Environmental Influence on Character in Thomas Hardy

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Summary:

This paper examines the different ways in which the natural environment affects Hardy's characters and their responses to life. In the Wessex novels, nature becomes an important factor in determining how people lead their lives. Continual contact with the forces of nature has taught the peasant to accept his lot in the scheme of things: he recognizes the futility of rebellion. Eustacia Vye, and Edred Fitzpiers reacts in a totally different manner. ~~Like Edred~~ Both she and Fitzpiers, ~~she~~ rebels against the limitations of ~~her~~ their surroundings. This attitude, however, only serves to bring pain to themselves and others. Eustacia's tragic history, in fact, reveals the hopelessness of rebelling against the natural environment. Man must learn to respect nature as a dominant power. Those who realize this achieve a certain measure of contentment that is impossible for those who rebel unnecessarily. Nature becomes a principal part of Hardy's comment upon character.

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Patrick John Collins 8/4/68

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INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that man is in some degree the product of his environment. His way of thinking can be influenced both by the predominant attitudes of his society and by the physical conditions of his surroundings. Environmental influence plays a large part in the Wessex novels. It accounts primarily for the conflict between town and country, one of Hardy's major themes. The culture, philosophy, spirit, and tradition of these two worlds are in complete opposition; the country believes in the soul and natural growth, the town in the mind and its discoveries. Man is influenced by convention as well. Angel Clare, despite his firm belief in "free thought" and his "indifference to social forms and observances," is really a "slave" to the rigid, conventional ideas instilled by his early training. "With all his [Angel Clare's] attempted independence of judgment this advanced and well-meaning young man, a sample product of the last five-and-twenty years, was yet the slave to custom and conventionality."[1]

The natural environment also has a substantial bearing on the lives of Hardy's characters. One senses this from Hardy's tendency to present, at the beginning of most books, an often quite detailed analysis of that part of Wessex in

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[1] Thomas Hardy, Tess of the d'Urbervilles (New York, 1966), p. 300.

which the story is to take place. To regard this merely as a piece of introductory machinery is to overlook one of the most prominent features of life in Wessex—the influence of nature upon man. In the early pages of The Return of the Native, Diggory Venn catches sight of a woman (Eustacia Vye) on the summit of Rainbarrow. "There the form stood, motionless as the hill beneath. Above the plain rose the hill, above the hill rose the barrow, and above the barrow rose the figure. Above the figure was nothing that could be mapped elsewhere than on a celestial globe."[2] These lines seem to emphasize the massive forces with which man has to contend. As man is fundamentally frail and sensitive, it appears inevitable that he should be profoundly affected by something as immense as Egdon Heath.

This paper is an attempt to reveal how the natural environment influences the ways in which Hardy's characters respond to life and attempt to overcome its problems. These responses vary considerably: from the peasants' resigned " 'Twas to be if 'twas, I suppose" to Eustacia Vye's frenzied outcry that "I do not deserve my lot," from Thomasin Yeobright's "rational" fears and "reasonable" dislikes of Egdon Heath's "worst moods" to Fitzpiers's "wearisomeness" and "boredom" of the Hintock Woodlands. Nature is essentially changeless. One can regard it, therefore, as a catalyst, for, while its cyclical movements are merely chapters of a

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2 Thomas Hardy, The Return of the Native (New York, 1965), p. 20.

permanence in flux, it affects man's linear movement. This enables Hardy to use nature as a frame of reference and, consequently, as a principal part of his comment upon character.

Although much of this paper is concerned specifically with The Woodlanders and The Return of the Native, the second chapter, which discusses the 'responses' of Hardy's peasants, covers many of the Wessex novels; these "quaint and colourful" characters appear in nearly all of Hardy's works. The Return of the Native is emphasized because Hardy attributes to insidious Egdon a greater influence on people's lives than to any other part of the Wessex environment. The Woodlanders is also referred to, because, although the Hintock Woodlands are far less terrifying in aspect than Egdon, they still cast similar shadows upon some of those who live therein.

Without endangering credibility, one can divide the characters of these two novels into two distinct categories: those who are in harmony with their milieu and those who rebel against it. This 'distinction of response' has given rise to the basic form of the following paper, the greater part of which will stress those who rebel, for herein lies one of the most conspicuous features of Hardy's tragedy—the aspirations of conscious man in direct conflict with the absolute laws of an uncompromising universe.

By virtue of the paper's subject, it seems advisable to devote the opening chapter to a summary of Hardy's attitude toward nature. It is to be hoped that such an outline, acting

as a kind of background to the topic, as nature does to Hardy's novels, will help to clarify the reasons behind the characters' particular responses.

CHAPTER I

NATURE

Thomas Hardy disagreed strongly with the concept of nature that had been expressed by many of his predecessors. He could not accept the optimistic Wordsworthian belief that nature was a moral force and a distinct proof of the existence of God, that nature, in fact, was God's signature. He was convinced rather that it was fundamentally amoral and unsympathetic, not because it was antagonistic, but because it struck him simply as being unconcerned with either man's triumphs or defeats.

> The night came in, and took up its place there, unconcerned and indifferent; the night which had already swallowed up his [Angel Clare's] happiness, and was now digesting it listlessly; and was ready to swallow up the happiness of a thousand other people with as little disturbance or change of mien.[1]

"The world," Hardy feels, "does not despise us; it only neglects us."[2] Nature beholds the whole gamut of human experience with a face unmoved. "Every night its Titanic form [Egdon Heath's] seemed to await something; but it had waited thus, unmoved, during so many centuries, through the crises of so many things, that it could only be imagined to await one

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1 *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, p. 267.

2 Florence Emily Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy* (New York, 1965), p. 48.

last crisis—the final overthrow."[3] In the Wessex novels, Egdon becomes the supreme example of nature's heartless indifference. Hardy did not dwell under the illusion that nature was the Great Mother or friend of man. Instead, he tended to agree with Arnold who had written:

> Man must begin, know this, where Nature ends;
> Nature and man can never be fast friends.[4]

Yet one should not imagine that nature's beauty was lost upon Hardy. Having lived in the country most of his life, he was keenly sensitive to its multitude of attractive guises and mysterious changes. Some of his most poetic passages are devoted to the glories of nature's dress.[5] One gathers that he inherited much of this sensitivity from his father.

> Thomas Hardy the Second had not the tradesman's soul. Instead of waylaying possible needers of brick and stone in the market-place or elsewhere, he liked going alone into the woods or on the heath, where, with a telescope inherited from some collateral ancestor who had been captain of a merchant craft, he would stay peering into the distance by the half-hour; or, in the hot weather, lying on a bank of thyme or camomile with the grasshoppers leaping over him.[6]

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[3] The Return of the Native, p. 12.

[4] Matthew Arnold, "In Harmony with Nature," ll. 12-13.

[5] To give just a few of many examples: Tess's first view of the Valley of the Great Dairies (Tess of the d'Urbervilles, p. 123.), the "gorgeous Autumn landscape of White-Hart Vale" (The Woodlanders (London, 1964), p. 212.), and the luxuriant countryside of Weatherbury at the time of the annual Sheep-Washing ceremony (Far from the Madding Crowd (New York, 1966), p. 143). Even Egdon Heath has its moment under "the July sun" (The Return of the Native, p. 245.)

[6] F.E. Hardy, p. 21.

The country had just such a soothing effect upon his son who would generally long for its tranquillizing influence after his visits to London, a city of "four million forlorn hopes."[7] Nature, in fact, can be so enchantingly restful that even the city-doctor, Edred Fitzpiers, despite his acute lack of interest in the Hintock Woodlands, is not insensitive to nature's therapeutic delights. "He [Fitzpiers] dreamed and mused till his consciousness seemed to occupy the whole space of the woodland round, so little was there of jarring sight or sound to hinder perfect mental unity with the sentiment of the place."[8]

Hardy believed, however, that it was dangerous to fall in love with nature's charms. "Nature is an arch-dissembler . . . nothing is as it appears."[9] There are times when nature appears to be in sympathy with human actions; the wind sighs mournfully as Tess examines "the mesh of events in her own life,"[10] and Giles Winterborne's "marvellous power of making trees grow" results from "a sort of sympathy between himself and the fir, oak, or beech that he was operating on."[11] Yet one suspects that nature's concern is really illusory. Whether Giles's trees grow or not surely depends just as much upon his individual skill, and one is tempted to feel that

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7 Ibid., p. 218.

