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## Fear and Fascination: A Study of Thomas Hardy and the New Woman

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## FEAR AND FASCINATION: A STUDY OF THOMAS HARDY AND THE NEW WOMAN

by

ANITA SANDLIN

(Under the Direction of John Thomas Lloyd)

## ABSTRACT

The tragic outcomes of most of his fictional heroines have led many to accuse Thomas Hardy of being a misogynist, harshly punishing women for their open defiance of Victorian social expectations. However, by writing about sexually-charged issues at a time when subjects such as premarital sex, rape, illegitimate children, adultery, and divorce were taboo, Hardy challenged his readers to consider the destructive power caused by hypocrisy and double standards, making many consider him to be among the first feminists. These conflicting perspectives reflect the internal ambiguities of a gifted man torn between wanting to maintain the conservative comfort of the Victorian era while yearning for the more equitable freedom of the Modern era.

Spanning the course of six decades, the literary works of Thomas Hardy note the evolution of the New Woman, particularly in his novels. From the accepting and submissive Cythera Graye in his first book to the questioning and defiant Sue Bridehead in his last written novel, Hardy documented the growth of the independent woman, as well as her struggles for acceptance and unconditional love. Though his heroines become stronger and more determined with each novel, Hardy maintains a consistency in their natures, indicating an essentialist view. All of his female characters are inherently passive, a trait that makes them vulnerable, though not inferior. Hardy worked to reconcile his adherence in the belief of a natural difference between men and women while advocating for equality between them.

A close examination of the fictional heroines in his major novels, a study on his personal experience, philosophy, and the perspective of a woman who knew him demonstrate that Thomas Hardy did not hate women; he hated the artifice of contrived relationships. A self-described meliorist, Hardy held hope for a better world but feared society was leaving itself without a future with the oppressive treatment of women. Though quiet and reserved in his personal life, Thomas Hardy loved intelligent, strong-minded women, but he feared the potential power of the emerging New Woman figures as much as he feared a world without them.

INDEX WORDS: Hardy, New Woman, Misogynist, Feminist, Ambiguity, Essentialist, Nature

FEAR AND FASCINATION: A STUDY OF THOMAS HARDY AND THE NEW WOMAN

by

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## DEDICATION

To Bryan,  
with an abundance of love and gratitude

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My son lived on frozen pizza and microwaved popcorn while I went to class and got lost in books. Thanks, G.

Mama and Papa, I sure wish you were alive today to celebrate this accomplishment with me. I miss you both.

The unfailing support and encouragement of a solid person goes a long way. Bryan, you are my heart --- and, yes, I will marry you.

And finally, to my high school English teacher, Mrs. Russell: Betty, you can still go f\*#k yourself!

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## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

## FEAR AND FASCINATION: A STUDY OF THOMAS HARDY AND THE NEW WOMAN

Known for his depictions of nature and women of all social classes in the Victorian era, Thomas Hardy remains one of the most influential writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Though in some ways an advocate for women's free will, Hardy believed that sex represents a fate that social reform and individual assertion can only partly counteract. In his novels of struggle and heartache, Hardy wrote of women's strength, intelligence, and capability—all qualities he demonstrated as essential to female nature; and as an essentialist, he often aligned women's innate qualities with nature. Saddened and enraged by the hypocrisy of social standards established by the Victorian middle class, Hardy wrote of its damaging consequences to women directly. He also intimated in his novels the negative impact of society's harsh judgment on civilization regarding sexuality, marriage, and desire. Decades before Sarah Grand coined the phrase "The New Woman," Thomas Hardy was writing of strong, independent-minded women determined to live life on their own terms. The New Woman was nothing new to Thomas Hardy; she was the reemergence of a natural phenomenon long suppressed and stifled by the social expectations of Victorian society. As Penny Boumelha notes in her introduction to *The Woodlanders* (1887), Hardy was no pioneer in the debate on women's rights and marriage laws in the press and Parliament in the 1880s and 1890s, but he was certainly part of the dialogue. Because of his willingness to address sensitive issues regarding social expectations and sexuality, Hardy, Boumelha posits, "was soon depicted as a willing conscript in the so-called 'Anti-Marriage League' of moral skeptics and social critics identified in the 1890s as crusading conservatives" (xii). Hardy, however was not against marriage; he simply opposed

what was unnatural in the conventions of obligatory unions and repression of innate desire.

Boumelha also addresses the desire found in Hardy's novels: "The continual mutability of sexual relationship is driven, it would seem, by instinctive response rather than by emotional (or, still less, legal) commitment." She adds, "Character after character experiences desire as force overmastering individual will. . . . Stunned, mesmerized, dizzied by desire, these characters act under the power of a kind of natural law that at once motivates and undermines the making and unmaking of their socially ratified relationships" (xvii-xviii). With the mutability of natural law, Hardy held no firm stance on women's rights, but wrote primarily on the prohibiting artifice found in Victorian standards. His fictional characters depict a longing for a return to a natural existence in their intimate relationships, with each of his novels unfolding more defined New Woman heroines. From Cytherea Graye to Sue Bridehead, the heroines of Thomas Hardy demonstrate the evolution of women's reemergence as independent-minded individuals as well as the destructive repercussions created by a society unwilling to embrace a natural element that cannot be easily contained or controlled.

It was the end of the Victorian era, and Hardy was torn between his desire to portray women as capable and intelligent, while preserving his own essentialist ideas. Through his novels, Hardy offered his women a voice reflecting the anxiety and ambiguity of their changing role in society. One of his most successful heroines, Bathsheba Everdene, best articulates women's difficulty in expressing themselves. In her effort to dissuade Farmer Boldwood from his marriage proposition as a business transaction in *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874), Bathsheba exclaims, "It is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in a language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs" (308). Similar to Bathsheba's determination to manage her farm as a single woman, the growth and development of the independent woman with a voice

and some degree of influence was a gradual process, which can be interpreted as a reflection of Darwin's theory of evolution. It took time and work and a great deal of effort to create a world in which women could live with recognition and equality. Noting his awareness of Victorian sensitivities and his novels' ongoing revisions until the end of his life, Rosemarie Morgan suggests that Hardy took advantage of the changing attitudes regarding sexual issues over the last two decades of the nineteenth century. In her introduction to *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Morgan writes that his writing "tends to empower readers to a sense of omnipotence and, consequently, to an emotional generosity and a compassion for the human struggle in perspective" (xxv). With this approach, Morgan adds, Hardy invited complicity, understanding that it would take more than force and argument for women to achieve a measure of equality in the growing global economy of an ever-shrinking world. It was a process that would take collaborative effort and multiple concessions from both sexes of all social classes.

The evolution and emergence of the New Woman and a sense of female empowerment are common themes in most of Hardy's major novels as he was keenly aware of the radically changing world at the end of the Victorian era as well as the struggles women faced in their evolution from a subservient role to the empowered New Woman figure. The Modern era ushered in new ideas of technology and industry along with new perspectives on personal relationships. Perhaps no "new" concept was more challenging or threatening than that of the New Woman. Promoted as a political agenda by women's rights advocate and novelist Sarah Grand in 1894, "The New Woman" was a generalized phrase describing an economically independent woman who stood socially, politically, and educationally equal among men. It was a topic of much concern and debate in both England and the United States in the late nineteenth century. Grand's work focused on the ideal of the New Woman and the responsibility of the

higher social classes in maintaining the power of the British Empire. Though she addressed the double standards in the different moral codes for men and women, Grand did not release women from the responsibility of having children. She argued that it was the woman's national duty to raise healthy children who would be a credit to England and heirs to the British Empire.

Motherhood is an important topic in Hardy's novels as well. Most of his heroines are future mothers—or would have been had they been able to survive an oppressive existence. Bathsheba is one of the few strong female characters of Hardy's novels that lives and finds happiness in marriage with Gabriel Oak following an unfortunate union with the self-serving “walking ruin to honest girls” Sergeant Troy (*Madding* 144). After Boldwood murders her errant husband at the Christmas party, Bathsheba finds the dignity and strength to hold his head in her lap and cover his wound with a handkerchief, manifesting a calm that astonishes the household. Hardy describes her as “the stuff of which great men's mothers are made. She was indispensable to high generation, feared at tea-parties, hated in shops, and loved at crisis” (*Madding* 333). According to Hardy, it took more than womanhood to be a great man's mother. While Hardy steered clear of political involvement and feminist activists, Grand aligned women's duties with national responsibility, undermining much of her feminist ideals. In *The New Woman and the Empire*, Iveta Jusova argues that Grand's “loyalty to the colonial narrative” seriously jeopardized her feminist agenda. She asserts that the early activist's literary work “inherited the racial bias of the evolutionary discourse and implicitly and explicitly supported British imperialism, connecting feminist issues for many of Grand's contemporaries with racism of the imperialist project” (45). Unlike Grand, Hardy held no feminist agenda—only a respect for strong women and disgust for a world that expected them to be small and silent. He seldom mentions politics or national identity in any of his novels, but his settings are undeniably the

English countryside, and it was undoubtedly England that would suffer for the loss of strong women who would have become “great men’s mothers” (*Madding* 333).

Hardy was born at the height of English rule, in 1840, and he lived to see its decline, dying in 1928 at age eighty-seven. He lived long enough to be steeped in Victorian ideals of societal structure, yet he demonstrated an acceptance and understanding of the growing expectations of human nature in Modern times. At the time of his birth, it was considered wanton for a woman to show her ankles in public, yet Flappers were dancing the Charleston the year of his death. The author of one of his biographies, Claire Tomalin, perhaps phrased it best when she titled her biography of Hardy *The Time-Torn Man*. A self-described meliorist, Hardy was also an artist, craftsman, naturalist, evolutionist, essentialist, and man who loved women as much as he seemingly feared them. He lived in a time of flux and was exposed to many new ideas that he combined with his own life experiences and personal outlook to form a vision of how things should and would be, even though they weren’t just yet. As Sue Bridehead sums up her reasons for marrying Phillotson in her confession to Jude, “When people of a later age look back upon the barbarous customs and superstitions of the times that we have the unhappiness to live in, what *will* they say!” (*Jude* 187) Though he attempted to project himself as a modernist, Hardy often remained trapped in gender assumptions, as evident in the way women are presented in most of his novels. The tragic endings of his last two novels beg the question of Hardy’s comfort level with the New Woman figures he presents in Tess and Sue, possibly bringing them low as consequence and punishment for their desires to break free from society’s expectations. While narrative revenge is a common argument against Hardy, he was no misogynist; he was an essentialist, hopeful that women could improve their roles in society but convinced that it was

not possible for them to escape their essential nature, the fundamental element of their being that made them passive and therefore vulnerable.

A solitary, unassuming man, Hardy challenged the rigid code of Victorian social standards in his writing. In an evolutionary discourse of their own, each of Hardy's novels grows progressively more revealing, highlighting the hypocrisy and futility of the era's double standards and suppression of women, culminating in the shocking storylines of his last two works. Through his fictional characters, Hardy challenges his readers to reflect upon the damaging consequence of social expectations on all humanity but most especially women. His stories grew more intense, pushing the envelope of social acceptance with each publication until the pressures of scathing critics finally outweighed the profits from soaring book sales. Social reformer, physician, and recognized expert on human sexuality, Havelock Ellis wrote an analysis of Hardy's work in 1882 when *Two on a Tower* was first published. Ellis noted that Hardy's first work demonstrated such a profound understanding of the female psyche that many readers believed the author was a woman, including early critics:

The minute observation, the delicate insight, the conception of love as the one business of life, and a singularly charming reticence in its delineation, are qualities which, if not universally characteristic of woman's work in fiction, are such as might with propriety be attributed to it—at all events from an *a priori* standpoint. (*From Marlowe to Shaw* 230-231)

Ellis further noted that women, specifically George Eliot, Jane Austen, and Charlotte Bronte, had authored the most influential modern works in English fiction of the era. Reviewing the attributes of Hardy's characters from his first published novel, Ellis commented on the evolution of the characters, particularly the female protagonists, acknowledging that while not evil, they

had something of the demonic about them—a fundamental element of nature that could not be controlled. Ellis suggested that Hardy’s insight into the female psyche made the author not only an artist but a psychologist as well.

Noting that Hardy’s heroines share characteristics with Shakespeare’s “Undines of the earth,” Ellis referred to them as simple, charming “untamed children of Nature” (234). He recognized that it was their “demonic” element that prevented them from being too good which is “precisely that which saves them from ever being very bad,” giving them an “instinctive self-respect, an instinctive purity” (234). The untamed element in a child of nature is embodied in most of Hardy’s female protagonists. For example, Bathsheba Everdene who “simply observed herself as a fair product of Nature in a feminine direction” (*Madding* 6), is also the same young woman who “was going to be a governess once, you know, only she was too wild” (*Madding* 25). In Ellis’ first analysis of Hardy’s work, he predicted that the author would continue to write, pursuing a vein of comedy found in *The Hand of Ethelberta*. He could not have foreseen that Hardy would later write of an adulterous heroine of “instinctive purity,” titling his novel *A Pure Woman Faithfully Represented*, followed by a novel of two people living outside the law of marriage and the tragic murder/suicide of their children. Nonetheless, he remained supportive of Hardy’s depiction of women.

Ellis revisited Hardy’s works in 1896, following the publications of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. While there was no comedy in either novel, Ellis was not disappointed. He lauded both works, calling *Jude the Obscure* “the greatest novel in England for many years” (274). He added that the book demonstrated “a fine self-restraint, a complete mastery of all the elements of an exceedingly human story” (275). He blasted Hardy’s critics for accusing him of writing with sexually-charged sensationalism, exclaiming that previous works

once regarded as scandalous, such as *Jane Eyre*, *Tom Jones*, and *Madame Bovary*, were later revered as indispensable novels of classic literature. Ellis also addressed the evolution of Hardy's writing: "The progress of his art has consisted in bringing this element of nature into ever closer contact with the rigid routine of life, making it more human, making it more moral or more immoral. It is an inevitable progression" (278). Acknowledging the author's genius, Ellis was among the first to recognize Hardy's contribution to the feminist movement and the creation of the New Woman.

Noting his portrayal of independent-minded women defying Victorian expectations in their struggle to gain recognition and equality, another contemporary critic joined Ellis in his favorable commentary on Hardy's works. In his 1970 novel, *Thomas Hardy; The Critical Heritage*, R.G. Cox includes Coventry Patmore's observations regarding Hardy's portrayal of the New Woman. Ironically, the author of "The Angel in the House," which depicts the ideal wife and mother as selfless and devoted, believed there was something positive in Hardy's rebellious heroines. Cox observes that the nineteenth-century poet and critic held the unconventional opinion that an entirely proper and pure Victorian woman was not necessarily fulfilled. By denying her negative emotions, she risked inhibiting her potential to fully embrace love. Patmore noted,

It is in his heroines, however that Hardy is most original and delightful . . . each has the charm of the simplest and most familiar womanhood, and the only character they have in common is that of having each some serious defect, which only makes us like them more . . . he [Hardy] is too rich in human tenderness not to know that love never glows with its fullest ardour unless it has something dreadful to forgive. (148)



Like Ellis, Patmore believed that it was in their failure to adhere to convention that Hardy's female characters are most human, most natural, most likeable.

However, not all contemporary critics shared Ellis's and Patmore's positive perspectives on the women in Hardy's works. In fact, most of the reviews regarding his later works were particularly negative, such as conservative Mrs. Margaret Oliphant in an article titled "The Anti-Marriage League" in an 1896 edition of *Blackwood's Magazine*, printed one year after Hardy's last novel. She asserted that Hardy's male characters are victims of "seductions of sirens" and "remorseless ministers of destiny, these determined operators, managing all of the machinery of life so as to be secure in their own way" (Cox 260). Oliphant further stated, "We rather think the author's object must be, having glorified women by the creation of Tess, to show after all what destructive and ruinous creatures they are, in general circumstances and in every development, whether brutal or refined" (Cox 260). Oliphant's critique of Hardy's work was typical of Victorian society's rigid social code: women should be subservient to men, compliant and without complaint. Otherwise, they are sirens taking control of the "machinery of life," examples of the New Woman which should be feared and avoided—if not destroyed. Though Oliphant reflected the majority, perspectives on the New Woman's role in society were slowly changing. People began to reconsider where they stood on the matter of the Marriage Question and the role of women in general, and Hardy's heroines were part of that process.

