

**THE THEME OF ALIENATION FOUND IN THE MAJOR NOVELS OF
THOMAS HARDY**

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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

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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

INTRODUCTION

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 over-mastering 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.

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

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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.

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

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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.

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

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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.

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 yearsold 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

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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.

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

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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.

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

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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 ricksand 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:

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“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

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down because she felt no love for Alec (*Tess* 254). Jude, however, sacrifices his personal aspirations to marry a coarsewoman, 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 beat 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

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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:

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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, lateron, 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, whosays, "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 themarriage 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,

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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).

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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 [Phyllotson] 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.

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