8 The Woodlanders, p. 145.

9 F.E. Hardy, p. 176.

10 Tess of the d'Urbervilles, p. 41.

11 The Woodlanders, p. 68.

Tess's dismal mood is accentuated, perhaps even induced, by the heaving of the wind. Wherever Tess might have been that night, or whatever she might have been doing, the wind would still have been blowing in the same manner. Thus, if the moods of man and nature correspond, it is not because nature is in sympathy with human actions, but, more than likely, because these actions reflect the mood of their environment.

If we wish to benefit, even to survive, we must look beyond nature's misleading friendliness, and recognize that nature, like frail man, is the hapless instrument of blind Law, of an indifferent and unconscious force at the back of all things, 'that neither good nor evil knows.'

"Poor wanderer," said the leaden sky,
"I fain would lighten thee,
But there be laws in force on high
Which say it must not be."

"I would not freeze thee, shorn one," cried
The North, "knew I but how
To warm my breath, to slack my stride;
But I am ruled as thou."
. . . . . .

"Come hither, Son," I heard Death say;
"I did not will a grave
Should end thy pilgrimage today,
But I, too, am a slave!"[12]

Yet any attempt to reason out the motivations behind this Prime Force would end in frustration, for Hardy felt convinced that, through the incomprehensible presence of "crass Casualty" and "dicing Time," it operated beyond the rules of logic.

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[12] Thomas Hardy, "The Subalterns," ll. 1-8, 13-16.

> If but some vengeful god would call to me
> From up the sky and laugh: "Thou suffering thing,
> Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,
> That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!"
> . . . . . .
>
> But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,
> And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?
> —Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain
> And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan . . .
> These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown
> Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain.[13]

Here, Hardy believed, lay the nature and source of man's ills; man could have accepted antagonism, but not plain, heartless, illogical indifference.

If the predominant force in the universe were one of total indifference, one might naturally expect that man, by the law of averages, would experience happiness and misery in equal quantity. Yet man, as portrayed by Hardy in both his poems and novels, is generally sad. Hardy knew that man was an "inveterate joy-maker," born with the will to desire. Here, however, lay the rub, for Hardy maintained that the emergence of consciousness had caused man to yearn for things that were unattainable in this "world of defect." Thus, he felt "the emotions have no place in a world of defect, and it is a cruel injustice that they should have developed in it,"[14] for the almost inescapable result will be pain. Hence, his acute awareness of "the intolerable antilogy of making figments feel."[15] Man was no

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[13] Thomas Hardy, "Hap," ll. 1-4, 9-14.

[14] F.E. Hardy, p. 149.

[15] Thomas Hardy, The Dynasts (London, 1913), p. 100.

longer God's chosen creature, striving to reach a transcendental world through the medium of nature. He was a struggling individual who would learn, sooner or later, that he was living in a world where nothing bears out in practice what it promises incipiently, and that the only consolation, if so it could be termed, was to make the best of an essentially sorry and misplaced existence. In short, life was

> A senseless school where we must give
> Our lives that we may learn to live.[16]

When man regards the forces of nature around him, he becomes aware of the controlling law of natural selection, a process by which animals and plants survive or become extinct in accordance with their ability to adapt themselves to the conditions of their environment. As Hardy lived in the country, he had ample opportunity to observe the functions of natural life. One suspects, therefore, that he was somewhat concerned by Darwin's theory that nature was the scene of the struggle for existence and that those who survived were necessarily the fittest. Owing to his religious upbringing, he must have been deeply troubled by Darwin's assertion that the "fittest" did not refer to those who deserved, in the ethical sense, to survive, that survival, in fact, depended entirely upon "accidental variation."[17] "Natural selection is daily and hourly scrutinizing . . . silently and insensibly working, whenever and wherever opportunity offers, at the improvement

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[16] Thomas Hardy, "A Young Man's Epigram on Existence," ll. 1-2.

[17] Harvey Curtis Webster, On a Darkling Plain (Chicago, 1947), p. 43.

of each organic being in relation to its organic and inorganic conditions of life." Thus, if the Prime Force in the universe governs both man and nature with equal inattention and neglect, it follows that man is no more immune to the vagaries of "accidental variation" than his natural surroundings. The logical conclusion reveals the frightening knowledge that the universal Law does not heed human ethics. "Reading in Darwin of the struggle going on in all nature integrated his [Hardy's] hitherto dim and disconnected impressions of the cruel plan by which Nature works and made him even more sensitive than before to the pain involved in the continuation of life."[18]

One might have expected Hardy to have chosen the natural landscape as his mise-en-scène, for this was the environment with which he was most familiar. Although the reader is very much alive to nature's arresting presence, however, and to its formidable impact upon human nature, he is aware that Man stands in the centre of Hardy's stage. Nothing can be of more importance than the merest sign of human life. "An object or mark raised by man on a scene is worth ten times any such formed by unconscious Nature. Hence clouds, mists, and mountains are unimportant beside the wear on a threshold, or the print of a hand."[19]

Nature, although as much a slave to the Prime Cause as

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[18] Ibid., p. 44.

[19] F.E. Hardy, p. 116.

man, acts as a medium through which the terrifying overtones of the cosmic Law are brought to bear upon man's consciousness. Against its background, Hardy's characters strive for love, happiness, success, and peace of mind, only to be generally beaten down by the sad and tormenting knowledge that "Experience unteaches—(what one at first thinks to be the rule in events)."[20] Man must rid himself of the deception that he can live in complete rapport with his natural surroundings. Like the peasant, who has unconsciously accepted the essential need of living by instinct rather than by aspiration, he must recognize the necessity of adapting himself to, and co-operating with, the predominant forces of his environment.

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20 Ibid., p. 176.

CHAPTER II

THE PEASANTS

When one reads the Wessex novels, one usually encounters events and situations that belong to the darker, less fortunate side of life. This is because Hardy considered the world to have "rather more of the tragedy than the comedy about it,"[1] and because, as a meliorist, he believed that "if a way to the better there be, / it exacts a full look at the Worst." Perhaps this is why many people find it difficult to believe that the Hardy who wrote The Return of the Native and Jude the Obscure could ever have written Under the Greenwood Tree, a simple and happy tale, set in idyllic surroundings. Yet, throughout the whole Wessex saga, we meet many rural characters whose attitudes towards life correspond to those expressed by the Mellstock peasants. Although these people differ in situation and occupation, one is continually struck by their colourful and humorous natures. Hardy's humour, in fact, belongs exclusively to his peasants.

One naturally wonders why this should be. Perhaps Hardy is using them as a kind of comic relief to the more prominent tragic moments as Shakespeare does, for example, with the grave-diggers in Hamlet? Despite one or two incidents that

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1 F.E. Hardy, p. 174.

have this effect,[2] such a rigid interpretation would reduce the essentially fine and noble characteristics of Hardy's peasants.[3] They are not presented as humorous characters for any rhetorical or artistic purpose, but because they are basically happy, or, at least, contented with their lot. Although their lives are subject to great hardship and continual toil and although material wealth is virtually unknown amongst them, they do not complain about the injustice of their position or labour under the idea that some misguided Providence has ill-treated them. Instead, they accept things with a pagan stoicism. "As Tess's own people down in those retreats are never tired of saying among each other in their fatalistic way: 'It was to be'."[4]

The peasant's response cannot be attributed to any defeatist attitude or to any cowardly desire to shun responsibility for action. It stems rather from the knowledge that he is surrounded by more powerful forces and that survival depends upon fitting in as best he can. Hardy nowhere suggests, of course, that his peasants sit down and meditate

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2 When Joseph Poorgrass stops at the old inn, Buck's Head, with the body of Fanny Robin and suffers from a case of the "multiplying eye." (Far from the Madding Crowd, pp. 316-322.)

3 Admittedly, Hardy's attitude towards the peasantry changes quite radically in his last two major novels. In John Durbeyfield and Arabella Donn, Hardy depicts that darker side of the rural character that forebodes the moral decay of the rural system. But, in general, his peasant is noble rather than mean, dignified rather than crude.

4 Tess of the d'Urbervilles, p. 91.

upon the scheme of things; this is quite obviously beyond them. It is simply that experience and intuition have warned them not to rebel but to adapt themselves, to recognize, in fact, that necessity governs their lives. There are certain times in the year when the land must be tilled, the seed sown, and the harvest collected. Perhaps the peasant's realization of his complete dependence upon the seasons and weathers[5] has produced this philosophical outlook. One must accept the inevitable, for there is nothing that one can do to alter things. Once this has been achieved, there is more time and scope for enjoyment.

This is fine in theory, of course, but it is the peasant's ability to put this belief into practice, no matter what the situation, that is one of his most winning and indispensable traits. In Far from the Madding Crowd, Joseph Poorgrass is bringing back the body of Fanny Robin from Casterbridge to be buried at Weatherbury, when he arrives at the old inn, Buck's Head. As he enters, he is very relieved

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This is the weather the cuckoo likes,
And so do I;
. . . . . .