As a novelist, Hardy became more daring as book sales grew, and the advent of the US Copyright Act in 1890 followed by the International Copyright Law in 1891 increased his wealth, making it possible for him to ignore more flagrantly the demands of his critics. Noting Hardy's ongoing revisions to all of his novels "in response to the differing climates of opinion in the 1870s, 1880s and early 1890s," Patricia Ingram suggests that he took advantage of the

growing acceptance of sexual topics to write more boldly of his true feelings regarding sexual morality (Preface, *Desperate Remedies* x). Early in his writing career, Hardy's goal was primarily to earn an income and he made considerable sacrifices to his critics, editing his work and omitting what were considered sexually charged scenes and open defiance against social structure. Shortly after publishing *A Pair of Blue Eyes* in 1873, he wrote to his editor, Leslie Stephen, explaining his immediate plan and long-term aspirations: "Perhaps I may have higher aims some day, and be a great stickler for the proper artistic balance of the completed work, but for the present circumstances lead me to wish merely to be considered a good hand at a serial" (*Life* 102). Hardy acknowledged the necessity to appease the Victorian reader's expectations, but he also rebelled against the confining demands of the publishing houses. As Henry Knight exclaims of Elfrida's romance in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, "Mean! I mean that the majority of books published are neither good enough nor bad enough to provoke criticism, and that that book does provoke it" (126-127). Knight is referring to the weak storyline and naïve assumptions of "some girl in her teens," but Hardy's opinion is projected as well: books either have to be very good or very bad to garner any criticism at all, and his last two novels must have been especially good. He weathered the fallout from the reviews in 1891 after *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* was published, but the torrent of negative commentary following the publication of *Jude the Obscure* in 1895 proved more than he could bear. The end of his writing career as a novelist coincided with the close of the Victorian era.

Regardless of his personal motivations regarding society, women, and nature, the work of Thomas Hardy was used as an argument in the Women's Rights Movement. Feminists of the era used his literary works to influence viewpoints regarding marriage laws, divorce proceedings, suffrage, and equality in education and career opportunities. After the publication of *Tess* in

1891, Hardy was asked to become the Vice President of the Women's Progressive Society, an invitation he politely declined. While he valued women, he held no aspirations to promote their political agenda. This was a source of contention with his wife, Emma, who remained active in the suffragist movement until the end of her life. In 1894, she wrote to her friend Mary Haws that her husband's interest in women's suffrage was "nil" and that he cared only about the women he invented (Tomalin 251). Hardy's wife was dissatisfied with his participation in the Women's Movement, though she acknowledged that he cared deeply for his fictional heroines. As his contemporary biographer H.C. Duffin noted in 1937,

It is not Hardy who treats his women cruelly, but life--life as Hardy saw it. What Hardy could do for women he did--he made them full of beauty, interest, fascinating and lovable qualities of all kinds, he gave them great parts to play, and let them (generally) play those parts well. His estimate of woman is high, but tempered and conditioned by keen observation of the realities round him... . Hardy is no misogynist, but a true lover in very deed. (238)

A more recent biographer, writing at the onset of the Women's Rights Movement during the Civil Rights era in 1967, Irving Howe shared Duffin's view on Hardy's attitude toward women. He observed, "As a writer of novels Thomas Hardy was endowed with a precious gift: he liked women" (108). It was his affection for women that made him an early feminist, Howe asserted.

Feminist critics in the 1970s cited the works of Thomas Hardy in support of women's liberation. Mary Jacobus attributed Hardy's "compassionate identification with his heroine with an authorial allegiance to a living, breathing, sentient woman [which] evades external standards of judgment" (321). Jacobus added that Hardy does not attempt to portray Tess for more than what she is; he does not idealize her, but rather, he humanizes her, not hesitating to portray her as

having feelings of intensity, leading to passion and murder. Tess is not to be criticized for her needs, but rather her needs should be recognized as natural, and Hardy presents her with clarity and without judgment. Jacobus also made a similar observation about his depiction of Sue: "Hardy is imaginatively generous towards both sides of the struggle, but as always his most intense feeling is for the loser. . . . Sue's tormented consciousness haunts us more than Jude's bitter oblivion" (324). Feeling most intensely for the "loser" might place Hardy as an advocate for women in the Women's Rights Movement, both in his time and in the Civil Rights era of the twentieth century. In 1979, for instance Rosalind Miles agreed about Hardy's concern for women. She wrote, "Heartsick at the world's cruelty, or worse, indifference, Hardy solaced himself by creating feminine softness and constancy. He found a recurrent consolation in rendering with loving exactness, through the mediation of these imaginary women, the sensations of the castaway" (27). This assertion does not entirely align with feminist ideals, but it recognizes Hardy's awareness of women's struggles; he made them human and depicted their needs and passions as natural rather than destructive creations.

Though Jacobus and Miles joined Ellis and Patmore in perceiving Hardy's writings as advocating for women, more recent feminist readers disagree. Penny Boumelha's extensive study, *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form*, examines Hardy's depiction of female characters and portrays the author as less than kind to the struggles of women. Boumelha calls attention to what she refers to as Hardy's "sexist pattern," asserting that *Tess* demonstrates "an unusually overt maleness in the narrative voice. The narrator's erotic fantasies of penetration and engulfment enact a pursuit, violation and persecution of Tess in parallel with those she suffers at the hands of her two lovers" (120). Boumelha's assertion of a male voice contrasts considerably with Ellis's previous observation that Hardy's feminine

characteristics held a “charming reticence” in his earlier fiction. More than a century after Hardy’s last published novel, Boumelha disagrees with his male contemporary critics. She argues that Hardy is no better than Alec, who rapes Tess, and Angel who deserts her. Even more scathing than Boumelha's observations is the perspective of Emma Tennant, who compares Hardy with the Minotaur in wait to devour his victims, abandoning voyeurism for consumption. Tennant suggests that Hardy held an “incestuous obsession with his own creation... . His is the male controlling imagination that devours women in its lair: Monster eats the Muse” (123). The radically differing assessments of Women’s Studies regarding Hardy’s writing demonstrate the paradoxes of a man who seemed strangely aloof yet keenly aware of societal expectations and women’s struggles to align their roles with their natures at the end of the Victorian era. Perhaps earlier feminists were encouraged with any indication of an author’s sympathy toward women while more modern feminists are dissatisfied with anything less than total female empowerment. These extreme views of Hardy's works, spanning the course of more than a century, reflect the ambiguities of the author himself. He has been accused of being a misogynist as well as an advocate for women, a constant commentary that is reflective of *The Time-Torn Man* who was both fascinated by and fearful of the New Woman. It seems that the inner contradictions of the New Woman, as well as the differing attitudes towards Hardy in literary criticism, reflect this unresolved tension between biological destiny and free will.

## CHAPTER 2

## HARDY AND WOMEN:

## HARDY'S PERSONAL, POLITICAL, AND PHILOSOPHICAL INFLUENCES REGARDING WOMEN

Hardy's affinity for women and their connection to nature is evident throughout all of his major novels, and though he portrays them as strong and capable, he also illustrates their vulnerabilities. While he seemingly promotes the assertion of individuality, the paradox remains: his belief, as revealed in his novels, is that women, try as they might, cannot escape gender determinism—another example of the author's ambiguity. He has a generous fondness for women, but many of his fictional heroines endure rejection and unhappiness as if they are being punished for their nonconformity. According to Hardy women are like Nature; they are nurturing, often unpredictable, and occasionally destructive. As elements of nature, Hardy intimates that women should be accepted and allowed to grow and thrive in a nurturing environment free from oppression and social judgment. He asserts it is women's nature to be passive as well as passionate, traits that required considerable modification in the Victorian era with women's changing roles and society's expectations.

The end of the Victorian era marked the culmination of more than a century rife with change, and the role of the New Woman had been abundantly addressed in politics, philosophy, and literature. The assertions of late eighteenth-century feminist advocate Mary Wollstonecraft and the political agenda of John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth century suggested society functioned as a new fate which determined people's lives. Schopenhauer's metaphysics parallels this determination in denying free will and negating desire. He wrote of sacrificing pleasure to avoid pain in *The World of Will and Idea*. Schopenhauer's pessimism influenced intellectuals like Flaubert and Tolstoy, who wrote novels promoting the idea that individuals must assert

themselves within a kind of social fate. Hardy read the works of these philosophers and novelists extensively, supplementing his formal education with life-long self study. Though he was clearly influenced by the politics, philosophy, and literature of his era, he exercised independent thought, denied any firm belief in the ideas and theories of others, and never really found definitive views regarding women in nature and society. On New Year's Eve 1901, he wrote,

After reading various philosophic systems, and being struck with their contradictions and futilities, I have come to this—*Let every man make a philosophy for himself out of his own experience.* He will not be able to escape using terms and phraseology from earlier philosophers, but let him avoid adopting their theories if he values his own mental life. (*Life* 333)

Observing women with internal ambiguities regarding their role in society, Thomas Hardy attempted to create his own philosophy but was torn between societal standards and the drive to promote equality, an internal tension that he never fully resolved. His literary works combine the philosophy and politics of the Victorian era as well as nineteenth century literature. Hardy's intellectual contexts are relevant to the conflict between nature and convention in his female characters, and he combines a mix of utilitarian and existential ideas, thus redefining the standard for the human condition in his writing. Caught between the accepted norms of Victorian society and the change ushered in with the Modern era, Hardy created stories that more accurately defined the transitional struggles of the New Woman. Although Tess and Sue meet unfortunate ends, their stories are not tragedies; the hope of progress, the natural (albeit painful) evolution of a better society, remains. True to his meliorist assertions, Hardy believed people have the ability to improve their lives and that suffering can be ennobling.

With an essentialist's alternate perspective, Hardy uses nature as a recurring theme, and the nature of his heroines, especially Tess and Sue, combines passivity with independence and strong will. Hardy believed it was something more than environment that influences women's roles in society. According to him, it is something inherent in their very nature that allows them to be passive and malleable, though not inferior or weak. After attending an event at Whitelands Training School in April 1891, Hardy writes his observation of the female students: "Their belief in circumstances, in convention, in the rightness of things, which you know to be not only wrong, but damnably wrong, makes the heart ache, even when they are waspish and hard... . You feel how entirely the difference of their ideas from yours is of the nature of misunderstanding" (*Life* 246). Hardy recognized women's susceptibility to convention as well as their capitulation to social expectation. He attempted to reconcile these passive attributes with women's inherent strength and capability through political and philosophical study and observation.

Counting Mill among his intellectual heroes, Hardy attended Mill's campaign speech at Covent Garden in 1865 when he was an impressionable young scholar. Nearly 40 years later, the author recalled his experience and wrote a description of the social reformer: "He stood bareheaded, and his vast pale brow so thin-skinned as to show the blue veins, sloped back like a stretching upland, and conveyed to the observer a curious sense of perilous exposure" (*Life* 356). Impressed with Mill's liberal political views about equality within societal structure, Hardy studied his essays with vigor. His copy of *On Liberty* is heavily marked with annotations and many of the passages are underlined, including one regarding individual thought that Sue Bridehead quotes in *Jude the Obscure*. In June 1876, Hardy reflected on Mill's perspective of independent thought; he writes of "the irritating necessity of conforming to rules which in



themselves have no virtue” (*Life* 114). He was in agreement with Mill’s celebration of the individual, examining nature and establishing limits of societal encroachment on personal life.

Hardy was intrigued with Mill’s liberal political perspectives on women’s rights. Mill’s assertions were reflective of the views posited by Mary Wollstonecraft, his predecessor in the feminist movement and author of *A Vindication on the Rights of Women*, 1792. Though he intentionally placed considerable distance between himself and the controversial feminist, Mill’s ideas were primarily inspired by the early activist, who combined her skill as a writer with her desire to expose the falseness of the conventional attitudes concerning women. In the late eighteenth century, it was widely believed that women had both inferior mental power and moral sense compounded by a frail and weak constitution. As an anti-essentialist, Wollstonecraft argued that women were products of their environment; they were inferior because they were treated as such. While many women accepted the subservient role with no objection, Wollstonecraft, like Tess Durbeyfield and Sue Bridehead, found it both objectionable and unacceptable. She writes, “Behold, I should answer the natural effect of ignorance! The mind will ever be unstable that has only prejudices to rest on, and the current will run with destructive fury when there are no barriers to break its force” (23). Anti-essentialists like Wollstonecraft asserted that until women were extended the rights of equality and education they would continue to act as they were treated, as ignorant children. She argued that it was environment more than nature that promoted the idea of woman's weakness.

Hardy seems to have explored the anti-essentialist’s concept of environmental influence in *The Woodlanders*. The female protagonist, Grace Melbury is from a working-class family in a small, rural village. Determined to elevate her to a higher social position, her timber merchant father sends her away to a finishing school, gladly paying the one hundred pounds per year for

her improvement. And though she returns “glorified and refined” (34), “What people therefore saw of her in a cursory view was very little; in truth mainly something that she was not” (36). Though graceful, socially adept, and exceedingly articulate, Grace passively accepts her father’s guidance in selecting a husband, even when he repeatedly changes his mind. She marries Dr. Edred Fitzpiers at her father’s request, though she cares little for him and is suspicious of his constancy. After discovering his infidelity only two months after their wedding, Grace’s “senses reveled in a sudden lapse back to Nature unadorned” (186). When admonished by her father to make the best of her situation and consider herself blessed in having received a good education and being the wife of a professional man, she exclaims, “I wish I worked in the woods like Martyr South” (200). Her father eventually sees her dilemma and tries to alleviate her discomfort, but his attempts to obtain her a divorce fail because the new law dictates that in addition to adultery, men must commit some other offence, such as violence, incest, sodomy, or desertion. Grace’s father tells her plainly, “I was deluded. He has not done you enough harm. You are still subject to his beck and call” (264). Grace is literally and figuratively caught in a man-trap, a recurring theme in the novel. She returns to her husband, hoping that “she might make of him a true and worthy husband yet” (319). Hardy’s essentialist views are projected in Grace’s nature taking precedence over her nurturing. If social expectations had not persuaded her and had the law been more equitable, Grace would have thrived in her own nature, and “Nature was bountiful, she thought” (186).

Even with a proper education, essentialists and anti-essentialists agreed that greater equality would not exempt women from their biological function and responsibility to have and nurture children. Wollstonecraft asserts, “a right always includes a duty, and I think it may likewise fairly be inferred that [parents] forfeit the right who do not fulfill the duty” (171). She

states that while women would continue to have children, their role as mothers should not preclude their rights as human beings. Seeming to agree with this argument, Hardy often wrote of motherhood and Nature as Mother; they were recurring themes in his novels. Some of his early female characters die in childbirth or from complications following childbirth, but the heroines of his last two novels actually become mothers, though society deprives them the opportunity to properly nurture their children. Tess is responsible, nursing Sorrow in the field while taking a break from her duties. She also makes certain that he receives a baptism she finds acceptable and as good a burial as she can arrange. Likewise, Sue is always depicted as being a responsible mother, making certain that her children are clothed, sheltered, fed, and educated. Sue also embraces the role of mother to Little Father Time, something that Arabella found unimportant except when it promoted her own agenda. Both Tess and Sue are independent in thought and action, but they do not neglect their responsibilities as mothers. Seeming to agree with Sarah Grand and Mary Wollstonecraft about women's duty to have and raise children, Hardy notes the sacrifice of his heroines as it relates to their ability as mothers. The question of how motherhood and equality could be reconciled remained unresolved for many years.

