Time appears to be an actor in a sensational play with his tragic, heart-rending question, “Is it you who’s my *real* mother at last?” .... Then a yearning look came over the child and he began to cry” (268).

How then do we begin to make sense of Time’s homicides? It can be fairly surmised that child-on-child killings are not a singular phenomenon, but have merely gained popular newsworthiness of late. It is important to understand the nature of Time’s act here. Contemporary readers saw it as an act done in ignorance and innocence, by an agent not old enough to comprehend life. The narrator constructs Time as the sacrificial being who must remedy the stain of time, atone for past sins, and die for the world, or an ideology: “For the rashness of those parents he had groaned, for their ill-assortment he had quaked, and for the misfortunes of these he had died” (326). The nameless and unindividuated, and voiceless, younger children are part of the sacrifice, birthed and reared in order to be sacrificed at the altar of tradition and the sanctum sanctorum of marriage. Remorseful and feeling guilty, Sue even considers the deaths as an edifying lesson for her to correct her sins: “They were sacrificed to teach me how to live! – their death was the first stage of my purification. That’s

why they have not died in vain!” (351-52). The episode in this light is a killing in order to save, as redemption from future suffering, a sort of euthanasia. Whether it is as ‘Divinity’ taking the lives of surplus children and himself so that the adults may live happily or correct themselves, or as the thoughtful older brother mercifully releasing his younger siblings from a life of suffering and lovelessness, both roles are motivated by love and sympathy.

Caroline Sumpter argues that Jude embodies Hardy’s belief in Darwinian evolutionary meliorism, the theory that “an ongoing process was bringing the world closer to universal sympathy” (Sumpter 683-84). Jude has the highest evolved sympathy among the characters of the text which was, at the time of its publication, a pioneer in the advocacy of animal rights. However, in the novel, an increase in sympathy, argues Sumpter, was contrary to Nature’s law of “mutual butchery” and would only cause the downfall of the truly altruistic agent (Sumpter 673). Sumpter, however, fails to address the question of Father Time; the novel itself makes it explicit that Time is a redeemer, a kind of “dwarfed Divinity” arriving precisely to release the modern adults, Jude and Sue, from their suffering. His sympathy towards the deserving and his solution of selective annihilation of the unwanted would represent the viewpoint of a divine figure, the true counterpoint to Nature’s levelling and indiscriminate butchery. In one of the rare articles that address the ethicality of Father Time’s actions, Richard Benvenuto, in a 1970 paper, argues that there is a conflict between two modes of perception in *Jude*: the objective, universalising vision represented by Time, Arabella, and the narrator, and the humanising, personalising vision represented by Jude. “The child’s objective awareness,” writes Benvenuto, “of the insignificance of life has led him to treat people as though they were no mere significant in themselves than they are for the conditions in which they live. He sees himself and others as superfluous [...]” (Benvenuto 33). Time’s moral reference is an impersonal universe which reduces individuals to “isolated, suffering units”; it is a mercy to the living to eliminate the unwanted, the burdensome (Benvenuto 36). With late-twentieth century hindsight to detect the fascist, eugenicist strains in Father Time’s actions, Benvenuto declares that this dehumanising vision is “an outrage against humanity and human values” (36). For Jen Baker, Time is not “inherently polluted, or an intentionally bad child, evil or wicked in nature”; it is his development which is “tainted and deformed” (70). However, she assents that Time is “not free from negative, or at least monstrous connotations” in his “duplicitous role as Child and Death itself” which “casts him as a preternatural and powerful being” (75).