And citizens dream of the South and West,
And so do I.
. . . . . .

This is the weather the shepherd shuns,
And so do I;
. . . . . .

And rooks in families homeward go,
And so do I.

(Thomas Hardy, 'Weathers')

to see his two friends, Jan Coggan and Mark Clark, for his "sad burden [Fanny's body]" is "beginning to tell" upon him. Joseph's "burden" is only briefly discussed before the three pass on to the more 'important' topic of the "warm and glorious" effects of drink and to their unanimous dismay that "the merry old ways of good life have gone to the dogs." There is absolutely nothing disrespectful or callous in this reaction, for it is only characteristic of these people that they should turn away from death, which is beyond their control anyway, to the more pertinent enjoyments of life that can still be savoured. Although Joseph's irresponsibilty leads to the violent tragedy of Farmer Boldwood's Christmas party,[6] no shadow of blame rests upon his shoulders. He is simply responding with the natural impulses of a breed of men which firmly maintains that, instead of increasing life's problems and worries, one should take every possible pleasure offered with humble thanks. Thus, Jan Coggan's defense of his behaviour is no mere excuse but a sincerely felt emotion.

All that could be done for her is done—she's beyond us:

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6 As a result of Joseph's prolonged stay at the Inn, Fanny's coffin is left in Bathsheba Everdene's house overnight instead of being buried in the churchyard, as arranged beforehand. Bathsheba opens the coffin and discovers that Fanny had died at the Poor-house while having Troy's baby. Troy then arrives home and there follows between them a terrible argument which leads to Troy's departure from the farm, to his disappearance and rumoured death, and, consequently, to Boldwood's renewed attempts to win Bathsheba: hence, to the party, Troy's death and Boldwood's confinement in an asylum. Yet how could anyone, especially Joseph, have been expected to foresee such cataclysmic results? If anyone were to blame, it was Troy for his disreputable behaviour towards Fanny.

> . . . If she'd been alive, I would have been the first to help her. If she now wanted victuals and drink, I'd pay for it, money down. But she's dead, and no speed of ours will bring her to life. The woman's past us—time spent upon her is throwed away: why should we hurry to do what's not required? Drink, shepherd [Gabriel Oak], and be friends, for tomorrow we may be like her.[7]

This is no 'epicurean' justification, but a sound conviction that time, too little of which is offered to the individual, should not be wasted by worrying about things completely beyond man's control.

Such thoughts have been induced by an unbroken contact with, and a necessary acceptance of, the insuperable forces of their environment. The peasant spends the majority of his time out-of-doors and must abide by nature's cyclical changes. "Almost every diurnal and nocturnal effect in that woodland place had hitherto been the direct result of the regular terrestrial roll which had produced the season's changes."[8] It is essential, therefore, that he unite himself with nature. Hardy's rustics have indeed become so much a part of their surroundings that it is difficult to imagine the one without the other. Under the Greenwood Tree is probably the most vivid example of this, for the Mellstock Quire is essentially Hardy's mouthpiece of man in nature. The Quire's members are motivated by their instinctive love for enjoyment, centred primarily upon their established position as the west-gallery musicians. This is not to imply that their lives are

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7 Far from the Madding Crowd, pp. 316-320.

8 The Woodlanders, p. 52.

all fun and no work, for, throughout the story, Hardy continually presents them in the course of their daily labours. When the majority of the Quire arrives at Tranter Dewy's for the traditional Christmas carolling, old William Dewy is working in the fuel-house, despite the late hour; on both of Dick's visits to Fancy's house in Yalbury Wood, Geoffrey Day and his trapper, Enoch, are busy with some job or other; and on that important occasion when Dick meets Fancy in Budmouth, he has been delivering two swarms of bees to Mrs. Maybold for his father. Work, in fact, must come first. Dick delays his journey to meet his bride by taking care of another swarm of bees. Nature demands prompt attention; otherwise the moment is lost.[9] "Well, bees can't be put off," observes grandfather James. "Marrying a woman is a thing you can do at any moment; but a swarm o' bees won't come for the asking."[10] Yet these people can still find plenty of time for enjoyment, partly because they are endowed with the innate capacity to look upon the happier side of life, and partly because it takes very little to make them happy. For Hardy's peasants, "labour suggests nothing more than a wrestle with gravitation, and pleasure nothing better than a renunciation

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9 One may compare Dick's behaviour here to that of Farmer Boldwood who, through his almost pathological love for Bathsheba, disregards the ominous warnings of the storm, so readily understood by Gabriel Oak, and allows his hay-ricks to go to rack and ruin. (Far from the Madding Crowd, p. 287.)

10 Thomas Hardy, Under the Greenwood Tree (London, 1964), p. 193

of the same."[11] And even though Joseph Poorgrass's blushes are an "awkward gift," he can still say cheerfully " 'tis a happy providence that I be no worse."[12]

Life in Mellstock, of course, is somewhat idealized,[13] although this can be attributed more to the surroundings than to the actual peasants who are real enough themselves. Hardy's peasants usually find life a hard and bitter lot. One only has to recall the long, hard hours that the furze-cutters have to spend on barren Egdon Heath, or the terrible conditions of "morning frosts and afternoon rains" under which the inmates of Flintcombe-Ash farm have to labour for a mere pittance, to realize this. Yet these are the very same people who arrange the May-day celebrations and take part in the gipsying, where "for the time Paganism was revived in their hearts, the pride of life was all in all and they adored none other than themselves."[14] While they recognize that survival demands a large, albeit disproportionate, quota of labour, they do not maintain that this necessarily precludes enjoyment, even at work. In fact, they are generally quite contented in their work and take a pride in doing it efficiently. It is this determination to live for the here

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11 *Far from the Madding Crowd*, p. 49.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

13 Hardy says that the chapters were penned "lightly, even . . . farcically and flippantly at times." (*Under the Greenwood Tree*, Preface 1912, p. vii.)

14 *The Return of the Native*, p. 266.

and now and to extract as much goodness and happiness out of life amid circumstances that would generally overwhelm the average man that Hardy seems to have admired so deeply and, perhaps, envied at times.

Thus, if Under the Greenwood Tree emphasizes the lighter rather than the darker side of rural life, it is not because things are easy, but because the rustic has learned to live by the impulses of the heart rather than by the aspirations of the mind. Those who think a good deal are seldom content or satisfied with their lot. Thought, in fact, seems to be the enemy of happiness, because it uncovers too many ills. Hardy's peasants, of course, are not incapable of thinking; their type of work gives them plenty of opportunity.

> Copse-work, as it was called, being an occupation which the secondary intelligence of the hands and arms could carry on without the sovereign attention of the head, allowed the minds of its professors to wander considerably from the objects before them; hence the tales, chronicles, and ramifications of family history which were recounted here [Little Hintock] were of a very exhaustive kind.[15]

They love nothing better than to talk about the prominent incidents of their neighbourhood, whether at Tranter Dewy's, Warren's malt-house in Weatherbury, or Fairway's hair-cutting ritual on Sunday afternoons. The essential difference, however, lies in the depth and substance of what they discuss or worry about. They concern themselves with the trivial rather than the great, with the parochial rather than the universal. Necessity has taught them that "the secret of

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[15] The Woodlanders, p. 29.

happiness lay in limiting the aspirations; these men's [the peasants'] thoughts were conterminous with the margin of the Hintock woodlands."[16]

The peasant's ability to adapt himself both physically and mentally to his surroundings appears to invest him with what one might call an aura of immortality.

> The sun had crept round the tree as a last effort before death, and then began to sink, the shearers' lower parts becoming steeped in embrowning twilight, whilst their heads and shoulders were still enjoying day, touched with a yellow of self-sustained brilliancy that seemed inherent rather than acquired.[17]

No matter what happens to the central figures, we are always left with the idea that the peasant, as part of nature, will persist like her. Hardy seems to suggest this by presenting the same band of peasants both at the beginning and at the end of his major 'pastoral' novels.[18] In Far from the Madding Crowd, the body of men that Gabriel Oak meets in the malt-house at the beginning of his stay in Weatherbury is the same as the "group of male figures" that plays for him on the night of his marriage to Bathsheba. Yet in the time that has passed, Troy has been killed, Boldwood has gone insane, Fanny Robin has met with a tragic death and Bathsheba has become one who only smiles, "for she never laughed readily now."

This idea of permanence is similarily exemplified in

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16 Ibid., p. 141.