Displaying Wollstonecraft's sentiments, Mill seemingly believed that much remained the same for women seventy-seven years after the first publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. In the 1869 publication of *The Subjection of Women*, he writes, "Society makes the whole life of a woman, in the easy classes, a continued self-sacrifice; it exacts from her an unremitting restraint of the whole of her natural inclinations, and the sole return it makes to her for what often deserves the name of martyrdom, is consideration" (306). Most of Hardy's fictional women struggle because they fail to restrain their "natural inclinations" and rather than consideration, they receive harsh legal and social judgments. From this perspective, Hardy's

heroines are martyrs of the feminist agenda. Concerned with the legal and political aspects of equality, Mill wrote that he saw no reason for refusing women the vote. He also addressed the legal aspects of marriage, noting that the laws were unjust and unnatural, comparing marriage to a form of slavery. His remarks regarding nature and the English Victorian ideal were incisive: “Both in a good and a bad sense, the English are farther from a state of nature than any other modern people. They are more, than any other people, a product of civilization and discipline. England is the country in which social discipline has most succeeded, not so much in conquering, as in suppressing, whatever is liable to conflict with it” (283). Though Mill said little that Wollstonecraft had not already written, his essay was received with far less vehemence. Perhaps his views were more widely accepted because he was not the “fallen woman” Wollstonecraft was perceived to be. However, it was widely known and accepted that he had been intimately involved with a married woman for many years, marrying her following her husband's death, providing a reflection of the era's double standard. He was a man, a well-known philosopher, and a Member of Parliament at the time of the publication, but it is possible that Mill was not so fiercely attacked because society had already begun to embrace some feminist ideals. *The Subjection of Women* became a best-seller and further stimulated the discussion of feminist ideas.

Mill's work on equality for women arrived two years prior to the publication of Thomas Hardy's first novel, *Desperate Remedies*. Hardy started his career at a time when the Women's Movement had already established itself and was building considerable momentum. Feminist ideas were known and discussed, and some results had been achieved. In 1870, the Education Act had made elementary education compulsory for girls as well as boys and allowed women to vote for School Boards. Schools providing adequate secondary education for girls had been in

operation for some time, and in London the first women's colleges providing university education had just opened. Although the Oxford and Cambridge Local Examinations had been open to women since the late nineteenth century, "Cambridge did not issue degrees to women until 1921" (*Women at Cambridge* 2). Women were soon to prove that mental inferiority was a fiction, something Hardy included in his novels. In his early days as an author, women were becoming shop assistants, clerks, secretaries, nurses, teachers, journalists, and a few pioneers were preparing for the learned professions. Some progress had been made for married women, as well. The Infant's Custody Act of 1839 and the Divorce Law of 1857 provided wives some measure of rights within their marriage. This legislation gave mothers custodial rights to their children under age seven, "but they could not take custody if they had been found to be adulterous" (Hurvitz 2). A series of acts and lawsuits covering the latter part of the nineteenth century began to rectify many of the legal wrongs. Although attempts to get the franchise for women would not succeed until well into the next century, the Women's Movement was making progress. Hardy was not a proponent of forcing political agendas; he believed in the slow process of natural evolution. As he wrote of Clym Yeobright in *The Return of the Native*, "A man should only be partially before his time; to be completely in the vanward in aspirations is fatal to fame" (156). Hardy was not in the vanward for women's rights and did not openly support suffrage like Mill, but he was in the debate through his fictional New Woman heroines. Hardy wrote fourteen novels from 1871 to 1895, all addressing issues of love, sex, and marriage complicated by socially and sexually mismatched characters. He did not idealize his female protagonists; he created them without trying to save them, and he only met with criticism on a large scale when he challenged society's conventions regarding sexual instincts, sexual morality, marriage and divorce with the publication of his last two novels.

Wollstonecraft and Mill advocated for a change in environment, a different type of nurturing for women. Though not a suffragist, Hardy promoted a better education for women. Many of his female characters hold an education above other women of their social standing. Though not college educated, Tess can read and write and is smart enough to learn new trades and support herself. Also her language is more refined than that of her parents. Vulgar in manners and approach, Tess's parents will brag while talking with pride of their famous ancestors. Conversely Tess is quiet, reserved and reflective, speaking with more cultured tones of living on a blighted star. Harboring a desire to marry Tess off to a member of the alleged rich side of the family, Joan Durbeyfield informs her eldest daughter "that wer [sic] all a part of the larry! We've been found to be the greatest gentlefolk in the whole country—reaching all back long before Oliver Grumble's time—to the days of the Pagan Turks—with monuments and vaults and crests and 'scutcheons, and the Lord know what-all" (*Tess* 13). Tess could and does speak her family's dialect, but having attended the National School, founded in 1811, she passes the sixth standard under the guidance of a London-trained mistress, affording her the ability to speak another language: standard English. Responding to her younger brother's inquiries about their place in the universe, Tess, although most probably unknowingly, makes reference to Shakespeare's *King Lear* and incorporates her knowledge of nature to define the world in which they live:

"Did you say the stars were worlds, Tess?"

"Yes."

"All like ours?"

"I don't know; but I think so. They sometimes seem to be like the apples on our stubbard-tree. Most of them splendid and sound—a few blighted."

“Which do we live on—a splendid one or a blighted one?”

“A blighted one.” (21)

Having received an education, Tess has been nurtured to speak proper English. Her recollection of a blighted star is also suggestive that she has been exposed to literary classics. Similar to Grace Melbury, Tess returns to the world of nature, comparing stars to the apples on her family’s tree. She uses what she has learned with what she has always known to gain better insight into her standing in the grand scheme of things. Equally articulate, Sue receives much of her education from her father, and her reading exceeds that of Jude. She is his intellectual equal, if not his superior, and can quote lines from classic literature as well as the political theories of John Stuart Mill. Hardy gives his New Woman characters educations that are believable given their social limitations, but his heroines remain mostly passive, indicative of his essential perspective on women’s nature. Tess looks to Angel and Alec for guidance and support, and Sue often defers to Jude and eventually returns to Phillotson, as Grace returns to Fitzpiers. Regardless of their abilities, Hardy believes that it is in women’s nature to acquiesce, contrasting with the anti-essentialist assertions of Wollstonecraft and Mill.

Though Hardy confronts convention by rejecting the Victorian ideals of relations between the sexes in his literary works, his avoidance of a political agenda leads to the belief that he did not entirely agree with the philosophy and agenda of Mill and, indirectly, Wollstonecraft. His conservative views about women’s right to vote did not mean that he disparaged women or was an unrelenting misogynist; they simply meant that he was both a man of principle and a paradoxical man torn between the real and the ideal. Although Hardy was impressed by Mill’s political assertions, Schopenhauer was perhaps his strongest philosophical influence. After reading *The World as Will and Idea* in 1883, Hardy began to consider nature as the basic force

that impels all processes, a topic he explored in his notebooks and letters, along with his thoughts on Darwin and Nietzsche. He accepted Darwin's philosophy and, though mostly embracing Schopenhauer's *Will and Idea*, he held conflicting views about Nietzsche's promotion of the individual over the collective, an ongoing struggle he experienced throughout his life and is best represented in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. Hardy's novels often reflect the conflict between instinct and intellect and convention and nature. He seems to regard instinct as something fundamental, untouched by civilization's conventions. The intellect, on the other hand, may be and is influenced by upbringing, education and society in general. Many of Hardy's female protagonists are intelligent, and their inquisitive nature leads them to make mistakes because of their conditioning by society. What Wollstonecraft and Mill regarded as choice in upbringing and education is considerably more complicated in Hardy's novels. He combines politics and philosophy to create a basic force influencing the essential nature of women that determines the personalities and lives of his educated heroines which includes natural instinct, convention, and common sense—a reflection of the struggle to reconcile social expectations with the assertion of free will.

Common sense, according to Hardy's novels, is that part of the intellect that should have the power to control natural instincts and judge social conventions in a logical and comparatively unprejudiced way by rejecting what is false. The tragedy with many of his heroines is that they permit themselves to fall in love regardless of convention or common sense; to love and desire love is inherent, part of their natural instinct. Their comparatively insignificant errors are often magnified through the eyes of their lovers who were brought up to regard social conventions as all-important. Through his unconventional heroines, Hardy addresses issues that had been overlooked in philosophy and politics. Wollstonecraft and Mill had little to say about the subject



of sexual morality. To them, many of the problems arising from sexual instincts would solve themselves if men and women were given a sensible upbringing and education. According to their proposals, a properly developed understanding would rein in an abundance of passion. Hardy's views differed, as evident in Grace Melbury's return to nature in *The Woodlanders*. Though he promoted better education for women and greater equality in the nurturing process, as an essentialist, he understood women differently. To Hardy, it was women's natural instinct that overruled common sense and social convention. His assertion was that what cannot be altered should be accepted and embraced, leaving him torn between the conventional Victorian standards and liberal feminist activists.

While Hardy expounded much on the teachings of Wollstonecraft and Mill, he added a mix of Darwin's natural philosophy and Schopenhauer's basic impelling force into his storylines, creating a new and provocative approach to the relationships among men and women and the world. Although biographer Michael Millgate found no evidence of Hardy reading Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* before 1859-1865, Hardy claimed to have been among the first to elaborate on the theory of evolution (*Life* 158). Aligning himself in the argument against divine design, Hardy writes,

For when the evolutionary process is considered in the wider and more organic relations that have been here discussed, it is clear that the peoples who represent the advanced sections of the race at the present day do so in virtue of qualities in the minds of those who preceded them which had no relation to the current environment. The people amongst them who are destined to inherit the future will similarly do so in virtue of qualities which have no utilitarian relationship to existing environment. (*Literary Notes*, 2: 2195)

Hardy doubts the existence of an autonomous spiritual element outside the sum total of existing matter, preferring to assert a process inherent in individuals and the society in which they are embedded. He concludes his thoughts on Darwinism by noting Leslie Stephen: “we are no longer forced to choose a fixed order imposed by supernatural sanction, & accidental combination capable of instantaneous and arbitrary reconstruction, [but] recognize in society, as in individuals the development of an *organic* structure by slow secular processes” (*Literary Notes*, 1: 1194). Hardy uses Tess and Sue as examples of organic structure. Jane Thomas observes Hardy’s characters operating as structures within structure, moving as individuals inside a community: She writes,

In both *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure* the central characters are thwarted by the relations of gender and class which are relations of power and powerlessness. The intricate analyses of the ways in which class and gender function as vital determinants of subjectivity in these novels serve mainly to ironize the presence of the “President of the Immortals” or other supernatural malevolents. (Thomas 18)

Hardy combines class and gender with social structure to create an ecosystem of organic beings that rely on one another for support and survival. Tess and Sue are strong and intelligent as individuals, but they fail to thrive when society rejects the growth of their independent thoughts and actions.

The tragic endings of Hardy’s last two novels seem to indicate a pessimistic view of women. As Hardy was seemingly influenced by Schopenhauer’s *Will and Idea* (1818), which he read in the late 1880s or early 1890s, some scholars argue that he expounds on the pessimism founded in the idea that the only act of free will is to deny the individual will through suicide

(Millgate 246). But Hardy wasn't ready to have his heroines kill themselves; they wanted to live. As Jane Thomas notes, "where Schopenhauer was prepared to accept unhappiness as the ultimate end of existence, Hardy was drawn to the suggestion that pain and misery could provide the positive stimulus to the amelioration of the human condition" (24). Hardy asserted that humanity had the ability to be motivated by sympathy and altruism that could override external forces. Modifying Darwin's claims about evolution, Hardy writes, "Altruism, or The Golden Rule, or whatever 'Love your Neighbor as Yourself' may be called, will ultimately be brought about I think by the pain we see in others reacting on ourselves, as if we and they were a part of one body. Mankind, in fact, may be and possibly will be, viewed as members of one corporeal frame" (*Life* 235). Although he shared some agreement with Schopenhauer's philosophy, Hardy held a more providential perspective, one of redemption through suffering. As Thomas observes,

Looked at positively, unhappiness could signify the reflective space in which the individual rebels against the vast impersonal system that is responsible for its existence. Unhappiness then becomes synonymous with free-will—the dissatisfaction with and the consequent desire to alter what we have become. Unhappiness contains the potential for radical reassessment and change in both the individual and the collective sphere in that it could conceivably stimulate resistance. Where resistance multiplies it eventually becomes a force for change as reverse discourses become dominant ones. (24)

Resistance becoming a force for change is an optimistic perspective on Hardy's alleged pessimism. Not all tragedies make a sad ending. Perhaps Michael Irwin negates views about Hardy's pessimism best in his introduction to *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. He argues, "In all Hardy's novels there are such moments of exaltation. His so-called pessimism is in fact defined

against his insistence on man's innate capacity for joy" (xi). Rather than being a pessimist, Hardy believes that there are better lives available for those who will strive to work against the "backward current" of the times as discussed by the farmers in *Desperate Remedies* (387).

In addition to his study of philosophy and politics, Hardy was also a student of literature and applied the works of other writers to his own perspective regarding women. True to his naturalist disposition, Hardy explored the evolution of literature, from the classics to realism and occasionally recorded his thoughts about literature's power to alter perspectives and create change. The written word was a living, growing being to Hardy, and he personifies the art with the female pronoun:

Literature, that confession of societies, could not remain a stranger to the general tacking about. First by instinct, afterwards by doctrine, she has regulated by the new spirit of her methods & her ideal... . It sought its personages in the social depths, but ... it was penetrated with the classic spirit ... its monsters became heroes the wrong way... . The declamatory theme was changed, but not the declamation. (*Literary Notes* 1: 1632)

Addressing the birth of realism, Hardy noted that people had grown weary of sentimental rhetoric and wanted something more in line with the truth of life. He refers to Gustave Flaubert as the "incontestable initiator of realism." Regarding Flaubert's realist approach, Hardy observes, "He went rapidly to the extreme consequences of the principle: no one could show us better than he the nothingness of that principle" (*Literary Notes* 1:1632). Hardy also addresses Tolstoy's influence: "By the sole virtues of naturalness & emotion the realist Tolstoi [sic] arrives, like G. Eliot, at making the most of banal histories a tranquil epopee... . It is the spirit of life which animates these books [Russian novels], the accent of sincerity and of sympathy" (*Literary*

*Notes* 1:1632). Qualities of integrity and compassion were paramount in his conception of life, so Hardy designed his own Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina, projecting sincerity and sympathy onto Tess Durbeyfield and Sue Bridehead, his personal portraits of the New Woman.

Initially met with scathing criticism, the works of Flaubert and Tolstoy took time to be recognized as timeless classics. Serialized in 1856 in the *La Review de Paris*, *Madame Bovary* soon became notorious for being the subject of a trial and attacked for obscenity. Flaubert was acquitted, and *Madame Bovary* is now regarded as one of the best works of nineteenth-century realism, detailing a beautiful woman's ruin by looking for an escape from the lifeless existence inside a loveless marriage. Two decades later, *Anna Karenina* was serialized in *The Russian Messenger* between 1873 and 1877. Though not as vehemently attacked as a work defiant of society's standards, it was initially dismissed as a petty romance before it received recognition as one of the greatest literary works of all time. Acknowledging the degree of attention Flaubert and Tolstoy bestowed upon their tragic heroines, Hardy was dissatisfied with an apparent lack of compassion for the unhappy women. To better tell the story of women's struggle, Hardy created characters that were no less biologically determined than their ancestors, but he gave them insight and presented them as products of a damaging and unforgiving Victorian society that judged harshly regardless of personal intent. Hardy's heroines, especially Tess and Sue, are representatives of the New Woman and reflect the fears and anxieties involved with the natural, impelling force that promotes the individual over the collective. And though Hardy was fearful of the New Woman himself, he admired her; he presented her to the world with character and strength and the promise of a better future.

## CHAPTER 3

## HARDY AND NORRIE WOODHALL:

## THE CONNECTION BETWEEN LIFE AND FICTION

To have had such insight into the needs and desires of women, Thomas Hardy generally revealed very little about himself directly. His conflicts about the New Woman as embodied in his female characters, most particularly Tess and Sue, are rooted in the contradictions of his personal life. A close examination of his relations with women, as well as his family history of out-of-wedlock births, explains his evasiveness as reflected in autobiographical non-disclosure. It may also possibly account for his discomfort at the human touch. The testimony of a woman who knew him in his lifetime is especially useful in unlocking this secretive Hardy.

An intensely private man, Thomas Hardy was reluctant to share his personal experiences to hopeful biographers. As he grew older and more famous, he responded to these demands with an architect's precision. He resolved the problem by composing an autobiography to be published after his death but represented as a biography by his second wife, Florence Emily Hardy. This ruse was not discovered until 1940, when Hardy's bibliographer Richard Little Purdy revealed the deception. It was important to him to project a very specific image of himself; appearances were paramount, and the author remains mostly elusive. As Robert Cantwell notes of Hardy in his introduction to the collector's edition of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, "he is himself a personal stranger, almost a mystery, although his life was almost mysteriously free of shadows and obscurity" (ix). According to Cantwell's observations, Hardy was not in the habit of writing himself into his novels:

Everything is known about him that people would like to know about Shakespeare, or that people think they would like to know about Shakespeare.