However, keeping aside the question of the morality of Time’s motives, could his triple homicides (counting the miscarriage as well) be considered a crime (as in, the violation of a legal or social law)? Certainly, there are objections, at least according to the narrative – although the act was committed with knowledge of its immediate consequences, there is no wicked intention behind the act, but rather a kind of distorted benevolence. The agent is a minor (whose age may be placed below ten) who cannot be held responsible for his actions, however grievous. Even disregarding the above arguments, no guilt still accrues on the agent who awards himself the highest possible punishment for taking the life of another. By modern standards, however, Little Father Time, despite his age, has to be thought of as culpable for double homicide and suicide because it is evident that he had the necessary ‘intention’, foreknowledge of consequences, to do the act; he had foresight, meticulous planning (suicide note, box-cords, closed eyes) and premeditation. The narrator’s description of the scene of death, mentioned earlier, is crucial here; the younger children’s eyes are

closed while Time's eyes are open and slanting: "his glazed eyes were slanted into the room; but those of the girl and the baby boy were closed." Did he close their eyes after they died to avoid further grief for the parents? Baker writes that he "imitated this traditional mark of respect, or because he did not wish to look into their eyes as he died" (69). The fact that no one was there to close his eyes "simultaneously distinguishes him as the executor of this horrible deed: he occupies a liminal space between victim and perpetrator, between pitiful and abhorrent" (69). Is it possible to have a quiet and clean death by hanging as the terse narration seems to imply? Are the details omitted owing to the sensitivities of Victorian readers, or are those details unnecessarily graphic for the symbolic purpose that the incident may serve?

The whole episode requires a rethinking from Time's perspective. On waking up in the morning, Time discovers that Sue is absent; he panics that she has abandoned them. In a fit of mania, perhaps, he finds some box-cords, awakens the other children, convinces them to trust whatever he is going to do or forces the box-cord nooses around their necks, and proceeds to expertly hang the younger children to death (but how? Is there a chair beneath the children's feet? Does he hang them one after another? Do they hang together?). There is struggle but he appears unscathed. Then he uses the same chair and proceeds to hang himself after making sure to leave a suicide note on the floor. The problem here is not the unrealistic depiction of Time, whose perspective is sorely lacking in the text, but that what was once merely grotesque and grievous has become in Time's point of view, horrifying and violent. The suicide note acquires a sinister character in its fait accompli; childish misspelling promising educability is juxtaposed with the finality of the word 'done'. The participle without the active subject indicates, as Louise Creechan notes, that the act is "a consequence, as opposed to a crime with motive" (504). There is then, no blame nor motive, as the wording of the suicide note appears to declare. However, the irrevocable finality of the Done – not 'doing' – belies the apparent innocence of the child. The "simplicity" of the note "jars with" the excess surrounding it (Creechan 504). Did Time write it after killing the children – or before? The text appears to point towards the latter; Time is able to see the future as though it were already the past.

The point here is not that Time is guilty of a serious crime and the act should be seen in that light despite the narrator's forgiving tone, but that *Jude the Obscure* has become incomprehensible for our times, because it is impossible to see Time's actions as a gimmick or a surprise or sensational as Victorian readers felt. The scene is a travesty of a tragedy, an understatement which instead of adding to the novel's theme of futility casts a dark shadow over the whole text. Rather than being the pivotal incident, it is for the narrator, simply one of the tragedies, albeit the worst besetting the dreams and ambitions of Sue and Jude. The lack of details about the scene makes it all the more unsettling, inexplicable, and difficult to interpret because the discourse of childhood has changed. Both the agential child and his/her violence cannot be mere narrative props today. The "restrictive framing", borrowed from nineteenth-century sensation fiction and the gothic, limit the perspectives of both the characters and readers, so that we can only have an indirect view of the incident (Vuohelainen 3); the symbolic layers at work dispel any straightforward, ordinary view. The narrator starts with the metaphorical figuring of Time as Death, as Age; the child at the centre is an enigma, not *merely* because of his own personality (which we are not allowed to know directly), but because the narrator presents him so. Where has the child disappeared to and



why is he only a vehicle of doom for Hardy's narrator? Little Father Time cannot be read any longer merely as a symbol nor as an ideological argument; to restate Sue's words, there's more for us to think about in that one little hungry heart.

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