17 Far from the Madding Crowd, p. 176.

18 The Woodlanders, Far from the Madding Crowd, and The Return of the Native.

The Return of the Native. The book opens on November 5th, the night on which the furze-cutters light their traditional bonfires on Egdon Heath. We see them there again the following year, for nothing of any extraordinary nature has caused them to alter this annual ritual. For them, another year has simply passed. For others, however, so much else has happened that the interim ~~time~~ has seemed like centuries rather than a mere twelve months. Clym and Eustacia have married, but have become separated through a tragic misunderstanding that has culminated in the pitiful death of Mrs. Yeobright, while Wildeve and Thomasin have been miserably dissatisfied with their marriage. The catastrophe of the following night is so astounding that Diggory Venn can scarcely believe how things have fallen out.

> Two were corpses, one had barely escaped the jaws of death, another was sick and a widow. The last occasion on which he [Venn] had lingered by that fireplace was when the raffle was in progress; when Wildeve was alive and well; Thomasin active and smiling in the next room; Yeobright and Eustacia just made husband and wife, and Mrs. Yeobright living at Blooms-End. It had seemed at that time that the then position of affairs was good for at least twenty years to come. Yet, of all the circle, he himself was the only one whose situation had not materially changed.[19]

To Venn's name we can add those of the furze-cutters who, at the close of the book, are cheerfully "waxing a bed-tick" for Venn himself and his bride, Thomasin. The peasants have passed unchanged across the face of the very same heath that has destroyed and mortally pained others. It is as though their "strength" is drawn up from the soil with which they work.

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[19] The Return of the Native, p. 381.

Hardy is well aware, of course, that to identify oneself with nature is tantamount to denying something of one's basic aspirations, hopes, and values. Unlike the peasant who has intuited from his surroundings the necessity of limitation, the 'outsider,' submitted to a world of crass materialism and competition, has been moulded into an aspiring creature. Furthermore, he has been instructed to think and to probe for reasons behind things. How, therefore, can he accept a way of life that categorically denies the very values and aims to which he has been awakened? Hardy is in partial agreement here with Arnold, who believes that man wishes to identify himself with something beyond nature. Man moves on a linear scale and, Arnold maintains, should he try to unite himself with nature, he will merely become her "slave,"[20] part of a cyclical changeless change. This also means that he can become like nature and, for Arnold, this is fickle, stubborn, and cruel: in short, animalistic.

In most ways, however, Hardy's peasant disproves this argument. Although Hardy believed that the average person could not fit into nature, he did not think it impossible for all or that it necessarily meant a return to the primitive state. His rustic is generally a good-natured, kind-hearted, civilized sort of man. Admittedly, there are times when, through the want of leadership, he becomes rather ruffled and irresponsible. But for the timely arrival of the level-headed

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20 Fool, if thou canst not pass her [Nature], rest her slave! (Matthew Arnold, "In Harmony with Nature.")

Gabriel Oak, Bathsheba Everdene's hay-ricks would certainly have been destroyed by fire. "The assemblage—belonging to that class of society which casts its thought into the form of feeling, and its feelings into the form of commotion, set to work with a remarkable confusion of purpose."[21] Nowhere, however, are we given any inkling that the rustic is morally irresponsible. In a world that Hardy considered to be growing increasingly less concerned with moral values, the peasant's steadfast honesty and goodness must have been very gratifying. Significantly, the clearest illustration of civilized man in nature is to be found in the most pastoral of Hardy's books, Under the Greenwood Tree. At the end of the book, we see the characters drinking, dancing, and talking under the Greenwood Tree itself. Although this tree is described individually as "an ancient tree, horizontally of enormous extent, though having no great pretensions to height," it is symbolic of Nature herself.

> Many hundreds of birds had been born amidst the boughs of this single tree; tribes of rabbits and hares had nibbled at its bark from year to year; quaint tufts of fungi had sprung from the cavities of its forks; and countless families of moles and earthworms had crept about its roots.[22]

Those who are most in harmony with their environment are usually the most contented.

The rustic, by virtue of his position in the rural system, is essentially unsophisticated. If nature has laid

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21 Far from the Madding Crowd, p. 56.

22 Under the Greenwood Tree, p. 198.

down a certain set of rules for him to follow, she has also helped to protect him from the modern, careworn spirit of the 'outside' world. "All those forces which in towns tend to reduce the manual worker to the status of a machine, all those educative influences which tend to make him a thinker and destroy his naivete, have not, in Hardy's time of writing (the date in which his books are set), been brought to bear."[23] Moreover, this 'freedom' has endowed the rustic with a liberality of mind far exceeding the pinched and narrow views of his urban counterpart. A 'natural' education has invested him with a tolerance and sympathy for his fellow-creatures and an often astute perception of human nature and its multiple ways. Tranter Dewy promptly reads in Fancy Day's behaviour towards his son, Dick, one of the basic characteristics of woman's love for man. "Now, Dick, this is how a maid is. She'll swear she's dying for thee, and she is dying for thee, and she will die for thee; but she'll fling a look over t'other shoulder at another young feller, though never leaving off dying for thee just the same."[24] This speech is wonderfully colourful and humorous, but there can be no denying the tranter's seriousness. Likewise, the Egdon furze-cutters recognize the impossibility of Clym's plans to open a school for rural folk. They sympathize readily with his fervent wish "to follow some rational occupation among the people I know best, and to whom

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23 Arthur Grimsditch, Character and Environment, (New York, 1962), p. 74.

24 Under the Greenwood Tree, p. 117.

I could be of most use," but, even if they cannot explain why, they know it to be hopelessly unwise.

'He'll never carry it out in the world,' said Fairway. 'In a few weeks he'll learn to see things otherwise.'
' 'Tis good-hearted of the young man,' said another. 'But, for my part, I think he had better mind his business.'[25]

The furze-cutters show far more forethought and reason on this occasion than the educated Clym.

Hardy's peasant, however, is not always guided by 'rational' thought. Many of his ideas are dominated by old superstitious and fetishistic beliefs inherent in the rural culture. Such responses are generally a feature of the rural character, partly, perhaps, because the rustic has not been taught to reason out cause and effect, but mainly, it would seem, because he is in direct confrontation with the unharnessed and primitive forces of his surroundings. Everything around him is essentially the same as it always has been, and yet the forces behind it have remained clothed in mystery. Man often tends to invest things unknown with powers that subsequent knowledge will repudiate. It is no wonder then that the peasant, fundamentally naive and unworldly, should attribute to certain singular omens the inevitability of events. When the quiet afternoon of Tess's wedding-day is thrice interrupted by the crowing of a cock, the group of bystanders is immediately perturbed.

'Oh?' said Mrs. Crick. 'An afternoon crow!'
Two men were standing by the yard gate, holding it open.
'That's bad,' one murmured to the other . . .

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[25] The Return of the Native, p. 178.

Tess is also upset. "I don't like to hear him!", she tells Angel Clare.[26] The furze-cutters on Egdon Heath believe that it is a bad sign for a male child to be born on a moonless night. " 'Yes; "No moon, no man." 'Tis one of the truest sayings ever spit out. The boy never comes to anything that's born at new moon. A bad job for thee, Christian, that you should have showed your nose then of all days in the month.' "[27] Superstition plays a very important part in the lives of rural folk, as Hardy illustrates so often.[28]

On occasion, it can lead to the most horrendous practices. Perhaps it is significant that the most elaborate example of this should be set against the most primitive and dismal of Hardy's backgrounds, Egdon Heath. Susan Nunsuch, convinced of Eustacia Vye's evil influence upon her son's health, busies herself "with a ghastly invention of superstition, calculated to bring powerlessness, atrophy, and annihilation on any human being against whom it was directed."[29] First of all, she makes a wax effigy of Eustacia and then, before committing it to the

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26 Tess of the d'Urbervilles, p. 246.

27 The Return of the Native, p. 33.

28 E.g.'s The apparition of the d'Urberville coach that bodes ill for its beholder (Tess of the d'Urbervilles, p. 397); the Midsummer Eve ritual of the young girls entering the Hintock woods to see their future partners (The Woodlanders, pp. 148-155); the churn's failure to produce butter at Talbothays' dairy because someone [Tess] is in love (Tess of the d'Urbervilles, pp. 155-156). The reader will find that these superstitions are fully realized!

29 The Return of the Native, p. 361.

fire, thrusts as many as fifty pins into the image "with apparently excruciating energy." The reader's horror of such an unhallowed rite is surely surpassed by his amazement that it is actually successful, for Eustacia does indeed die that very night. Likewise, the crowing of the cock correctly forecasts Tess's bitter unhappiness, and Christian Cantle certainly belongs to the Thomas Leaf, rather than to the Gabriel Oak category of men. Yet superstition is generally regarded as irrational. Hardy, therefore, seems to be telling us either that the peasant is that much closer to the truth of things, or that man, living in a non-rational universe,[30] cannot afford to deny or overlook any possible outcome of any event. Probably he is saying that both are true.