There is always a sense of Shakespeare's being in his plays, despite the lack of information on his life, but the meticulously preserved details on Hardy's career and whereabouts tell surprisingly little about him. (xv)

Though Cantwell's assertion may be true for some of Hardy's writing, it can be argued that aspects of the author are revealed in some of his characters. Some examples of this can be found in his last two novels, especially in the characters of Tess and Sue but also through Angel Clare and Jude Fawley, through whom parallels can be drawn in terms of gender assumptions. Like these two male characters, Thomas Hardy struggled with internal ambiguities. While seemingly trying to embrace the independent strength of the New Woman, he was restrained by the Victorian social standards of women's roles. Like Hardy, Angel Clare is concerned about appearances. Held by convention and social expectations, Angel Clare cannot accept Tess's confessed transgressions, though he has willfully engaged in similar unacceptable behavior, having had a sexual relationship with an older woman. He is the personification of the double standard typical of the Victorian age. Angel Clare assumes the role of the gentleman, though his nature is far more carnal. He gives considerable thought to the perception of others and rejects his new bride, though he claims to love her deeply. However, Hardy redeems himself in Angel Clare's conversion. He returns to Tess, comforts her, and though he cannot save her, he values her as a pure woman. As biographer Irving Howe notes,

Tess is one of the greatest examples we have in English literature of how a writer can take hold of a cultural stereotype and, through the sheer intensity of his affection, pare and purify it into something that is morally ennobling. Tess derives from Hardy's involvement with and reaction against the Victorian cult of

chastity, which from the beginning of his career he had known to be corrupted by meanness and hysteria. (110)

Through Angel Clare, Hardy projects the understanding that the current misery required a form of redemption through suffering for the betterment of those to come. True to his meliorist perspectives, circumstances could change through human effort, improving conditions for women in Victorian society, which would benefit all of society in turn. Though Tess is hanged for murder and Sue descends into guilt-ridden madness, their personal struggles help form an altered perspective for those living independently from socially defined norms. Jil Larson observes, “Hardy encouraged his readers to rethink conventional ideas about women and feeling, as difficult as that was during an age just beginning to understand women’s aspirations without fathoming how they could be realized” (170). Reflective of his ambivalence, Hardy could not allow the independent-minded female characters he loved to live happily after rejecting social expectations; as the title of the fifth phase of *Tess of the D’urbervilles* states, “The Woman Pays.” Hardy wrote truthfully and realistically, allowing his heroines’ sacrifices to facilitate an alteration of social expectations, creating a new world for those who would follow in their path of ingenuity, intellect, and independence. As both a meliorist and an essentialist, Hardy used his novels to advocate for social reform—a society that would nurture one’s inherent nature.

In *Jude Fawley*, Hardy bequeaths some of his most personal attributes, living vicariously through the impoverished scholar. Hardy gives Jude his father's vocation, stonemasonry, and a desire to learn more. He also gives Jude something else of special personal value: the love and friendship of his cousin. It is widely accepted that Thomas Hardy was enamored with his younger cousin, Tryphena Sparks, and loved her his entire life, writing a poem for her while on a train, later to learn his musings coincided with the time of her death. He consoled his grief of not



having any tangible items such as letters or locks of hair in which to remember her, reminding himself of the greater value of his recollections. In “Thoughts of Phena” Hardy wrote,

Thus I do but the phantom retain  
 Of the maiden of yore  
 As my happy relic; yet haply the best of her—fined in my brain  
 It may be the more. (17-20)

Retaining the memory of his beloved cousin was more valuable to Hardy than beholding a token, and he may have incorporated some of Tryphena’s characteristics in his conception of Sue Bridehead. In addition to being his cousin, Tryphena was left in straightened financial circumstances upon the death of her parents and attended a teacher’s training college to provide herself with qualifications that would afford her a vocation. Also like Sue, Tryphena neglected her academic responsibilities and was officially reprovved, though she was allowed to continue her training and later received a teaching position. In *The Time-Torn Man*, Claire Tomalin notes Hardy’s support of his young cousin following the death of her mother: “He gave Tryphena some French lessons, passing on what he had learnt at King’s College” (94). It is evident that Hardy learned the specific hardships of women in difficult circumstances through those he loved most early in life. He wanted to help them as he helped Tryphena, though he later considered that the only remnant of women would be “phantoms” or “relics,” as reflected in Tess and Sue.

First conceived in 1888 as "a short story of a young man—who could not go to Oxford," *Jude the Obscure* initially focused more on Sue than on its title character. In the first manuscript, Hardy describes Jude's thoughts about Sue, which depict her as elemental as the earth (Ingham, “The Evolution” 166). In a letter to his friend Florence Henniker in 1895, Hardy confided his personal interest in Sue's character. He wrote, "Curiously enough I am more interested in this

Sue story than in any I have written" (*Life* 84). It is interesting to note that Hardy's "Sue story" had a number of different names throughout the writing process, before Hardy settled on the final title. The first installment was published as "The Simpletons" in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in December 1894. The title changed to "Hearts Insurgent" and then to "The Recalcitrants." "What has generally gone unnoticed," notes Shanta Dutta in her study of Hardy's ambivalence, is that these three early titles all employ the plural form, suggesting that Hardy initially conceived of the novel as having a binary focus" (42). Hardy's last novel began with the story of a man, but the primary focus quickly shifted to the struggles of an independent-minded woman before it established itself as a story between the two. Contrasting Jude's intellect with Sue's nature, the binary focus indicates Hardy's affinity for the New Woman he created in Sue Bridehead, and when he dramatized the story in 1897 two of his provisional titles for the stage production were *The New Woman* and *A Woman with Ideas* (Millgate 312). Hardy's attention to Sue demonstrates her significance in the novel, but it is the male protagonist that garners first billing, indicating Hardy's desire to project himself into the role of a defeated visionary. Through Jude, Hardy was able to voice his dissatisfaction about Victorian hypocrisies. His last novel, while tragic, revealed the destructive power of societal expectations along with the blissful joy of living outside of them.

Hardy was also connected to Sue's character; he shared her aversion to intimacy. It is well known that Hardy did not like to be touched, especially on the shoulder or arm, leading most scholars to hold the belief that his relationships with women were more intellectual than physical. But also like Sue, he was not without deep, abiding passion. Many women, such as Tryphena Sparks, held a certain fascination for him over the course of his life, and his aversion to physical contact was merely a manifestation of his Victorian reticence; his passion took form in

his novels, particularly in the female protagonists of his final two. Through his characters, Hardy lived fiercely and independently, but in his personal life, he was a calm, educated, soft-spoken man interested in writing and animals and helping others when he could. He sympathized with the downtrodden, but had no illusions about the reality of societal sanctions. His perspective seems to alternate from championing women to punishing them. As Dutta observes, "Hardy is constantly changing his stance, shifting his sympathies, so that it is difficult to freeze this protean artist into a fixed, static attitude" (7). Like Angel and Jude, Hardy regarded himself as a man of independent thought, though he too was confined by the gender assumptions influenced by his Victorian nurturing and his instinctive nature.

Rife with internal ambiguity, Thomas Hardy gave his readers a safe avenue to explore the unquestioned hypocrisies of their lives by helping alter their perspectives. He seemed to understand the hardship families experienced when society looked upon their decisions with disfavor. Conceived before wedding vows himself, Hardy held a firm understanding about passion and impulses. Not only was his mother, Jemima, pregnant when she married, but both of his grandmothers had given birth to illegitimate children in their youth, as well as one of his great-grandmothers, all of whom were of independent mind and "flouted the rules of sexual behavior as laid down by the Church and gentry" (Tomalin 17). These maternal role models influenced Hardy tremendously. The illegitimate births in his family during an era when premarital sex was an indicator of flawed character may explain Hardy's evasiveness regarding his personal life and the distance he placed between himself and the women to whom he was attracted. His friend Horace Moule wrote to him in 1873 after reading a section of the manuscript to *A Pair of Blue Eyes* that Hardy clearly understood the woman far more than the lady. Moule's observation was on target: from Cythera Graye to Sue Bridehead, Hardy

demonstrates an exemplary understanding of the complexity that is woman. Resembling the women in his family, many of his female characters become pregnant out of wedlock and struggle with social stigma and personal judgment. As Tomalin notes in her biography, "He sympathized with them and defended them, but he showed them punished with the severity his society regarded as appropriate" (17). Hardy advocated for women though he could not save them from society or from themselves, but that didn't mean he did not appreciate the female sex and value the special contribution of women. As Dutta observes, "sexual inequality" and "woman as commodity . . . were a social reality in an age when a woman practically surrendered her legal existence on marriage" (126). She further explains the fear held by many in the Victorian era that women must be confined by their dependence on men. She writes,

If women overstep their traditional passive roles, social anarchy will surely result: this seems to be the paranoia of those critics who were hostile to the New Woman's bid for independence. Fear of the New Woman's disruptive potential and ridicule of what was considered her inordinate demand was widespread.  
(127)

Hardy's conflicting perspectives left him torn, ambivalent. He wanted to portray women as strong and capable, but he shared in Victorian society's anxiety about the New Woman and her "disruptive potential," something he experienced from birth.

Independent thinking and a disdain for convention were common characteristics in the women of the Hardy family. The tradition of biographical accounts indicates that the women in Hardy's family were opinionated, outspoken, and very influential throughout his life, particularly his mother, Jemina. She promoted his studies and advocated for an education better than what was typical for the son of a stonemason. It was also his mother who encouraged him to write,

giving him a desk that now sits on display in a replica of Hardy's study at Max Gate in the Dorchester Museum. Forced to marry because she was pregnant and labor the rest of her life as a stonemason's wife, Jemina was not a happy person; she had always wanted to live a more refined life. She shared her negative views of marriage with all of her four children, telling them stories steeped in fatalism, such as the tale of the husband who killed his wife because she burned his dinner. This pessimistic outlook on marriage is projected in one of the characters in *Jude the Obscure*. Jude's aunt Drusilla Fawley tells the hopeful young man, "Jude, my child, don't you ever marry. 'Tisn't for the Fawleys to take that step anymore" (*Jude* 9). He describes the elderly matron as a "tall, gaunt woman, who spoke tragically on the most trivial subject" (*Jude* 8). Hardy's mother helped her husband in his work and encouraged all of her children to receive the best education available to them, especially her eldest. Even her two daughters, sixteen years apart in age, received secondary education at a teacher's training college. Only Hardy married; his younger brother and sisters remained single. Jemina was a grandmother to none and retained her negative outlook throughout life, harboring a special distaste for her eldest son's first wife, Emma, whom she considered arrogant and patronizing. But in his childhood, Jemina supported her favored son, giving him opportunities to learn and experience nature with little confinement. His mother's critical perspective on social judgment and his early exposure to the natural world may not only explain Hardy's desire for privacy but may also account for his connection between women and nature.

Though he was rather weak as a small child, Hardy was deemed well enough to attend the Parish school in 1848 and soon became the favorite of school patron Julia Martin. Biographer Claire Tomalin observes that she was the first lady he had ever known, adding, "In truth, she was giving him his first love affair" (27). Mrs. Martin was thirty years his senior, but

he never forgot the different way she spoke, walked, and dressed, recalling later the very details of her dress and the “frou-frou” sound it made as she passed by; she made an impression that lasted a lifetime. Even from a tender youth, Hardy had eyes for ladies of a higher social standing. A few years later, when he was eleven, another life-long love arrived when his aunt Martha Sparks gave birth to Tryphena. While there has been some speculation that he and his cousin were secretly married in 1867, there has only been rumor rather than proof.

In addition to Tryphena, Hardy held special affinities for an attractive redheaded woman by the name of Elizabeth Brown, for whom he wrote the poem “To Lizzie Brown.” He held a fondness for refined ladies of Victorian aristocracy, including Florence Henniker and Lady Agnes Grove, both of whom had literary ambitions. Following the success of his fourth novel, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, in 1874, Hardy married Emma Gifford, an aristocratic woman, with whom his literary achievement helped him stand on an equal footing. He was attracted by her spirited vitality, a trait she shared with Bathsheba, the heroine of his fourth novel. Thomas and Emma Hardy had no children, though it appears there had been the hope of children early in their marriage. Upon discovering that their unmarried maid, Jane, was expecting a child, Hardy wrote in his journal, “We hear that Jane, our late servant, is soon to have a baby. Yet never a sign of one is there for us” (Tomalin 172). It is interesting to note that the Hardys did not dismiss their maid upon hearing this news. She fled, probably more in fear of their reaction than the treatment she had received while in their service. Yet, Hardy, the alleged misogynist, searched for her. He went to her family to offer her help while they were haymaking, but she had already gone. His act was one of kindness, not an action of one who harbors hatred for women.

Though initially quite close, Thomas and Emma Hardy grew distant over the course of their long marriage. Rather like Sue Bridehead following the tragic deaths of her children,

Emma withdrew into a religious fervor and moved into a small upstairs apartment at Max Gate soon after *Jude the Obscure* was published, supposedly in opposition to the content, though recent scholars propose that she was probably exhibiting signs of dementia. After her death in 1912, Hardy was deeply bereaved. He wrote poems about their early courtship, and, interestingly, gave the bound manuscript to his second wife, Florence, on her birthday in January 1923. Florence and Emma were initially friends, and Florence endeared herself to the Hardys by assisting them in their literary endeavors, especially by transcribing manuscripts. Hardy and Florence married in 1914, two years after Emma's death. It is thought that Hardy married Florence, thirty nine years his junior, for appearances as she attended him on travels and often stayed at Max Gate to assist in his writing. Though recognized as one who would readily publish works that challenged Victorian standards, Hardy accepted the limitations of his role as a society gentleman. Adept at evasiveness and determined to maintain a high degree of privacy in his personal life, it is likely that Thomas Hardy sacrificed personal happiness to social expectations with his second marriage, another manifestation of his ambiguity. The real reason for Thomas and Florence's connection remains private, though many, including the last remaining person who knew him in his lifetime, perceived her as a shameless opportunist with a difficult personality.

Norrie Woodhall is the last of the original Hardy Players, a group of local actors who performed adaptations of the author's famous novels at the Corn Exchange in Dorchester from 1882 to 1926. As of 2011, Woodhall is 105 years, and she claims that Florence Hardy ended her and her sister Gertrude's acting careers by discouraging Gertrude from performing in London. She maintains the opinion that Florence was jealous of her sister's beauty and talent and did not want the local actress to have the opportunity to be unattended in London with her famous

husband, though he was well advanced in years. Tomalin also recounts an encounter between Florence and Gertrude in Hardy's biography:

Hardy had told [Gertrude] to come to Max Gate whenever she liked, but when she called and asked for him she was coldly received and sent away by Florence, who followed this up with an incredible letter of reproach, suggesting that she had no manners and telling her that a lady did not call on a gentleman. (353)

Tomalin also notes that Florence had evidently forgotten how she first met the famous author, approaching for help with her literary aspirations. Of a melancholy disposition, it is thought that Florence Hardy was lonely in her life at Max Gate, married to a much older man who spent his days absorbed in his writing but who was social enough well into his eighties to still incite pangs of jealousy in his young wife. While there is an abundance of letters, journals, and poems to suggest that Hardy was smitten by women from all walks of life, there is no proof that he ever took a mistress. Women fascinated him and he helped them when he could, often using them as his muse.