The peasant's firm belief in superstition renders the teachings of religion somewhat ineffectual. This is not because the peasant is irreligious. It is simply that superstition excites his senses, while Church doctrine, as administered by those like the Reverend Maybold, is directed at the mind rather than at the heart of its brethren. Maybold is not aware that his decision to replace the Quire with an organist will "curtail and extinguish the interest of the parishoners in church doings,"[31] an interest centred primarily upon the

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30 "Non-rationality seems, so far as one can perceive, to be the principle of the Universe. By which I do not mean foolishness, but rather a principle for which there is no exact name, lying at the indifference point between rationality and irrationality." (F.E. Hardy, p. 309).

31 Under the Greenwood Tree, Preface, 1896, p. v.

external trappings of religion. Yet, unmoved as the peasant is by any deep belief in the Christian theology, he regularly attends church and is consequently well-versed not only in the details of the service but also in biblical lore and language. So much so, in fact, that liturgical phrases slip into his everyday speech, often with the most amusing effects. Joseph Poorgrass defends himself as "a man of spirit" by maintaining: "I know that I always do say 'Please God' afore I do anything, from my getting up to my going down of the same, and I be willing to take as much disgrace as there is in that holy act."[32] Also, the rustic is not disinclined to discuss theology, and takes pride in his reasons, characteristically quaint and simple, for adhering to one denomination rather than to another.[33] "Yes; there's this to be said for the Church, a man can belong to the Church and bide in his cheerful old inn, and never trouble or worry his mind about doctrines at all. But to a meetinger, you must go to chapel in all winds and weathers, and make yerself as frantic as a skit."[34] Although the peasant is no strict believer in ceremony or ritual and is presented as essentially pagan at heart, he cannot be called irreligious. For Hardy, he possesses a true Christian nature.

> Religious, religion, is to be used in the article in its modern sense entirely, as being expressive of nobler feelings towards humanity and emotional goodness and greatness, the old meaning of the word—ceremony, or ritual—having perished,

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[32] Far from the Madding Crowd, p. 321.

[33] Arthur Grimsditch, p. 81.

[34] Far from the Madding Crowd, p. 318.

or nearly . . . . If I understand, it [Christianity] now limits itself to the religion of emotional morality and altruism that was taught by Jesus Christ, or nearly so limits itself.[35]

In Hardy's time, there was a prominent tendency among townsfolk to refer to rural people by the collective name of 'Hodge.' Hardy deeply resented this and hoped his novels might illustrate that "the rustics, though quaint, may be made to appear intelligent, and not boorish at all."[36] Angel Clare discovers this during his residence at Talbothays Farm.

> The conventional farm-folk of his imagination—personified in the newspaper-press by the pitiable dummy known as Hodge—were obliterated after a few days' residence . . . . The typical and unvarying Hodge ceased to exist. He had been disintegrated into a number of varied fellow-creatures—beings of many minds, beings infinite in difference.[37]

Although one is still inclined to regard Hardy's peasants en masse, each one is, in fact, carefully and distinctly individualized; Joseph Poorgrass, with his perpetual blushing, Old Warren, proud of his ancient age, Henry Fray, who strenously insists that his name be both spelt and pronounced H-e-n-e-r-y, and many, many more from Thomas Leaf to Tranter Dewy, from Christian Cantle to Timothy Fairway.

The rustics rarely have any direct bearing on the outcome of events,[38] but the novels would lack much colour and depth in their absence. Their humorous conversations and ideas

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35 F.E. Hardy, pp. 332-333.

36 Ibid., p. 97.

37 Tess of the d'Urbervilles, pp. 139-140.

38 There are one or two exceptions, however—Joseph Poorgrass and his drinking bout at Buck's Head. (See above.)

form a pleasing relief to the predominantly dark and serious tone in most of Hardy's books. For Hardy, these men are as much a part of the natural background as the trees and plants. One should not imagine, however, that this was his sole purpose for introducing them. In direct contrast to the 'central' characters, the rustics have not only learnt to fit into their environment, but have also proved that the inherent will to enjoy can and must overcome the "circumstantial will" that seems to be against enjoyment. And although Hardy felt convinced that such a rewarding condition was beyond those whose Consciousness had "to ask for reasons why," there must have been times when "the countryman's pragmatic respect for a faith, a way of life, an ethic, sanctioned by time and tradition, lightened his darkness."[39]

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39 Douglas Brown, Thomas Hardy (London, 1961), p. 22.

CHAPTER III

EDRED FITZPIERS

Hardy begins The Woodlanders in characteristic fashion; Barber Percomb is walking along a "deserted highway" on his way from Sherton Abbas to Little Hintock.[1] At first, however, our attention is drawn to the forbidding aspect of the landscape, where "the trees, timber or fruit-bearing as the case may be, make the wayside hedges ragged by their drip or shade, their lower limbs stretching in level repose over the road, as though reclining on the insubstantial air."[2] It is a dark, lonely spot, calculated to bring anxiety rather than composure, discomfort rather than pleasure. Man is in direct contact here with the forces of nature. Mr. Percomb finds nature's presence so overwhelming that it takes him "two days to raise my sperrits to their true pitch again."[3]

This is a very important passage, for, while it emphasizes the vulnerability of man's 'spirits' in such forlorn and desolate surroundings, it helps to explain Fitzpiers's

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1 Many of Hardy's novels open as one or more persons are walking along a country-road—e.g.'s Tess of the d'Urbervilles, The Return of the Native, Under the Greenwood Tree, The Mayor of Casterbridge. The nature of the surrounding countryside is always very conspicuous.

2 The Woodlanders, p. 7.

3 Ibid., p. 373.

reactions to the loneliness of Hintock life. If the bats and owls are enough to drive Mr. Percomb "melancholy-mad,"[4] it is only to be expected that Little Hintock, located "outside the gates of the world," should affect the more impressionable, sensitive Fitzpiers. This secluded existence 'charges' his emotional nature. "People living insulated, as I [Fitzpiers] do by the solitude of this place, get charged with emotive fluid like a Leyden jar with electric, for want of some conductor at hand to disperse it."[5] He begins to hanker for the comforting reassurance of a woman's presence. This need sparks his interest in Grace Melbury, an interest that, "in other circumstances," would have waned considerably, once her family background had come to light.

> The discovery of the attractive Grace's name and family would have been enough in other circumstances to lead the doctor, if not to put her personality out of his head, to change the character of his interest in her. Instead of treasuring her image as a rarity he would at most have played with her as a toy. He was that kind of man. But situated here he could not go so far as amative cruelty. He dismissed all deferential thought about her, but he could not help taking her somewhat seriously.[6]

The unexpected presence of such an accomplished, attractive woman in this "outlandish" place kindles his wayward heart. In a characteristic fit of irrationality, Fitzpiers decides that Grace's pretty face and dowry will compensate for her

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[4] It is interesting to note that Fitzpiers uses the same phrase. He complains to Grammer Oliver: "there's no society at all [in Hintock]; and I'm pretty near melancholy mad." (p.53)

[5] The Woodlanders, pp. 121-122.

[6] Ibid., p. 129.

lowly social position.

> Apart from his [Fitzpiers's] lover-like anxiety to possess her the few golden hundreds of the timber-dealer, ready to hand, formed a warm background to Grace's lovely face, and went some way to remove his uneasiness at the prospect of endangering his professional and social chances by an alliance with the family of a simple countryman.[7]

Fitzpiers's restlessness can also be attributed to his lack of sympathy with the rural system. The country is a world of physical activity, where the feeling is for growth and life, and where existence depends upon a stoical acceptance of life as it is; it is not a world of mental ideas and fancies. Its culture, firmly rooted in a communal spirit, is disregarded by the educated doctor, who believes that "there's only Me and Not Me in the whole world."[8] This 'philosophy of self' is strictly contrasted with Giles's supreme act of sacrifice, when he gives up his life to protect Grace's name. Thus, if Fitzpiers's nocturnal studies stand out "like a tropical plant in a hedgerow," and represent "a nucleus of advanced ideas and practices which had nothing in common with the life around,"[9] so do his egocentric values. It is only after a period of estrangement, during which he has apparently realized that the purity and beauty of Grace's nature is of far greater worth than the temporary satisfactions of sordid intrigue, that he becomes more concerned with the welfare of others than with his own. Significantly, he only regains Grace's complete favour

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7 Ibid., p. 177.