Greater insight into Hardy's private thoughts and public projections can be garnered from Woodhall's recollections. Granting a personal interview in her home in Owermoigne, England in the summer of 2009, Woodhall recalled her experiences with Thomas Hardy with eager vivacity. Through her personal connection and interest in his work, Woodhall confirmed that it is in Hardy's writing that his passion for women abounds, and the mystery of his life can be best understood through the projection of himself in many of the characters in his novels. She experienced Hardy's "understanding of human nature" first hand when she starred as Liza-Lu in a 1924 production of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*; Gertrude performed the role of Tess. Woodhall remembered, "I was only nineteen, and I was so proud of my one line. I had practiced it over and



over, and I was waiting for my cue.” It was during this rehearsal that Hardy noticed her and wrote an additional line for her part. She recalled feeling excited by having been recognized by the famous author and felt privileged to have garnered more stage presence than initially allotted. Describing him as “Nature’s Gentleman,” Woodhall said, “Thomas Hardy understood people; he understood women. He knew that women were smart and special, and he wanted to help them” (interview Aug. 2009). She explained that Hardy used his novels to help change the attitudes toward relationships between men and women. In her autobiography, *Norrie’s Tale*, Woodhall reflects on this exchange with the author:

Thomas Hardy beckoned to me to come to the table. He asked for my script, saying, “I haven’t given Liza-Lu much to say, have I?” He seemed to me, then so young, to be a very old man who sensed my acute shyness and love of acting. He added to the two words “Tess, Tess” which was all I had to say after rushing across the stage to throw myself in Tess’s arms, the sentence “I’m so glad you have come home.” Then he returned my script to me with a twinkle in his eye, saying “That’s better isn’t it?” I thanked him, feeling he, so shy himself, understood me, and was trying to help me. (32)

As Woodhall suggests, Hardy wanted to help women, and he explored the New Woman's potential in his writing. Her reminiscences reveal much about Hardy’s ambivalence and elusive personality. She was a child in 1913 when her older sister, Gertrude Bugler, began playing many of the leading roles in Hardy’s dramatizations of the Wessex novels, and she holds a very favorable opinion of the celebrated author. During the interview, Woodhall recalled Hardy attending the rehearsals and offering feedback and direction to the local actors, many of whom were members of the Dorchester Debating and Dramatic Society. “He would often sit in silence

and just watch the players; he was such a gentleman,” she said. Woodhall described Hardy as sitting silently during the rehearsals, studying people, most especially women and occasionally offering a slight nod and a wink when he caught her watching him. “When I think back on it now, I believe he felt that it was safe to talk to me a little, to smile at me because I was so young, a child really,” Woodhall said. She added that she likes to tell herself that they shared a secret; though she doesn’t really know what that secret was, she tends to believe that Hardy saw some promise in her awkwardness and anxiety—perhaps the growing pains of an independent woman and a fond resemblance of a milkmaid who once inspired him. In addition to her memories of performing in Hardy’s plays, Woodhall also takes pride in another connection to the famous author. Norrie and Gertrude’s mother, Augusta Way, was one of the women who provided Hardy the inspiration for Tess Durbeyfield. A dairymaid at Brockhampton prior to her marriage, Augusta would often be at her work in the field when the young author passed by the dairy. In her memoir, Woodhall writes, “Thomas Hardy often visited Kingston Maurward, passing by the dairy, thus seeing my beautiful dark-haired mother milking a cow. Tess was created in the mind of Thomas Hardy then” (23). The woman in nature, like Augusta Way milking cows in the rural English countryside, was a theme that resonated throughout Hardy’s literary works.

It is not through their thoughts or activities that Hardy’s heroines come to grief, but, rather, through the disclosure of their nonconformist ideals which lead to their downfalls. Not so much by refusing to comply with Victorian expectations, but by confiding their indiscretions that his heroines alienate themselves from social acceptance. The heartaches and destruction of his heroines are reflective of Hardy’s fear of personal disclosure in the context of Victorian society. It also reveals the reason he was comfortable only with disclosing himself “publicly” to a child, Norrie. Through the naivety of a child and the fictional screen of his created characters, Hardy

dispersed his secret bohemian ideas while avoiding the dangers of public disclosure. His fictional females made it possible for a man who did not like to be touched to touch the lives of many. As Norrie Woodhall said, “I have thought about Thomas Hardy almost every day of my long life, and it has made me want to be a better person—a stronger woman” (interview Aug. 2009). Having closely linked her identity with her connection to the famous author, Woodhall looks upon Hardy as something of a hero. If it was not for his literary notes regarding women and the textual support of strong New-Woman characters in his novels, Woodhall’s testimony would be suspect. However, a close examination from multiple sources confirms Woodhall’s experience: Hardy was a kind man who wanted to help women. In her thoughts of Hardy, Woodhall retained his phantom, the man of yore. He is her “happy relic” and “haply the best of her.” Woodhall declared that she needs no tangible evidence of Hardy’s personal convictions: “He is who I need him to be. I am over one hundred years old. I have loved and been loved. I have lived through World Wars, the Civil Rights era, and survived cancer. I am strong. I am his proof” (interview Aug. 2009).

## CHAPTER 4

## HARDY'S NEW WOMEN:

## AN EVOLUTION IN GROWTH AND UNDERSTANDING

Thomas Hardy was keenly aware of women's strength and the radically changing world in the Victorian era. Most importantly perhaps was his astute understanding of the struggles women faced in their evolution from a subservient role to the empowered New Woman. As an author, he was the parental figure of his invented characters. He may have felt as powerless as Susan Newson on her return journey to Casterbridge with Elizabeth-Jane, who at eighteen years old felt an undefined longing for something yet unknown:

The desire—sober and repressed—of Elizabeth-Jane's heart was indeed to see, to hear, and to understand. How could she become a woman of wider knowledge, higher repute—"better", as she termed it—this was her constant enquiry of her mother. She sought further into things than other girls in her position ever did, and her mother groaned as she felt she could not aid in her search. (*Mayor* 19)

Torn between wanting to contain women and his desire to allow their passions to grow and maximize their fullest potential, Hardy's appreciation and understanding of women is best depicted in his fictional heroines, but perhaps most especially the leading women of his last two novels.

The strong women of Hardy's works evolved over the course of fourteen novels in twenty-four years. His earliest female protagonists are less resistant to social sanctions in love and marriage, but they demonstrate characteristics of strong will in embryo that grow into the more evolved New Woman in his later works. In his first published novel, *Desperate Remedies* (1871), Cytherea Graye is an accomplished woman with refined speech though she never

attended school. She had been informally educated by her mother and her remaining personality “naturally developed itself with her years” (12). Often musing on the fourth finger of her left hand, she holds romantic ideas of marriage and is left entirely dependent on others when her father dies bankrupt. In Cytherea’s limited experience, “To marry was obviously the course of common sense” (229). Reluctantly accepting the proposal of the wealthy and barbaric Aeneas Manston, Cytherea reasons that “even Christianity urges me to marry . . . it is a kind of heroic self-abnegation” (233). In her introduction to the novel, Mary Rimmer addresses women’s sacrifice upon marriage. She writes, “Women’s identity, assumed to change fundamentally upon marriage in any case, proves especially malleable” (xxv). Predicated on social conformity and sanctioned by religious precepts, the Victorian woman’s idea of self was easily manipulated and often obliterated by the necessity of marriage. In his first novel, Hardy gives his readers a sensational story of romance and criminality with an ending that most audiences of the era would likely have found satisfying: Manston writes a full confession of deceit and murder before committing suicide, and Cytherea is free to marry her first love, Edward Springrove. But even with the capitulation to his readers’ needs, Hardy manages to express his thoughts on the need to modify social expectations regarding sex and marriage through the farmers who speculate on Manston’s murder of his pretended wife and subsequent suicide. As they watch the carpenters carry his coffin on their shoulders, one of the farmers observes, “There’s a backward current in the world, and we must do our utmost to advance in order just to bide where we be” (387). Through his writing, Hardy was doing his “utmost to advance,” illustrating the damaging consequences of existing social expectations. He understood that improvements would be so slow in coming that it would seem that nothing was changing at all, but true to his meliorist perspective, he asserted himself for the improvement of all, especially women. Fictional

authorship is an indirect approach, but “Nature does few things directly” (*Desperate Remedies* 178).

As the years passed, the demand for his novels grew. Hardy became increasingly daring in his approach to double standards and sexual morality. But his second published novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), is unique in its positivism, a considerable contrast to his first written novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady*, which he destroyed after it was rejected for being “too extreme in its social critique” (Seymour v-vi). Leaving only the idyllic countryside setting, Hardy purged the disparaging storyline from his first unpublished novel and incorporated a humorous tale of love and female fickleness in *Under The Greenwood Tree*. In her introduction to the novel, Claire Seymour notes that Fancy Day’s “essential shallowness is implied by her name” (xiv). And though modern readers may find her preoccupation with dresses and hats offensive, Seymour asserts that most Victorian readers would have perceived her as an educated, well-funded young woman with choices; she was the emerging New Woman. As Seymour observes, “She is associated with the pressures causing change even if she does not will them herself: indeed, she is ushered into the novel by a song related to the Fall of Man” (xiii). *Under the Greenwood Tree* was a commercial success and helped launch Hardy’s third published novel the following year.

Published in 1873, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* was written when Hardy “was in his early thirties, in love, and thinking of marriage,” notes Tim Dolin in his introduction to the novel (xi). The story’s heroine, Elfride Swancourt, is the daughter of the Rector and assists the young architect, Stephen Smith, in his commission to renovate the old church, a scenario quite similar to the love affair between Hardy and his first wife, whom he met in 1870 while restoring the rectory at St. Juliot in Cornwall. Though Hardy makes Stephen an architect, he aligns himself more closely

with another of the novel's male characters. Hardy offers an uncharacteristic admission in *Life and Work*, sharing that he was "really much more like Henry Knight," who is portrayed to love philosophically rather than romantically (76). Both men love Elfride to distraction, and her struggle is to overcome the double standard of the era. Henry Knight is obsessed to marry a woman who has never been touched, and Elfride has received a romantic kiss from Stephen. She confronts Henry, saying, "O, could *I* but be the man and *you* the woman, I would not leave you for such a fault as mine" (*Eyes* 315). It was not unnatural for her to love and desire love, and Hardy describes her as "Nature's spoilt child" (*Eyes* 192). Aligning her with nature, Hardy writes, "Elfride was nowhere in particular, yet everywhere; sometimes in front, sometimes behind, sometimes at the side, hovering about the procession like a butterfly" (26). As the emerging New Woman, Elfride is the writer of romances, player of chess, speaker of Latin, and accomplished horse rider, yet she is unable to find happiness with either Stephen or Henry. Instead, she marries the wealthy Lord Luxellian through a sense of obligation. She explains her reason to a house servant: "Yes; I'll do anything for the benefit of my family, so as to turn my useless life to some practical account" (351). Social expectations of the Victorian era could not confine Elfride's natural tendencies, but she was still forced into accepting marriage as a practical matter. Shortly after her marriage, Elfride dies of a miscarriage, supporting Hardy's belief that Victorian standards are against nature and, therefore, not conducive to life.

Hardy's fourth published novel in 1874 coincided with his marriage to Emma Gifford and secured his financial success as an author, enabling him to stop working as an architect. With growing confidence as a novelist and greater experience as a man in love, Hardy creates his first truly strong and independent-minded woman: the heroine in *Far From the Madding Crowd*. Bathsheba Everdene's house servant, Liddy, lauds her Amazonian qualities: "O no—not

mannish; but so almighty womanish” (174). Bathsheba is perhaps Hardy’s first New Woman character in full light, though the novel’s male protagonist, Gabriel Oak, sees her best in the dark. Hardy writes, “Night had been the time at which he saw Bathsheba most vividly” (63). Hardy often places the “Queen of the Corn Market” by the light of a lantern, the blaze of a fire, the light of the moon, as if illuminating her strength and determination. Unwilling to marry for the sake of social propriety, Bathsheba tells Gabriel, “I *hate* to be thought men’s property in that way—though possibly I shall be to be had some day” (26). She further explains, “Why, he’d always be there, as you say: whenever I looked up, there he’d be” (27). Gabriel accepts Bathsheba’s reluctance to marry and works hard to protect her fields and farm while observing her impulsive union with Sergeant Troy in painful silence. After rejecting Gabriel, Bathsheba allows herself to be manipulated by a man who “had been known to observe casually that in dealing with womankind the only alternative to flattery was cursing and swearing. There was no third method. ‘Treat them fairly and you are a lost man,’ he would say” (148). Upon voicing regret that their romance had come to an end, Troy tells Bathsheba, “They all end at marriage” (236). She later owns her mistake and questions the validity of the legally sanctioned union. Bathsheba tells Troy, “A ceremony before a priest doesn’t make a marriage, I am not morally yours” (264). But she is legally his, according to Parliament, and she is not free from her unfortunate marriage until he is dead. Having grown comfortable and safe in her friendship with Gabriel, Bathsheba decides to marry the man for whom she has a “substantial affection” and “good fellowship” (348). In the first year of his marriage and success as a novelist, Hardy allows Bathsheba a happy ending: the New Woman finds a husband who “has learnt to say ‘my wife’ in a wonderful naterel [sic] way” (352). Sexual love, legal sanction, and nature had aligned to create a happy ending with a promising future.



In addition to Bathsheba Everdene, Hardy incorporated another unlikely heroine into *Far From the Madding Crowd*, serving as a contrast to primary character. Deceived by the passionate promises of Sergeant Troy, Fanny Robbin becomes pregnant out of wedlock, yet Hardy describes her as “a steady girl” (73) and “a childlike innocent thing” (254). She appeals to Troy not to judge her harshly: “Don’t speak like that. It weighs me to the earth. It makes me say what ought to be said first by you” (77). Fanny does not see herself as being flawed and makes the distinction between herself and women of poor character. She explains to Troy the appearance of her compromised situation, “There are bad women about, and they think me one” (78). Troy deserts her, and she and her baby die shortly after childbirth. Fanny’s unfortunate death is another example of Hardy’s assertion that there can be no life, no future, as long as women are oppressed and subjected to double standards and harsh judgment.

With each novel, Hardy’s heroines were growing more vocal and the storylines were becoming more socially challenging with topics of sexual desire and social commentary. The women in Hardy’s novels were developing shared characteristics of the challenges faced by the independent women forced to live in a world not ready for their desire for equality of treatment. In a Darwinian progression, the strong women in Hardy’s novels were evolving into a force that would reject what had rejected them. Rosemarie Morgan suggests that Tess Durbeyfield is the combination of Bathsheba Everdene and Fanny Robbin:

*Far From the Madding Crowd* is, in many respects, the precursor to *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891), with the role of Tess split between the trusting homespun girl (Fanny) seduced by the untrustworthy “blue-blood” (Troy), and the courageous, self-determined girl struggling to make her way in a world made by men for men, played by Bathsheba. (*Madding* xx)

Morgan's suggestion holds considerable merit. Tess and Sue were on the horizon, as were Women's Rights, suffrage, and laws protecting married women. But Hardy was not quite ready to tackle those issues, and in 1878, he turned his attention even more to nature in *The Return of the Native*. More than any of his other novels, *The Return of the Native* focuses on nature as a force, the process of evolution, and the effects of civilization.

"Civilization," Hardy writes of Egdon Heath, the setting of *The Return of the Native*, "was its enemy; and ever since the beginning of vegetation its soil had worn the same antique brown dress, the natural and invariable garment of the particular formation" (5). Feminizing nature and connecting it with history, Hardy begins the novel with a sentence that articulates how civilization is the ruin of all that is natural, especially women. Hardy also describes the time and exhaustive effort it takes to make changes by detailing the cultivation of a patch of land near Damon Wildeve's home: "The man who had discovered that it could be tilled died of labour: the man who succeeded him in possession ruined himself in fertilizing it. Wildeve came like Amerigo Vespucci and received the honours due to those who had gone before" (32). Damon Wildeve, with his "pantomime expression of a lady-killing career," is the heir of Aeneas Manston and among the forefathers of Alec d'Urberville, and he is romantically connected to two women in the novel, lover of Eustacia Vye and husband to Thomasin Yeobright (37). Both women are ancestors of Tess and Sue and offer contrasting images of what is fearful and what is hopeful in the newly emerged independent woman.

Though "some say she is a witch" (44), Hardy describes Eustacia Vye as "the raw material of divinity" (58), and he closely aligns her with the natural world—wild, untamed, unpredictable. Her desire "to be loved to madness" creates "actions of reckless unconventionality, framed to snatch a year's, a week's, even an hour's passion from anywhere it

could be won” (61). Without demonizing her, Hardy makes Eustacia daring; as she exclaims in her defense, “Best natures commit bad faults sometimes” (300). Though she marries Clym Yeobright, she continues to yearn for Wildeve. The Victorian era is not ready for a woman with such “smouldering rebelliousness,” and she dies, drowning, along with Wildeve in the current of a large, circular pool (60).

Thomasin, however, not only lives but lives through childbirth, a novelty for Hardy. Though “a pretty maid” (20) and “a pleasing and innocent woman” (56), Thomasin harbors a rebellious temperament as well. She chooses to marry Wildeve even after her aunt forbids the banns, and when their wedding is delayed owing to a mishap with the marriage license, she carries the stigma of a loose and reckless woman. Unwilling to accept the opinion of others, Thomasin questions her aunt’s frequent reprisals: “Why don’t people judge me by my acts? Now, look at me as I kneel here picking up these apples—do I look like a lost woman? . . . I wish all good women were as good as I!” (100) In Thomasin, Hardy creates a refined and careful woman capable of impulsive decisions and the consequent mistakes. He makes her sympathetic and connects her with nature, associating her most closely with birds: “All similes and allegories concerning her began and ended with birds” (191). Interestingly, at the novel’s conclusion, she marries Diggory Venn, the former reddleman whom Hardy compares to a dodo and as being “one of a class rapidly becoming extinct” (7). Diggory is the evolutionary link that will help Thomasin raise her daughter, curiously named Eustacia Clementine, suggesting a combination of all that is wild and meek in nature. Though her uncle Clym laments, “This unhappy marriage of mine is to be perpetuated in that child’s name” (301), Hardy describes the baby girl as “strong and happy, growing in size and knowledge everyday” (348). Hardy leaves his readers with the healthy growth of a female child, one that will continue the evolution of the New Woman.

In 1880, Hardy included the New Woman figure in a historical fiction about the Napoleonic War. Anne Garland is the heroine in *The Trumpet-Major*. Confronted with typical double standards regarding gender, Anne struggles with the decision to marry. Declining John Loveday's proposal, Anne gives voice to her reason: "Well, since you will make me speak, I mean the woman ought to love the man" (78). In addition to lack of affection, Anne is also trapped in the social expectations of the era, as she is "a woman who by education and antecedents was fitted to adorn a higher sphere than his own" (129). Later in the novel, Anne allows herself to fall in love with John's brother, Bob Loveday, but their wedding is cancelled with the arrival of his former lover, Matilda Johnson. The surfacing of a jaded past that would be a woman's ruin is only a minor inconvenience for a celebrated officer in Her Majesty's Navy. Bob's philandering is readily dismissed by most characters in the novel; even his father excuses his caprices. Propounding the double standard, he uses Lord Admiral Nelson as an example: "Folks that gain victories must have a little liberty allowed 'em. Look at the Admiral himself, for that matter" (222). This sexist attitude left Anne in an awkward position regarding her feelings. Hardy writes, "Here was she, who had done nothing, feeling all the embarrassment; and Bob, who had done the wrong, feeling apparently quite at ease" (243). At the novel's conclusion, Bob shares with John that Anne has finally "agreed to bestow her hand upon me at the end of six months" (257). Six months is a long time for an inconstant man, and having inherited most of Uncle Benjy's estate, Anne has no need for the financial support of a husband. The novel's ambiguous ending leaves the fate of the New Woman unknown.

A luke-warm resolve is carried over into his next novel, *A Laodicean*, in 1881. Like *Desperate Remedies* and *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, *A Laodicean* concerns a young architect's struggles in love and the quest for philosophical understanding. W.L. Phelps notes that in 1900,

Hardy conceded that “*A Laodicean* contained more of the facts of his own life than anything else he had ever written” (391). Resonating Hardy’s ambivalence, the novel’s male protagonist, George Somerset, is “balanced between believing and not believing in his own future” (7). Upon hearing the wealthy heiress, Paula Power, is a nonconformist and “mixed young lady,” Somerset exclaims, “Heaven send us more of the same sort of people” (30). As the New Woman, Paula is described as being in “emphatically a modern type of maidenhood . . . not wickedly so, but one who knew life very well for her age” (11-12). She commissions Somerset to renovate her ancient Norman castle, making it comfortably inhabitable, suggesting Hardy’s belief that history could be reconciled with the modern times, a natural progression reflective of Darwinian evolution. Paula holds advanced views on religion, social matters, and love, and she has the financial means to manifest her independent ideas. She refuses baptism, feeling no obligation to demonstrate her personal belief in God; she is highly educated and takes advantage of the latest technological inventions, as indicated by her personal telegraph and the extensive use of photography; she has a gymnasium designed for her personal exercise which is “an imitation of those at the new colleges for women” (150). Indicating her strength and capability, Hardy writes that Paula is “more woman than Somerset was man” (57). She is determined and self-willed and has been nurtured by Victorian standards, but “Human nature at bottom is romantic rather than ascetic, and the local habitation which accident had provided for Paula was perhaps acting as a solvent of the hard, morbidly introspective views thrust upon her in early life” (188). She and Somerset resolve to find happiness, and in falling in love with her while working on the castle renovations, Somerset evolves into a man willing to accept a woman with such power: “he followed on through all this ancientness to where the modern Paula sat to receive him” (201). Though her “modern spirit was taking to itself wings and flying away,” Paula, like Hardy,

remains reluctant to entirely let go of the past (242). She is intrigued by the former owners of the castle in the DeStancy family line and is saddened when her ancient ruin burns to the ground.

The novel concludes with the New Woman's hesitation at entering into the Modern era. When Somerset, her newly-wed husband, offers her comfort by telling her he will build her a new house in "modern spirit," she cries, "I wish my castle wasn't burnt, and I wish you were a DeStancy!" (379). Embodying the author's internal ambiguities, the powerful New Woman is fearfully reluctant to completely release the past while fervently reaching to embrace the future.

In 1882, Hardy published another novel focusing on the life of an attractive wealthy woman. Lady Vivette Constantine is the New Woman character in *Two on a Tower*. Resembling ancient ruins, castles, and churches, the tower joins Hardy's infamous historical settings; they are symbolic of history. The novel begins with Vivette's journey to the tower, possibly signifying women's quest for power in a male-dominated society. At the historic site she encounters Swithin St. Cleeve, an impoverished young astronomer using the tower for celestial observation. In her introduction to the novel, Sally Shuttleworth addresses the human significance of Hardy's combination of history, nature, and love. She observes, "Like *Paradise Lost* it sweeps across the heavens, placing human sexuality and a desire for knowledge in a framework which is, literally, universal" (xvi). Both Vivette and Swithen are looking for something more. He yearns to discover an astronomical phenomena that will make him renowned in academic circles while she longs for a reason to live. Hardy describes her "large and melancholy eyes" as she looks upon Swithin for the first time: "they were the natural indices of a warm and affectionate, perhaps slightly voluptuous temperament, languishing for want of something to do, cherish, or suffer for" (22). This longing is noted by Tabitha Lark, the village girl who attends Vivette and occasionally reads to her. She describes Vivette's seemingly purposeless existence: "Eaten out with

listlessness. She's neither sick nor sorry, but how dull and dreary she is, only herself can tell" (16). With a singular purpose, Vivette directs her life energy toward Swithen. She applies herself to his study, assisting him most by having a proper observatory built for his personal use atop the ancient ruin. Again, Hardy combines ancient and modern with a new addition on an old edifice, symbolic of the transition from the Victorian to the Modern era. Upon hearing that her husband has died on his travels abroad, Vivette and Swithin marry in secret, but their marriage becomes void when the news of Lord Constantine's death is proved false. This circumstance leaves the star-crossed lovers in an exceedingly difficult position, and she questions her fidelity to her husband. In the nature of sacrifice, Vivette releases Swithin from their connection, not wanting to compromise his future as a famous astronomer with personal scandal. She assures him, "I am your wife through all time; the letter of the law is not needed to reassert it at present; while the absence of the letter secures your fortune" (217). Swithin leaves the country to continue his studies in Italy, where he can better observe the Transit of Venus. Shortly afterward, Lord Constantine dies on his journey home, and Vivette realizes she is inconveniently with child and without husband. Unable to contact Swithin, she hastily accepts the Bishop of Melchester's proposal of marriage to salvage what is left of her reputation. Shuttleworth notes Hardy's defense of the sexual relations in the novel in his preface to the 1895 edition of the novel, explaining that "there is hardly a single caress in the book outside legal matrimony, or what was intended to be." But his tendency to challenge society's perceptions are later revealed, as Shuttleworth asserts: "Revisions, however, make it very clear that Vivette's baby is conceived on her final night with Swithin, when they know full well that they were not married" (xxxvii). The child is a boy, born just a few short months following his mother's marriage, hastening his cuckolded father into an early grave. The novel ends a few years later with Swithin's return. He

first encounters Tabitha Lark, who has returned from London where she has studied music and “joined the phalanx of Wonderful Womanhood who have sternly resolved to eclipse masculine genius altogether, and humiliate the brutal sex to the dust” (256). Not interested in romantic involvement, Tabitha agrees to work as Swithin’s amanuensis. He then seeks out Vivette, who has grown quite ill. He offers an obligatory marriage proposal moments before she dies, but there is no salvation or life available for a ruined woman in the Victorian era. As Swithin stands distracted over her corpse, thoughtlessly trying to quiet the distraught little boy, he looks over the tower wall and catches a glimpse of Tabitha Lark “who was skirting the field with a bounding tread—the single bright colour and animation within the wide horizon” (262). *Two on a Tower* ends with the dismissed cries of a motherless child and the abundant energy of a young woman blazing a path in the Modern era.

Published in 1886, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* continues the evolution of the New Woman with Elizabeth-Jane. Describing Hardy as a “rural novelist,” Michael Irwin addresses Hardy’s approach to nature and natural selection in his introduction to the novel. He posits, “Man’s inescapable involvement in natural processes is everywhere the central theme, reflecting the powerful influence upon him of Darwin’s writings” (ix). As mentioned earlier, Elizabeth-Jane is on a personal quest to become better, to have more of a fulfilled life. Aligning her growth with natural processes, Hardy describes her as a “flower of Nature” (247). The novel’s theme is predicated on Elizabeth-Jane’s need to redefine herself and secure a future. Auctioned off as an infant when Michael Henchard sells her and her mother in a drunken fit of passion at a village fair, Elizabeth-Jane grows up with a delusion of personal identity. Where it takes her years to explore the grief of rejection, her mother feels the sting of injustice immediately. After being purchased by the sailor Richard Newson for five pounds (the equivalent of three month’s salary),



Susan flings her wedding ring across the tent in a self-styled divorce and passively accepts her new life with an unknown man. Newson provides for her and the child until his death leaves them without means. Through necessity, Susan returns with her daughter to Casterbridge to seek support from Henchard, who has found success through sobriety, and has become a wealthy businessman and the town's mayor. He initially accepts his paternal responsibilities until he discovers that the newly emerged daughter is not the same child that had been carried off in his wife's arms eighteen years ago. His daughter died an infant and was replaced with Newson's child and given the same name, reflective of Hardy's depiction of the New Woman reemerging with inherited traits from previous generations. A reasonable and "subtle-souled girl," Elizabeth-Jane did not wish to depend on anyone for support; she only wanted to be loved (96). Upon the offer to be Lady Lucetta's companion, she exclaims, "Oh yes I would, indeed—I would do anything to be independent; for then perhaps my father might get to love me" (107). Elizabeth-Jane's earnestness stands in contrast to Lucetta's manipulations. Having had a long-term affair with Henchard, Lucetta has now turned her attention to the newly arrived Donald Farfrae, who became Henchard's partner before becoming his competitor. Lucetta skillfully secures Farfrae in marriage before Henchard has the opportunity to divulge their previous affair, yet dies during pregnancy after making a full confession of her misdeeds.

Interestingly, Hardy sets Lucetta's home at High Place Hall, the location of "the pool wherein nameless infants had been used to disappear" (109). Desmond Hawkins notes Hardy's visit to Portsmouth in 1885 as the inspiration of Hardy's poem, "A Sunday Morning Tragedy." It was there that he first saw the bridge where unmarried women were known to drop their illegitimate children into the rushing currents below. Hawkins writes, "It was these disfigurements and mutilations of the natural sexuality of women that aroused in Hardy a deep

feminist sympathy. Illicit unions and illegitimate births—to use the jargon of public morality—were a subject of his continuing meditation” (421-22). His meditations took form in his literary works, and Hardy demonstrates the collective costs of societal expectation and judgment.

Perhaps Hardy was recalling this memory when writing the following year of a woman who cries her innocence to Henchard, a self-described “woman hater” (60). Lucetta says, “My only crime was indulging in a foolish girl’s passion for you with too little regard for correctness, and that I was what *I* call innocent all the time they called me guilty” (137). Differing from Lucetta, Elizabeth-Jane’s “strict nature” reigns in her passions and focuses on the needs of the moment (241). She helps her father in the seed business which the town leaders established for him. Calm and capable, Elizabeth-Jane becomes independent in her care for others. Hardy writes, “She had her way in everything now. In going and coming, in buying and selling, her word was law” (235). She attracts the attention of Farfrae, and though recognizing “that marriage was as a rule no dancing matter . . . custom was omnipotent,” and she becomes his wife (253). The novel concludes with her burying Henchard, who dies a broken man, and spending her time “making limited opportunities endurable” (259). Elizabeth-Jane’s ability to bury the past, make the most of the present, and work for a better future signifies Hardy’s meliorist approach to the New Woman’s evolution.

Though Hardy had always written novels involving complications in love and marriage, it was not until his next work was published in 1887 that he attracted considerable attention for indiscreet material. In the precursor to *Tess* and *Jude*, *The Woodlanders*, Hardy emerged as a “controversial writer,” argues Penny Boumelha in her introduction:

These attracted critical opprobrium for the overtness with which they focus on sexual relationships, for their interrogation of conventional understandings of

chastity and marriage, for the absence of explicit moral justice in their denouements, and for their failure to abide by the prevailing canons of good taste in plot and tone. (xi)

Hardy took advantage of his experience as a known author and the slowly changing views on the role of women in society. His writing was evolving into an incisive critique on the damaging consequences of societal expectations as demonstrated by Grace Melbury, the heroine in *The Woodlanders*, who is unable to obtain a divorce from an adulterous man as the prevailing law dictates that he had not treated her badly enough. An educated woman with an established sense of duty, Grace remains married to a man who has unintentionally ruined the marriage of village maid Suke Damson and indirectly taken the life of Felice Charmond, who dies from pregnancy complications.

Though Grace is educated and articulate, the strongest New Woman figure in the novel is Marty South, a plain village girl whom Hardy defines through the natural environment. Helping her father earn an income, “Marty South, alone, of all the women in Hintock and the world, had approximated to Winterbourne’s level of intelligent intercourse with Nature. In that respect she had formed his true complement in the other sex” (297). Existing quietly in unrequited love for a man who only wants Grace, Marty South relinquishes the one attribute that makes her most feminine; she sells her hair so that extensions can be weaved for Felice Charmond. Attending to the business of making a living before and after her father’s death, Marty supports herself with income from helping Grace’s father in the timber industry. Following Giles’ death, she acquires his tools and continues his work with the cider press, and Hardy writes that she “looked almost like a being who had rejected with indifference the attribute of sex for the loftier quality of abstract humanism” (331). Never to become a wife or a mother, Marty South is a paradox in

nature, another demonstration of Hardy's ambiguity. To be completely independent of men is to sacrifice a natural element of womanhood: the propagation of humanity. Thus the New Woman presents a danger of ending the species. In *The Woodlanders*, Hardy illustrates the need for society to reconcile its standards to accommodate the natural needs and desires of women without forcing them into servitude or solitude, as represented by Grace and Marty.

Further exploring the evolution of the New Woman, the two female protagonists of Thomas Hardy's last two novels most clearly demonstrate his personal philosophy that society can be improved through individual effort, but that social limitations are often the source of humanity's destruction. *Tess of the D'urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented* and *Jude the Obscure: The Letter Killeth* are literary examples of the argument regarding essentialism versus gender as a construct—nature versus nurture. The publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* in the mid-nineteenth century sparked the critical argument of the importance of one's innate qualities compared to the characteristics developed over time through personal experience: what was in their nature versus how they had been nurtured. Hardy demonstrates the prevalence of natural instincts through the difficulties of his fictional characters. He details the individual's struggles and sacrifices required to reconcile their nature's inherent qualities in order to modify the nurturing construct within Victorian society. The suffering of Hardy's characters helped alter perspectives and create a world more tolerant of women's natural needs for empowerment, if not exactly equality. While women could be nurtured to behave more like men, there was something essential in their nature that made them different, though not inferior.