8 Ibid., p. 53.

9 Ibid., p. 54.

after his sincere display of distress at her possible injury from the man-trap. She believes that "a man who could suffer as you [Fitzpiers] were suffering must have a tender regard for me."[10]

One cannot say that Fitzpiers is altered in any fundamental way by his contact with the Hintock woodlands, for he is both selfish and emotional by nature. Yet the natural environment undoubtedly aggravates these tendencies. In another situation, they would have probably remained latent and would certainly have had less devastating consequences. Although Hardy never tells us why, it would seem that Fitzpiers had decided to seek a practice in the country because he believed that its tranquillity and seclusion would be conducive to his plans for medical and physiological research. After a time, he finds instead that it jars upon his nature. He is made for the intellectual circles of urban society and frets in their absence. The limitations of his surroundings fail to offer him any emotional or mental outlet, so he seizes with invigorated ardour the first possible opportunity that presents redress. Such an irrational reaction can only have damaging results and Fitzpiers, by failing to take into account the possible effects of his behaviour upon others, brings misery not only to Grace and her family but to Giles Winterborne as well.

At first, Fitzpiers's callous treatment of Grace seems to substantiate the rumour, circulating in Little Hintock, that

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[10] Ibid., p. 369.

he is "in league with the devil." He generally studies at night, when the rest of the community is asleep, and the country-folk, in their simple way, associate things of this nature with the devil's work. The country, of course, does not understand the town, but it would be unwise to dismiss this rumour as mere rural superstition, for there does seem to be something peculiar, even sinister, about him. This feeling is engendered less by his nocturnal studies than by his investigations of the fragments of Old John South's brain. Although these investigations are carried out for purely scientific purposes, such practices are not likely to endear him to the reader. His associations with Grace are also very strange. Giles sees him hiding behind a hedge, "quizzing" her through an eye-glass. When Grace pays her first visit to Fitzpiers's house, she catches sight of his open eyes in the mirror, "gazing wonderingly at her," only to find, upon turning round, that he is fast asleep. Likewise, when Grace returns to the scene of the tree-barking to look for her purse, Fitzpiers's face is suddenly illumined by the fire that she has stirred to aid her in her search. As he says, "We almost always meet in odd circumstances."[11]

These circumstances are "odd," mainly because they are planned by neither party; Fitzpiers and Grace meet by sheer chance. Strengthened by Fitzpiers's fascination for Grace, their marriage seems inevitable. Neither of them finds the

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[11] Ibid., p. 146.

marriage particularly rewarding, but, despite the few misgivings that Fitzpiers experiences at its prospect, he certainly never envisaged himself as the unfaithful husband. He is genuinely upset to hear that Grace believed he was really awake when she saw him in the mirror. "Never could I deceive you," he says fervently. Yet, "Foreknowledge to the distance of a year or so, in either of them, might have spoilt the effect of that pretty speech. Never deceive her! But they knew nothing, and the phrase had its day."[12] Fitzpiers may be a clever and learned doctor, but, apparently, he knows little, if anything, about his own impulsive nature.

Nevertheless, we are not inclined to regard Fitzpiers as innocent, for his "lover-like" instincts bring misery and unrest to several of the Hintock inhabitants. And yet, Hardy seems to ask, is he really to blame for his conduct? Is he really as peculiar, or sinister, as he seems? Hardy rarely presents his characters as villains or heroes, but simply as fallible human beings, none of whom is wholly bad. He believed that man generally aspired towards good,[13] so that, if his deeds proved to be harmful, it was ultimately because man had no real control over them. Fitzpiers himself tells Grammer Oliver that "no man's hands could help what they did, any more that the hands of a clock."[14] Man is a creature of

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12 Ibid., p. 136.

13 Herein lay his conviction that there was hope for amelioration.

14 The Woodlanders, p. 53.

circumstance, subservient to the unconscious workings of the Prime Cause. For Hardy, therefore, the freedom of the will must remain an illusion, "for a break in the chain of cause and effect, such as "freedom" necessarily connotes, is unthinkable."[15] Man may recognize very clearly the gulf between good and evil, but he can do little to help himself. Thus, in a predetermined universe, man is not answerable for life's tragedies. The conditions and the cruel, immutable laws of his being are primarily responsible.

Hardy believed that one of these laws, sexual selection, was especially cruel, for its influence upon man's nature, making physical attraction rather than value of character the general basis of love, repeatedly brought pain and regret in its wake. Darwin's Origin of Species suggests Nature's principal objective to be the continuance of life. As natural selection operates in much the same way as sexual selection, Hardy sees that love may often depend upon physical attraction, for beauty first strikes the eye of the beholder. As a result of the same process of selection, it frequently follows that the loved one is idealized. In Tess of the d'Urbervilles, Angel Clare's love for Tess is distinctly idealistic. "Clare's love was doubtless ethereal to a fault, imaginative to impracticability. With these natures, corporeal presence is something less appealing than corporeal absence; the latter creating an ideal presence that conveniently drops the defects

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15 Grimsditch, pp. 19-20.

of the real."[16] Angel deserts Tess because he is "not content with the gem of reality [Tess] he finds, but has to romanticize it."[17] He has come to regard her as an Artemis and a Demeter and cannot accept the difference between these goddesses and the real Tess, as he should have done. "It is the incompleteness that is loved, when love is sterling and true. This is what differentiates the real one from the imaginary, the practicable from the impossible . . . . A man sees the Diana or the Venus in his beloved, but what he loves is the difference."[18]

As idealization involves a dangerous escape from reality, Hardy feels that disillusionment will inevitably creep in through custom and habit. Man naturally wishes, of course, that there should be a rational basis for his innate tendency to idealize the loved one, for he does not want to bring suffering upon himself and his partner. Nature, however, desiring only that man should serve her purpose for the perpetuation of the race, is indifferent to such consequences. Although there are times when society is to blame for people's unhappiness, "social law had negatived forever their [Giles and Grace's] opening paradise,"[19] Hardy's criticism is generally based upon cosmic rather than social causes. Man acts as he does, because his personality has been moulded by forces

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16 Tess of the d'Urbervilles, p. 277.

17 Roy Morrell, Thomas Hardy: The Will and the Way (Kuala Lumpur, 1965), p. 108.

18 F.E. Hardy, p. 239.

19 The Woodlanders, p. 313.

far more powerful than the individual will. If his actions bring sorrow and dissatisfaction, Hardy implies, the Will, rather than the individual, is at fault, for it has implanted desire in man's consciousness.[20]

We realize, therefore, that Fitzpiers is compelled by instincts which are beyond his control. Nevertheless, we may still hold him responsible for the unhappiness caused by his illicit relationship with Mrs. Charmond. Constancy, however, appears to be "a human value rather than something firmly based upon the nature of things."[21] Fitzpiers is only responding to one of the inexorable laws to which man has been 'conditioned.' His love, we are told, is "unquestionably of such quality as to bear division and transference." This ability to love more than one person at the same time, and with equal sincerity, is of incalculable value to Nature's plan, for, while Fitzpiers's "love differed from the highest affection as the lower orders of the animal world differ from advanced organisms," it brought "not death but a multiplied existence."[22]

At first, Fitzpiers had sincerely intended that his relations with Grace should be none other than "purely casual." While he admired her beauty, he recognized their difference in station. "Anything like matrimonial intentions towards

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[20] Webster, pp. 67-71.

[21] Ibid., p. 70.

[22] The Woodlanders, p. 217.

her [Grace], charming as she is, would be absurd . . . . And, indeed, I have other aims on the practical side of my life."[23] Fitzpiers, however, has an inordinately passionate nature which responds more readily to impulse than to reason. The natural environment becomes a very important factor here, for, by bottling up his emotions, it begins to play upon his imagination. Grace, ironically, not only becomes the mistress of Hintock House, but one who is "particularly ready and willing to be wooed by himself and nobody else."[24] When one is lonely, one often tends to imagine things that the mind may recognize as remote and probably impossible, but that it will nevertheless nourish as its most immediate remedy in the situation. Such feelings are extremely dangerous, for the individual is liable to react with undue warmth.

> In such circumstances, . . . a young man may dream of an ideal friend . . . but some humour of the blood will probably lead him to think rather of an ideal mistress, and at length the rustle of a woman's dress, the sound of her voice, or the transit of her form across the field of his vision, will enkindle his soul with a flame that blinds his eyes.[24]

Fitzpiers, who indulges in "rank literatures of emotion and passion as often as, or oftener than, the books and matérial of science,"[25] is especially vulnerable. When he sees Grace, reflected in the mirror, he is profoundly moved. "The design is for once carried out," he exclaims. "Nature has at last

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[23] Ibid., p. 138.