In his novels, Hardy likened women to nature—mostly beautiful, often comforting, frequently unpredictable, and occasionally cruel. After reflecting on his work in 1911, Hardy classified his major novels under the heading "Novels of Character and Environment," as if to

reconcile his views regarding the connection between people and nature. Using the example of Sue and Jude's differing reactions to their children's death, Dutta suggests that Hardy's essentialist view of women was influenced by the work of Charles Darwin:

As an early admirer of *The Origin of Species*, he was surely not unaware of the role of heredity in determining character and action. . . . While this may sound crudely sexist, there is some truth in it, because women cannot deny their bodies and the tragedy of a child's death will usually be more traumatic for the mother than for the father because of the undeniable fact of biology. (119)

Tess and Sue struggle to reconcile their “undeniable biology” with their desire to live outside society’s expectations. They are not materialistic; they simply want a better understanding of life and positive relationships with people who will accept them without judgment. Resisting conformity, Tess and Sue find happiness in misery rather than just living in it. As Jude exclaimed to Sue at their last parting, “If misery can know happiness, I have a moment’s happiness now!” (*Jude* 344). The struggles experienced by Hardy’s complex characters were not in vain; they were part of an evolution creating a path to a better existence. Writing on the cusp of change and the emergence of the New Woman, Thomas Hardy illustrated the fallen woman's plight as well as that of the struggling man. As Michael Irwin observes, “To be moved . . . is to share Hardy’s humanism, to recognize that we are capable of greatness on our own terms, which are the only terms we can know, and possibly the only ‘terms’ which exist” (xiv). It is with Tess and Sue that Hardy best illustrates the humanity of those shunned by society for daring to think independently and live life according to their personal beliefs, enduring severe consequences for their forward movement in a “backward current” (*Desperate Remedies* 387).

*Tess of the d'Urbervilles* details the life of an attractive girl from England's rural working class who is intelligent enough to know how to survive yet confined to the point of her undoing. Though he provides her with many positive attributes, such as beauty, intelligence, courage, and diligence, Hardy fails to create a support system of kindness and understanding in her struggle to live independently, which is reflective of Victorian society's unforgiving attitude to the natural needs of women. Though there is some redemption in Tess's suffering with the return and final acceptance of Angel Clare, she is as much alone in the end as she has been all along. Hardy seems to love the strength and beauty of her character, but he possibly fears how those same qualities will affect the current social structure. Hardy dissects Tess, killing her in order to reveal all she has to offer.

Further depicting women's connection to nature, Hardy combines the roles of women, nature and sexual morality. For example, in Alec's seduction and subsequent rape of Tess, nature seems almost cruel at times, or at least indifferent and amoral. Setting the rape of Tess in the most ancient forest in all of England, Hardy aligns nature with passion and cruelty. Noticing that they have strayed from the path, Tess questions Alec about their location, to which he explains, "A bit of The Chase—the oldest wood in England. It is a lovely night, and why should we not prolong our ride a little?" (*Tess* 55) Though harsh at times, nature is synonymous with sex and, having distracted Tess with fear and manipulation, Alec convinces her to wait for him in the wood, and "She passively [sits] down amid the leaves he had heaped, and [shivers] slightly" (*Tess* 56). Tess is an integral part of the natural setting; her "sexual vitality is at all times associated with pure physicality, pure naturalness" (Morgan 484). Upon Alec's return, he finds her asleep, passive as the leaves, and whether or not the sexual act that follows is consensual, nature dominates the scene:

Darkness and silence ruled everywhere around. Above them rose the primeval yews and oaks of The Chase, in which were poised gentle roosting birds in their last nap; and about them stole the hopping rabbits and hares. But, might some say, where was Tess's guardian angel? Where was the Providence of her simple faith? Perhaps, like that other god of whom the ironical Tishbite spoke, he was talking, or he was pursuing, or he was in a journey, or he was sleeping and not to be awaked. (*Tess* 57)

Providence and her guardian angel may have forsaken her; but nature, with all of its indifference to the conventions of society, disregards all manner of moral law. Through Tess's passive acceptance, Hardy demonstrates the sexual act as natural and, at times, a weakness. As Morgan observes, "More often than not, natural instinct, for Hardy, is natural law" (484).

Instinct as natural law is perhaps best depicted in Hardy's last novel, *Jude the Obscure*, which first appeared in book form in 1895. Though willing to work hard to attend university, Jude cannot escape the drudgery of the lower classes. He is trapped into a marriage by the deception of a false pregnancy. Arabella later deserts him only to return, taunting him in his misery under the guise of help and mercy. In the interim, Jude finds comfort in friendship and love with his cousin Sue Bridehead, a freethinking spirit who has grown disillusioned in a mundane marriage. The two attempt to live happily, negotiating the difficulties of their shared life until Jude's oldest child by Arabella hangs his two younger children by Sue before killing himself. The deaths of the children further signify Hardy's belief that humanity's future is inconsistent with Victorian standards. Jude's dream of becoming a scholar disappears along with any residual hope of life and love with a woman of equal understanding and intellect. Grief

stricken, Sue goes mad, seeking solace in religion and returning to her husband, while Jude dies in misery.

Hardy uses Sue to respond to the Marriage Question, providing an example of his belief that living in accord with societal expectations can be just as detrimental as living without the sanction of society. In winning her argument to convince Phillotson to release her from their marriage, Sue quotes Mill's essay *On Liberty*, which was published in 1859. She declares, "She, or he, 'who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation.' J.S. Mill's words, those are. I have been reading it up" (*Jude* 194). Through Sue's education and self study, Hardy demonstrates that a woman can articulate and defend her position with a rational argument: she can be nurtured to act and speak more like a man and not as an ignorant child, but it is her nature that remains constant. As Jacobus observes of Sue's descent into madness following the murder of her children, it is her nature that makes her frail. She writes, "It is precisely Sue's femaleness which breaks her, her experience as a woman, which brings her from clarity to compromise, from compromise to collapse because the burden has been too heavy, the bearer too frail" (314). Reminiscent of Grace Melbury, Sue has been nurtured to match wits with their male counterparts, but frailty is inherent in her nature. Ambivalent about the evolving roles of women, Hardy recognized the challenges they faced in the rapidly changing times of the late Victorian era, but he wasn't quite convinced that they (or society) could effectively adapt to their new role as the New Woman. As Sue demonstrates, women can be strong, thoughtful, and capable of being a friend on equal intellectual footing with a man, but she is unable to transcend the confines of her nature as a woman.



Tess and Sue are passive, victims of instincts, hampered and influenced by convention. They are intelligent, possessing their own ideas concerning right and wrong. They lead active lives; they have had some education, and they display different degrees of independence. Tess and Sue are ideal examples of the New Woman because they allow the reader the opportunity to study the effects of different kinds of upbringing and education, as well as the influence of instinct and convention. Being heroines of tragedies, they are average women, but they share certain qualities and characteristics that Hardy seems to attribute to women in general. While he rejects much of society's conventions, Hardy recognizes them as realities of the Victorian age. Social expectations and judgments are there, all the time, destructive forces, which may be temporarily ignored when fundamental instincts are aroused, but they eventually crush those who rebel against them. D.H. Lawrence, in his study of Thomas Hardy, expresses this clearly:

This is the tragedy of Hardy, always the same: the tragedy of those who, more or less pioneers, have died in the wilderness, whither they had escaped for free action, after having left the walled security, and the comparative imprisonment of the established convention. This is the theme of novel after novel: remain quite within the convention, and you are good, safe and happy in the long run, though you never have the vivid pang of sympathy on your side: or, on the other hand, be passionate, individual, willful, you will find the security of the convention of a walled prison, you will escape, and you will die, either of your own lack of strength to bear the isolation and the exposure, or by direct revenge from the community, or from both. (168)

Lawrence provides a good description of the conflict between individual and society in Hardy's last two novels with one exception: Hardy's characters do not consciously rebel against social

expectations; they are products of nature. Victims of the force of their instinctive natures, they have no choice between adhering to convention and rebelling against it. The artificial construct of society is not strong enough to remove Hardy's powerful characters from their essential natures. There is a basic force impelling their actions. They must abide by the influence of their natural instincts, in friendship, in love, and in sexual relationships.

The seemingly meaningless and tragic deaths of two of his most beloved characters are not proof that Hardy was propounding the necessity of living in accord with expectations, but rather his understanding of the very real consequences of living a life alienated from the Victorian era's artificial society. Jil Larson refers to Hardy's work as "transitional literature, written during a period of cultural upheaval . . . as if to startle readers out of their complacency" (159). While Hardy was notably influenced by established expectations of his era and may have been too conservative to have reached a personal level of comfort to create a happy ending for his intelligent and independent outcasts, he may have wanted something very different for them. As Larson asserts, however, "it is important to see that, depressing as it is, the punishing plot reveals not the author's beliefs about what the New Woman's fate should be, but his or her recognition of what it most often was" (168). Regardless of Hardy's motivation, Tess and Sue pay dearly for their audacity to live outside societal norms, but that should not overshadow the satisfaction received from their individual experiences which demonstrate a greater story, one that transcends the platitudes of the expected. The individual experience of a higher meaning is reflected in the subtitles of each novel. Deconstructing the often overlooked subtitles, Jeremy Strong applies meaning to Hardy's additions to his original titles. He notes that *A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented* indicates the "argument that Tess is pure despite her possible compliance with her seducer, bearing an illegitimate child, becoming a 'kept woman' and eventually a killer"

(196). Strong adds that *The Letter Killeth* expresses “the view that the binding law of Christian marriage is stifling, even fatal” (196). There is an explanatory redemption in his subtitles, though many readers continue to perceive Hardy’s unhappy endings as a sign of negativity. While it is true that he has often been called a pessimist, Hardy demonstrates something far more positive in his tragic characters: the strength of will and human endurance and the power of independent thought.

As models of the New Woman, Hardy’s heroines strive for something more, something beyond their means, risking society’s criticism and punishment to live a life more in line with their natural instincts. Through these characters, Hardy was not only a voice for the disgraced maiden; he questioned the rationality of marrying for the sole purpose of appearances and expectations, and challenged the concepts of love, the institution of marriage, and the difficulty of divorce in a time when discussing such matters was considered quite taboo. Hardy’s New Woman characters, most exemplified in Tess and Sue, want more than appearance and affectation; they want unconditional love and unwarranted acceptance. Though Hardy presented his heroines as capable and deserving, he denied them the fruition of their desires without pain and punishment, reflecting his internal ambiguities as well as society’s resistance and fear of the New Woman.

## CHAPTER 5

## CONCLUSION:

## SEX, MARRIAGE, DIVORCE, AND HARDY

Writing with fear of and hope for the New Woman during the late Victorian era, Hardy was among the first to grasp the perspective of greater equality for women. The New Woman concept conflicted with the defined roles and expectations of society, an ambiguity that resonated within Hardy himself. With his belief in the all-pervading influence of instincts, the problems of sexual relationships were of paramount importance to Hardy. His novels challenge the social aspect and conflict between societal expectations and natural instincts. Hardy's chaotic mixture of cynicism and affection toward women was recognized by editor Leslie Stephen's daughter in her 1928 memorial essay, defending her father's friend when death had silenced him. Virginia Woolf writes,

His characters, both men and women, were creatures to him of an infinite attraction. For the women he shows a more tender solicitude than for the men, and in them, perhaps, he takes a keener interest. Vain might their beauty be and terrible their fate, but while the glow of life is in them their step is free, their laughter sweet, and theirs is the power to sink into the breasts of Nature and become part of her silence and solemnity, or to rise and put on them the movement of the clouds and the wildness of the flowering woodlands. (250-51)

Rather than betraying any deeply rooted sexist assumptions, Hardy empowers women, presenting the sexual act as neither a sin nor an ideal, but rather as a relinquishing to a natural weakness, an element of nature. He realistically depicted women in the world in which they lived—a world that was not always favorable. He loved women, respected them, and held a

standard of values for men and women alike. He clearly did not want to discard the whole system of morality. As his novels indicate, Hardy simply wanted to modify social expectations regarding sanctioned relationships, which would create a mutual loving relationship inside marriage, making it stronger and less susceptible to societal expectations and judgments.

Hardy was not ignorant of women's misery and pain in the late Victorian era and was sympathetic to their struggles. A witness to the tragic and brutal, Hardy used his voice as a writer to convey the screams of the powerless. Artificial structures of civilization would not put an end to passionate drives within relationships and the natural inclinations for sex. He advocated for the New Woman, and, as Morgan observes, "Hardy's achievement in his portrayal of women lies indisputably in his profound understanding of their dilemma as strong, bright intelligences fully capable of proving their capacities in a world unwilling to grant them that right" (*Oxford* 485). He did not support the suffrage movement, but he promoted education that would benefit women in all aspects of their lives, an education that included sexual knowledge and relationships.

Though he challenged the Victorian concept of sexual relationships between men and women, Hardy did not attack marriage as an institution. In fact, many of his novels depict marriage as often necessary and even, at times, desirable for immediate survival and long-term propagation of the human species. The problems with marriage, according to Hardy, occur when the relationship is forced. The inequality between men and women and the injustice suffered as a result of the era's male-biased double standard leaves women powerless, depriving them of their natural ability to reason and participate in personal and professional matters; they are unnaturally defenseless and easy prey to those who will harm them. As wife-killer Aeneas Manston in *Desperate Remedies* posits, "A lady's dependent, a waif, a helpless thing entirely at the mercy of

the world; yes, curse it; that is just what it is; that fact of her being so helpless against the blows of circumstances which renders her so deliciously sweet!” (150) In Hardy’s essentialist views, women are not supposed to be helpless; they are naturally capable. Through his heroines he argues that it is society’s expectations and regulations that make them unnaturally vulnerable.

Rather than being anti-marriage, Hardy wanted better marriages based on mutual respect and a level of equality that creates productive cooperation between husband and wife. He demonstrates this ideal union best with Bathsheba and Gabriel in *Far From the Madding Crowd*. Leaving her bed prior to a heavy thunderstorm in the night, Bathsheba joins Gabriel on the ricks and helps salvage the harvest her reckless husband, Sergeant Troy, has left exposed to the elements to drink himself into a stupor with the rest of the farmhands. The two work in concert to cover the grain. Hardy describes the couple as they are illuminated by flashes of lightning:

The next flare came. Bathsheba was on the ground now, shouldering another sheaf, and she bore its dazzle without flinching, thunder and all, and again ascended with the load. There was then a silence everywhere for four or five minutes, and the crunch of the spars as Gabriel hastily drove them in could be again distinctly heard. He thought the crisis of the storm had passed. But there came a burst of light. (218)

Learning to rely on one another with trust and acceptance places Bathsheba and Gabriel in ideal circumstances, and the novel ends with a sense of hope and happiness following their wedding. As the satisfying union of Bathsheba and Gabriel indicates, Hardy advocated for a healthier union more aligned with nature. He wanted alternative opportunities for women, and, above all, he wanted greater equality in the institution of marriage. Hardy details some of his thoughts about marriage in “On the Tree of Knowledge”:

The general question whether marriage, as we at present understand it, is such a desirable goal for all women as it is assumed to be; or whether civilization can escape the humiliating indictment that, while it has been able to cover itself with glory in the arts, in literatures, in religions, and in the sciences, it has never succeeded in creating that homely thing, a satisfactory scheme for the conjunction of the sexes. (*Life and Art* 118-119)

Though they had been glorified in many forms, Hardy held the belief that Victorian values were not conducive to healthy marriages. Without love and equality, marriage is little more than a legality, an institution as simple as the subjection of women by men; it is artificial, a product of civilization, in many cases, involving unhappiness for both husband and wife. According to Hardy, the only solution to living within nature is to change the attitude of society in questions of morality. He attempted to alter perspectives on love, sex, and marriage in his writing with complex female characters representing the New Woman. His literary treatment of sex and convention and the description of his heroines offer some idea regarding his views about the female sex in general. One of his earliest critics, Havelock Ellis, writes, “The real and permanent interest in Hardy’s books is not his claim to be the exponent of Wessex, a claim which has been more than abundantly recognized, but his intense preoccupation with the mysteries of women’s hearts” (271). A great many of Hardy’s main characters are women, and they are, for the most part, more interesting than their male counterparts. His heroines are representative of Hardy’s views about women in general, depicting the type of woman by whom he was both fascinated and frightened.