[24] Ibid., p. 129.

[25] Ibid., p. 128.

recovered her lost union with the Idea!"[26] Grace is undoubtedly a very attractive and winsome girl, but we know that she hardly deserves such an effusive outburst.

Fitzpiers is convinced, at first, that Grace has only appeared in a dream. He has just been reading the work of a transcendental philosopher, and he suspects "it was the dose of Idealism that I received from it that made me scarcely able to distinguish between reality and fancy."[26] This speech is supremely important, because it reveals the essentially idealistic nature of Fitzpiers's love. Even though Grace subsequently admits to having been in the room at the time, Fitzpiers remains so deeply enchanted by the ideal figure in the mirror that he loses sight of the real Grace and attaches to her qualities that merely exist in his mind. Unable to distinguish between the material world and the fanciful, he deceives himself into believing that the woman he loves and wants to marry and the woman who stands before him are one and the same person. Apparently, he never really wakes up from his sleep on the sofa until it is too late. Fitzpiers's 'blindness' is rather ironic, for it is he who tells Giles: "Human love is a subjective thing . . . it is joy accompanied by an idea which we project against any suitable object in the line of our vision . . . . You [Giles] are right enough if you admit that I am in love with something in my own head, and no thing-in-itself outside it at all."[27] Man's tendency to idealize the

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[26] Ibid., p. 136.

[27] Ibid., p. 122.

loved one is presented in Hardy's last novel, The Well-Beloved, which illustrates "the theory of the transmigration of the ideal beloved one, who only exists in the lover, from material woman to material woman."[28]

Such responses, it would seem, are an essential part of Nature's plan, and Fitzpiers acts accordingly. When he finds that Grace is not the woman of his dreams, his position as Mr. Melbury's son-in-law begins to weigh heavily upon his mind. Chance intervenes, however, for a message arrives from Hintock House, requesting his immediate attendance upon the 'injured' Mrs. Charmond, a woman whose emotional nature and similar social background answer his present needs. In these circumstances, his affair with Mrs. Charmond is perhaps more understandable than his philandering with Suke Damson, for the former is "a finished coquette and a cultivated woman, and she can play on every key of his mind, which responds so readily to new sensations."[29] They had met many years before in Heidleburg, but their acquaintance had been so brief that, in the general course of events, they would have had little reason to have ever recalled its sentimental memories. Owing to their oppressive dissatisfaction with Hintock life, however, and to its effect upon their erratic passions, the two or three days they had spent together "were stretched out in retrospect to the length and importance of years; made to

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28 F.E. Hardy, p. 286.

29 Grimsditch, p. 126.

form a canvas for infinite fancies, idle dreams, luxurious melancholies, and pretty, alluring assertations which could neither be proved nor disproved."[30]

Fitzpiers's platonic intentions towards Grace and his marital vows of fidelity are rendered ineffectual by Nature's sexual law. The dreary woodlands seem to further Nature's plan, for, by playing upon Fitzpiers's susceptible temperament, they arouse his emotional needs for female companionship. The natural environment becomes a medium, as it were, through which Nature can realize more fully her plans for the propagation of life. As a result of Fitzpiers's entanglements with the opposite sex, all the major characters suffer. Yet, he is not to blame, for he is merely part of "the great web of human doings," compelled by the "Unfulfilled Intention which makes life what it is,"[31] a struggle with natural laws that are unconscious of man's desires.

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30 The Woodlanders, p. 201.

31 Ibid., p. 56.

CHAPTER IV

EUSTACIA VYE

The Return of the Native is dominated by the monumental presence of Egdon Heath. This "vast tract of unenclosed wild" influences the lives of all who inhabit its dark and haggard slopes, "moving them to love or to hate, to despair or to the philosophic mind."[1] In no other novel has Hardy emphasized with such consistency the importance of the natural environment.[2] This is especially noticeable in the case of Eustacia Vye, a wilful and desperate girl who lives with her grandfather in "the loneliest of lonely houses on these thinly populated slopes."[3] The heath's influence pervades all that she does and thinks, and, in her attempts to escape its hold, she unwittingly brings pain, and even death, to several "honest people." Hardy has drawn for us in this, his first major tragedy, a picture of life that is as grim as Egdon itself.

Egdon Heath, in fact, exposes much of life's grimness. When man observes its "swarthy monotony," he becomes aware of the more wretched aspects of his existence. Egdon's dismal and

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1 Henry C. Duffin, Thomas Hardy (Manchester, 1937), p. 16.

2 Hardy, in fact, classified this work as "a Novel of Character and Environment."

3 The Return of the Native, p. 80.

barren wastes seem to symbolize the indifference with which nature views the human lot. Man is of such slight importance to the heath that Thomasin Yeobright, as she leaves Blooms-End on her wedding-day, is reduced to "a pale-blue spot in a vast field of neutral brown,"[4] while Clym Yeobright is nothing more than "a brown spot in the midst of an expanse of olive-green gorse."[5] Whatever befalls man, whether tragic or joyful, is none of Egdon's concern. Only night can arouse its interest. Its "sombre stretch of rounds and hollows seemed to meet the evening gloom in pure sympathy, the heath exhaling darkness as rapidly as the heavens precipitated it."[6]

Quite naturally, these gloomy and unsympathetic surroundings are in no way congenial to the "inflammable" Eustacia Vye. Egdon is one of those remote, solitary spots that are made for "the more thinking among mankind" rather than for the fanciful flights of a dreamy romantic. Its gaunt face oppresses her and engenders a desperate need for love.

> To be loved to madness—such was her [Eustacia's] great desire. Love was to her the one cordial which could drive away the eating loneliness of her days. . . . Her prayer was always spontaneous, and often ran thus, 'O deliver my heart from this fearful gloom and loneliness: send me great love from somewhere, else I shall die.'[7]

This "great love" for which Eustacia really yearns is that of a Saul or a Buonaparte, but, on netherward Egdon, where

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4 Ibid., p. 168.

5 Ibid., p. 258.

6 Ibid., p. 12.

7 Ibid., pp. 77-78.

love is rarely offered to such a beautiful woman, she has to fill up "the spare hours of her existence by idealizing Wildeve for want of a better object."[8] If Eustacia had been situated elsewhere, one may be sure that she would have bestowed nothing more than a customary glance upon the local inn-keeper. Yet, when we first meet her, she is restlessly awaiting a visit from him and has even lit a bonfire to attract his attention. When a woman who is described as "the raw material of a divinity," and whose "presence brought memories of such things as Bourbon roses, rubies, and tropical midnights,"[9] behaves in such a reckless fashion towards one "in whom no man would have seen anything to admire and in whom no woman would have seen anything to dislike,"[10] we realize that something grievous must have disturbed her.

Eustacia has two enemies—Egdon Heath and a proud and temperamental nature, which she has apparently inherited from her parents. While her mother is indicated as a woman "of good family," her father is described as a native of Corfu, an island, west of Greece, where Italians and Greeks have bred a people of fiery Latin temperament. Swayed by great passion and pride, Eustacia is a victim of moods and whims. Her burning desire to re-conquer Wildeve's heart is simply the result of a characteristic fit of pique at his desertion

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8 Ibid., p. 79.

9 Ibid., pp. 73-75.

10 Ibid., p. 50.

of her for Thomasin. "The man [Wildeve] who had begun by being merely her amusement, and would never have been more than her hobby but for his skill in deserting her at the right moment, was now again her desire. . . . Such feeling as Eustacia had idly given to Wildeve was dammed into a flood by Thomasin."[11] Likewise, she forgets the realities of Wildeve's rather nondescript character, because she wants to feel the power of her attractiveness. "She [Eustacia] seized the moment, and throwing back the shawl so that the firelight shone full upon her face and throat, said with a smile, 'Have you [Wildeve] seen anything better than that in your travels?' "[12] Eustacia is "a mere vessel of emotion," responsive to the unscrupulous promptings of love and unable to place her ideas in any kind of logical order.

Egdon does little to curb her wild, romantic nature. Its forbidding and unchangeable features seem to accentuate her fears that "any love she might win would sink simultaneously with the sand in the glass."[13] Eustacia is never able to rid herself of this oppressive fear. On the night of Clym's proposal, the "slipping, slipping, slipping" of the eclipsed moon makes happiness impossible, for it suggests to her that nothing can ensure the continuance of love. One cannot attribute such ideas to the heath's influence alone, for

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11 Ibid., p. 103.