Hardy uses Tess and Sue to demonstrate how Victorian society, with its rigid codes based on the false belief that women are inferior, was leaving itself without a future. This is

demonstrated by his seemingly ambiguous treatment of Tess—defending her yet punishing her. His approach to ethical problems makes use of two norms: the argument from nature, according to which Tess’s seduction is innocent and unimportant, and the argument from Tess’s intentions. She did not intend to break social code; therefore, she is innocent. In this way, her seduction is a regrettable yet excusable accident, a completely natural thing—not right, but not wrong. It seems as if Hardy operates within two differing standards, rejecting them both. He views the sexual act itself as value neutral, but it is wrong and unnatural when it occurs between two people who hold no real affection for one another. What is clearly wrong, according to Hardy, is the artificial creation of marriage when there is no love or affection between the parties involved, something Tess demonstrates in her refusal to marry Alec:

“You will not marry me, Tess, and make me a self respecting man?”

“I cannot.”

“But why?”

“You know I have no affection for you.”

“But you would get to feel that in time, perhaps—as soon as you really could forgive me?”

“Never!”

“Why so positive?”

“I love somebody else.” (*Tess* 248)

It is love, not sex, that warrants the legal union of marriage. Tess’s submission to Alec’s seduction is not admirable, but it is inevitable. Her refusal of his marriage proposal to sanctify the sexual act demonstrates her awareness of the severity and immutability of nature’s laws, though she may not recognize that she is applying nature’s laws in a social context. Hardy



suggests that such an unfortunate act caused by instincts and circumstances should not be condemned by society. Nature may be harmful, but when compounded by society's cruel judgment, the results are disastrous. Though Hardy was not an advocate for promiscuity or socially-sanctioned prostitution within marriage, he accepted that the sexual act should happen only when there is love and attraction between the persons involved. If intentions are not taken into consideration, there would be no difference between Tess and Arabella, the menacing character in *Jude the Obscure*.

In *Jude*, there are two examples of extramarital sexual relationships: Arabella and Jude, and Jude and Sue. The first, between Arabella and Jude, is similar to the relationship between Tess and Alec, though the roles of the seduced and the seducer are reversed. Arabella, like Alec, is the seducer. With her greater sexual experience, she is able to engineer the circumstances in which the inexperienced and innocent Jude must inevitably submit to her charms. It is not the sexual experience that harms Jude, but rather Arabella's manipulation of convention to her advantage. She tells him that she has conceived a child, entrapping him. Adhering to social expectations, Jude is obliged to marry her, believing that he is to blame for what has happened. This form of "social salvation" was also offered to Tess, but she turned it down because she felt no love for Alec (*Tess* 254). Jude, however, sacrifices his personal aspirations to marry a coarse woman, honoring the social convention:

There seemed to him, vaguely and dimly, something wrong in a social ritual which made necessary a canceling of well-formed schemes involving years of thought and labour, or foregoing a man's one opportunity of showing himself superior to the lower animals, and of contributing his units of work to the general progress of his generation, because of a momentary surprise by a new and

transitory instinct which had nothing in it of the nature of vice, and could only be at the most called weakness. He was inclined to inquire what he had done, or she lost, for that matter, that he deserved to be caught in a gin which would cripple him, if not her also, for the rest of a lifetime. (*Jude* 50)

Hardy does not shy away from the double morality. He presents it as unfortunate for both sexes, at least for honorable and well-meaning men and women. But the fact remains that Jude's mistake is not as fatal to him as Tess's is to her, at least not directly. Marrying or not marrying, Jude would not suffer social ostracism to the extent of Tess. Jude talks with Sue, comparing their first experience with marriage. He explains, "I did suffer, God knows, about you at that time; and now I suffer again. But perhaps not so much as you. The woman mostly gets the worst of it in the long run!" (*Jude* 313) According to Hardy, sexual morality is not an entirely one-sided affair, as he writes in *Life and Art*, "the spider is [not] invariably male and the fly invariably female" (118). A marriage without love and friendship is artificial, removed from nature and destined to create unhappiness for both husband and wife.

In his study of Hardy, D.H. Lawrence observes that men and women are portrayed as different aspects of nature in the Wessex novels. To him, women represent stability, and men progress and knowledge:

In every creature, the mobility, the law of change, is found exemplified in the male; the stability, the conservatism is found in the female. In woman man finds his root and establishment. In man woman finds her exfoliation and florescence. The woman grows downwards, like a root, toward the centre and the darkness and the origin. The man grows upward, like the stalk, towards discovery and light and utterance. (227)

Havelock Ellis makes a similar observation regarding the difference of men and women in Hardy's Wessex novels. He writes, "The problems of love he presents, therefore, are largely those of the conflict between the modern man and a mate who retains the incalculable impulses of a more elemental nature" (289). Hardy had not changed his mind about the intellectual emancipation of women. To him, the strong-principled, proud woman, with her instincts under full control, was a misfit, unable to fulfill her sexual function, out of harmony with the other sex. Passivity is part of the nature of woman, part of her sexual role, not something taught to her in order to make her a willing slave. Without demeaning women, Hardy acknowledged the spirit and natural goodness of his fictional heroines though they were not aligned with society's expectation of wives and mothers, but he could not let them live blissfully without making some form of personal sacrifice.

Understanding that education regarding marriage and sex was important to the viability of matrimonial happiness for both sexes, Hardy notes his thoughts in "On the Tree of Knowledge." He asserts, "a girl should certainly not be allowed to enter into matrimony without a full knowledge of her probable future in that holy estate, and of the possibilities which may lie in the past of the elect man" (118). Seeming to agree with early feminists like Wollstonecraft, Hardy advocated what he felt constituted the proper basis for marriage. Where they proposed that education would solve the problem, Hardy promoted the idea of bringing the right persons in contact with one another through associations and to warn them about unpleasant possibilities. He held doubts about the value of a rigid code for right and wrong regarding sexual relationships, and he questioned the value of marriage in its inflexible form. He also advocated sex education for children of both sexes, to provide some advance knowledge of the weakness:

I have not much faith in an innocent girl's "discovery of the great mysteries of life" by means of "the ordinary intercourse of society." Incomplete presentations, meretricious and seductive presentations, are not unlikely in pursuing such investigations through such a channel. What would seem to be the most natural course is the answer to your second question: that a plain handbook on natural processes, specially prepared, should be placed in the daughter's hand, and, later on, similar information on morbid contingencies. (*Life and Art* 118)

Education regarding sex was a scandalous proposition in the Victorian era, and sex outside of marriage was, for women, a descent into whoredom. Hardy wanted to protect women from men who would prey on their natural passivity. He wanted to educate them and make the world a safer place for them to exercise independent thought and live free from convention. Without education and the benefit of gainful employment, women were dependent on men, "deliciously sweet" to predators like Aeneas Manston (*Desperate Remedies* 150).

Hardy joined the liberal approach to matrimony based on appearance or convenience, considering it degrading to both the man and the woman, an unnatural abomination. His high regard for nature and his Darwinian inclinations are evident in the fundamental laws of nature being stronger than, and independent of, convention. He voices his opinion through Jude, who says, "People go on marrying because they can't resist natural forces, although many of them may know perfectly well that they are possibly buying a month's pleasure with a life's discomfort" (*Jude* 227). Though love combined with friendship might constitute a proper basis for a life-long alliance, love in the sense of fascination cannot be expected to last. Yet on this basis, men and women were allowed to enter into a virtually indissoluble union. Rather than concern himself with the unequal rights of husband and wife, he writes of his doubts of marriage

as an institution. This is perhaps most transparent in the narrator's biting commentary on the marriage of Jude and Arabella:

And so, standing before the aforesaid officiator, the two swore that at every other time of their lives till death took them, they would assuredly believe, feel, and desire precisely as they had believed, felt, and desired during the few preceding weeks. What was as remarkable as the undertaking itself was the fact that nobody seemed at all surprised at what they swore. (*Jude* 46)

Similarly, in her marriage with Phillotson, Sue Bridehead finds herself confronted with a challenge. She says, "What tortures me so much is the necessity of being responsive to this man whenever he wishes, good as he is morally! – the dreadful contract to feel in a particular way in a matter whose essence is its voluntariness" (*Jude* 184). Later, Sue asserts, "For a man and a woman to live on intimate terms when one feels as I do is adultery, in any circumstances, however legal" (193). Jude asserts his thoughts regarding a loveless marriage when he attempts to dissuade Sue from returning to Phillotson following the death of their children. He says, "Do you care for him? Do you love him? You know you don't! It will be a fanatic prostitution—God forgive me, yes—that's what it will be!" (*Jude* 319) Though Hardy's novels focus primarily on his fictional heroines, Hardy is not intent with giving a simple, one-sided picture of marriage which demonstrates the unjust treatment of a wife by her husband. In addition to Jude, Hardy assumes a husband's perspective through Phillotson who is not a brutal tyrant, but a well-meaning man with an independent moral sense. Regarding his relationship and responsibility to Sue, Phillotson reasons,

I, like other men, profess to hold that if a husband gets such a so-called preposterous request from his wife, the only course that can possibly be regarded as right and

proper and honourable in him is to refuse it, and put her virtuously under lock and key, and murder her lover perhaps. But is that essentially right, and proper, and honourable, or is it contemptibly mean and selfish? (201-202)

Phillotson is a person “whose moral sentiments are better than the existing laws” (Mill 480). He is willing to have Sue on her own terms, giving up his prerogatives as a husband and denying nature. But even so, the marriage is impossible, an artificial construction. Sue finds she cannot give her love “to the chamber-officer appointed by the bishop’s license to receive it” (*Jude* 177). Marriage without love is unnatural, an artifice, an abomination. To Hardy, marriage without mutual love and affection is a part of “the barbarous customs and superstitions of the times that we have the unhappiness to live in” (*Jude* 258). It is cruel to both men and women.

Many of Hardy’s Wessex novels illuminate the marriage system's faults. They demonstrate how civilization magnifies and distorts the natural struggle between the sexes, making individual happiness impossible; and when the novelty of the physical attraction is gone, little is left of the marriage but life-long misery. The logical consequence is, to Hardy, to allow divorce. For John Stuart Mill, the question of divorce was relatively unimportant. If women did not have to marry, they would not do so until they had found the right partner, and if women were offered equal rights in marriage, marriages would be more harmonious. But, in the existing order of things, he found the laws concerning divorce unjust. The Divorce Law of 1857 had made marriages dissolvable in extreme cases, but the question of what degree of cruelty is sufficient reason for divorce was vague, such as the case with Grace Melbury in *The Woodlanders*. An additional concern regarding marriage and divorce was the religious aspect of whether marriage should be regarded as a sacrament. Sue does not consider marriage as such, referring to it as a “dreadful contract” (*Jude* 184). The question of Sacrament or civil contract is

really a question of accepting the teachings of the Church, which Hardy rejected along with the theory of divine design. But true to his Victorian nurturing, Hardy set aside his natural inclinations and remained aware of the tremendous influence the Church had on marriage and societal conventions. He artfully demonstrates this religious perspective with Sue, who reverts to the Church's teachings after her descent into madness. She explains, "I sacramentally joined myself to [Phillotson] for life. Nothing can alter it" (*Jude* 311). Her reaction may be reflective of Hardy's view of madness in religion; it can also be an argument for divorce.

In "Laws the Cause of Misery," Hardy's contribution to a symposium of answers to the question "How Shall We Solve the Divorce Problem," he clearly expresses his views on marriage and divorce:

I have already said many times, during the past twenty or thirty years, that I regard Marriage as a union whose terms should be regulated entirely for the happiness of the community, including, primarily, that of the parties themselves. As the English marriage laws are, to the eyes of anybody who looks around, the gratuitous cause of at least half the misery of the community, that they are allowed to remain in force for a day is, to quote the famous last word of the ceremony itself, an "amazement," and can only be accounted for by the assumption that we live in a barbaric age, and are the slaves of gross superstition. As to what should be done, in the unlikely event of any amendment of the law being tolerated by bigots, it is rather a question for experts than for me. I can only suppose, in a general way, that marriage should be dissolvable at the wish of either party, if that party prove it to be cruelty to him or her, provided (probably)

that the maintenance of the children, if any, should be borne by the breadwinner.

*(Life and Art 120)*

Through his novels, Hardy challenged existing sexual morality and marriage laws, demonstrating the cruelty of the system to both men and women. Much of what the feminists of his era address as artificial attitudes taught to women, Hardy attributed to unchangeable, fundamental instincts. Preferring happy marriages to divorce, Hardy wanted to change the conventions concerning the relationships between the sexes because they were artificial and not in harmony with nature. To him, the existing conventions were wrong because they were destructive. Though he was fearful of the New Woman's independence, he knew that the progress of feminism and the emergence of the New Woman were inevitable yet dangerous to the Victorian concept of the ideal woman. A woman of equal social, political, and educational standing to a man would be less likely to serve in the traditional silent and subservient role of wife and mother. The early pioneers of the Women's Movement were comparatively few, faced incredible resistance, and were scarcely regarded as typical representatives of the female gender. Over time, they grew in number and influence and by the time Thomas Hardy started writing novels, the idea of equality for women, and the conventions surrounding it, were very much alive. As Sue shares with Jude upon watching the traditional church wedding of an unknown couple, "Everybody is getting to feel as we do. We are a little beforehand, that's all. In fifty, a hundred years, the descendants of these two will act and feel worse than we are" (*Jude* 252). Times were changing and perspectives were altering. Hardy's realistic portrayals of the New Woman's nature have mistakenly led critics to argue that his sexist attitude is revealed in the tragic outcomes of the adulterous heroines; they were fallen women, punished harshly for their crimes against society. But rather than seeing women as flawed, Hardy perceived them as natural, and he only used the misery of



his tragic heroines to explore the personal and social damage caused by relationships not aligned with nature. His depictions of the New Woman were often misunderstood, and he was deeply affected by some of the critics' remarks concerning his portrayal of women. As Rosemarie Morgan notes,

Since women, like men, must fall short of perfection, the more worthy and desirable female model should, in all reasonableness, as Hardy saw it, embody less than perfect qualities . . . for presenting readers with humanly imperfect, sexually challenging heroines, he was, to his hurt and indignation, charged not only with misogyny, but also with misrepresenting womankind. (*Oxford* 479)

Many of his readers were not ready for his radical ideas about love, marriage, and sexual morality, but “Then again, the kind of woman that attracted him, the type he portrays so compellingly in his fiction, is strong-minded, sensual, free-spirited, and sexually exciting to a degree not to be talked about in Victorian drawing-rooms” (*Oxford* 478). Most of his contemporaries were afraid of the disruptive impact of the New Woman. And though he did not shy from creating a stir in Victorian society, Hardy, too, was a little afraid of his own creations. Yet he accepted the challenge to portray their struggles and help establish a more nourishing environment for their inevitable growth and proliferation.

A natural humanist with realist perspectives and a meliorist's philosophy, Thomas Hardy questioned the popular Utilitarian philosophy promoted in his era. He did not necessarily believe that people wanted to be happy, but rather, that they wanted to live more than just their assigned roles, allowing them to feel more emotional depth than permitted by society. His writing reflects the idea that it is better to risk tragedy in pursuit of fulfillment than to endure misery simply to be accepted by others. His protagonists strive for a *better* life, not necessarily a *happier* life. In an

era of heightened fear of and anxiety over the emerging power of women, Hardy wrote books that, while tragic on the surface level, offered a new perspective and hope for those who were strong enough to live according to their independent thoughts and values, pursuing ideals regardless of societal expectations as well as the certain consequences of their own actions. They sacrifice to express their true natures in a society that was struggling with new ideas on how to nurture—a debate that rang strong in Hardy's life and still resonates today.

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