12 Ibid., p. 71.

13 Ibid., p. 77.

they are undoubtedly characteristic of one who knows "the night-side of sentiment. . . too well for her years."[14] At the same time, Egdon is hardly guaranteed to set her mind at rest. Hardy presents it as "A Face on which Time makes but Little Impression" and tells us that "To recline on a stump of thorn in the central valley of Egdon, . . . and to know that everything around and underneath had been from prehistoric times as unaltered as the stars overhead, gave ballast to the mind adrift on change, and harassed by the irrepressible New."[15] Egdon's massive immobility symbolizes the timelessness in the powerful sweep of Nature herself and emphasizes, through contrast, the transitoriness of human things.

Time's unrelenting attack on man's happiness always disturbed Hardy; "dicing Time" is one of the "purblind Doomsters" that "for gladness casts a moan." ("Hap") Although the Wessex novels suggest that Hardy regards happiness as an illusion,[16] the illusion appears to be real enough while it lasts. The tragedy, however, is that Time makes disillusion inevitable, for happiness depends upon temporary things; "Life and Time are rivals in a great race, but it is a losing

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[14] Ibid., p. 75.

[15] Ibid., p. 14.

[16] While Hardy was preparing The Return of the Native, he wrote in his diary: "A man would never laugh were he not to forget his situation, or were he not one who never has learnt it. After risibility from comedy, how often does the thoughtful mind reproach itself for forgetting the truth? Laughter always means blindness—either from defect, choice, or accident." (F.E. Hardy, p. 112.)

one for Life."[17] Similar thoughts have produced in Eustacia's mind a rather vague and indefinable grudge against Destiny, "through whose interference she dimly fancied it arose that love alighted only on gliding youth."[18] These fears have given rise to an extremely dangerous doctrine of despair, "which tended to breed actions of reckless unconventionality, framed to snatch a year's, a week's, even an hour's passion from anywhere while it could be won."[18] Well might she mourn, like Wildeve, that "the curse of inflammibility is upon me," for her "actions of reckless unconventionality" do much to cost her Mrs. Yeobright's respect and trust. When Wildeve proposes, however, and even offers to take her away from the heath, Eustacia hesitates, for, while she unashamedly indulges in his attentions, her pride balks at the idea of marrying someone inferior. She wishes to leave Egdon, but only with a man who is worthy of her.

Chance presents Eustacia with the opportunity. She learns that Mrs. Yeobright's son, Clym, "a young and clever man," is coming home for the Christmas holidays "from, of all contrasting places in the world, Paris. It was like a man coming from Heaven."[19] As time passes, we often tend to exaggerate the importance and splendour of places and events with which we have been acquainted, but from which we are now far removed.

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17 Albert Pettigrew Elliott, "Fatalism in the Works of Thomas Hardy," University of Pennsylvania Theses (1935), I, 74.

18 The Return of the Native, p. 77.

19 Ibid., p. 116.

Such responses are especially strong when we move into a totally different environment. Seclusion on Egdon has exaggerated Eustacia's recollections of life in her native town of Budmouth.

> There was no middle distance in her [Eustacia's] perspective: romantic recollections of sunny afternoons on an esplanade, with military bands, officers, and gallants around stood like gilded letters upon the dark tablet of surrounding Egdon. . . . Seeing nothing of human life now, she imagined all the more of what she had seen.[20]

For Eustacia, even Budmouth is nothing compared to Paris, "the centre and vortex of the fashionable world," and here, on lonely Egdon, was an intelligent, well-educated man who, for many years, had been familiar with its fascinating atmosphere! Friendship with Clym would ensure her some contact, albeit rather distant, with this gay, fashionable world and an opportunity, at the same time, to temporarily escape the heath's solitude. Those "dawnings of reason," which had told Eustacia that she stooped in loving Wildeve, are completely extinguished by the prospect of Clym's arrival.

Eustacia's interest in Clym takes a far more hazardous turn when she happens to overhear Humphrey declare that she and young Yeobright "would make a very pretty pigeon-pair—hey? . . . there couldn't be a better couple if they were made o' purpose."[21] The furze-cutter's innocently-spoken words furnish Eustacia not only "with visions enough to fill the whole blank afternoon," but with a strange and curious

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20 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

excitement to meet this 'remarkable' man. With this in mind, she sets out for Blooms-End. Her wishes are duly fulfilled, for she meets Clym and even receives a passing "Good Night!" Unbeknown to Clym, these simple words have an enormous effect upon Eustacia's vivid imagination. "All emotional things were possible to the speaker of that 'good night'."[22] It is characteristic of this immoderately sentimental girl that such an ordinary statement, uttered in such an ordinary tone, should set in motion her tremendous passion for Clym.

That night Eustacia has an extraordinary dream that she is dancing with a man in silver armour. Suddenly, both wheel away from the dance and dive into one of the pools of the heath. As the stranger prepares to reveal himself, he falls into fragments and Eustacia wakes up. She is convinced, however, that her partner was Clym, for he has now become the knight who has journeyed from a far-away, exotic land to rescue her, a lady in distress, from the cruel hands of Egdon Heath. Although Hardy tells us that the noise of the cracking figure is caused by Eustacia's maid as she opens the downstairs' shutters, something far more important is obviously implied. The figure crumbles, partly because Eustacia's conception of Clym is a complete illusion, and partly, it would seem, because her silver knight is only to be found in story-book romance, certainly not in reality. The dream bodes no good, but Eustacia is too much of a romantic to heed

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22 Ibid., p. 124.

the warning and continues to colour Clym brighter than he really is. Clym's "Little Sound" has produced a "Great Dream" indeed!

The intellectual Clym, of course, is a totally unsuitable partner for the vivacious and sensuous Eustacia Vye, but "it is precisely the destructiveness and the self-destructiveness of a Eustacia that she should dream of satisfying her fantasies of worldly brilliance through a connection with a man of intellectual seriousness."[23] Eustacia longs for life that to her is music, poetry, passion, and war, and thinks she sees the way to it "in my Clym." Inevitably, she discovers none of these things and suffers greatly. Rather than blame herself, however, "she laid the fault upon the shoulders of some indistinct, colossal Prince of the World, who had framed her situation and ruled her lot."[24] Eustacia's ideas of the workings of the First Cause are always rather vague, for she does not possess the intellectual perceptiveness of a Clym or Jude Fawley. She is aware, nevertheless, that some insuperable force, destructive in its very indifference to man's fate, is making sport of her and ruthlessly thwarting all her attempts to achieve the happiness that should be love's reward.

Harvey Webster has pointed out that "Eustacia's predicament is an exaggerated form of the quandary in which Hardy believes intelligent human beings find themselves."[25] The accidental

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23 Irving Howe, Thomas Hardy (New York, 1967), p. 63.

24 The Return of the Native, p. 304.

25 Webster, p. 122.

variations which have brought man to his present state of existence have also brought a consciousness which causes him to desire and to suffer. Man suffers not because he desires unreasonable things, but because "the human race is too extremely developed for its corporeal conditions, the nerves being evolved to an activity abnormal in such an environment. . . . It may be questioned if Nature, or what we call Nature, so far back as when she crossed the line from invertebrates to vertebrates, did not exceed her mission."[26] Sue Bridehead experiences similar misgivings. She fears that "at the framing of the terrestrial conditions there seemed never to have been contemplated such a development of emotional perceptiveness among the creatures subject to those conditions as that reached by thinking and educated humanity."[27] These conditions lead Hardy to an indictment of consciousness, for man, having developed as a sentient being in a universe that "does not supply the materials for happiness to higher existences,"[28] is consistently tormented by unrealizable desires.

It is not an attractive picture, and Hardy felt that "If Law itself had consciousness, how the aspect of its creatures would terrify it, fill it with remorse!"[29] The Law, however, is unconscious and works "automatically like a somnambulist,

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26 F.E. Hardy, p. 218.

27 Thomas Hardy, Jude the Obscure (New York, 1966), pp. 353-354.

28 F.E. Hardy, p. 218.

29 Ibid., p. 149.

and not reflectively like a sage."[30] Hardy's criticism, therefore, becomes an indictment of the Prime Cause rather than an indictment of man's desires.

"Yea, Sire; why shaped you us, 'who in
  This tabernacle groan'—
If ever such a joy be found herein,
Such joy no man had wished to win
  If he had never known!"

Then he: "My labours—logicless—
  You may explain; not I:
Sense-sealed I have wrought, without a guess
That I evolved a Consciousness
  To ask for reasons why.

"Strange that ephemeral creatures who
  By my own ordering are,
Should see the shortness of my view,
Use ethic tests I never knew
  Or made provision for!"[31]

One can sense here Hardy's profound sympathy for man's predicament. He seems to believe that desire should be satisfiable if it is present in one's consciousness. As this is generally impossible in "a world of defect," he is very much aware of "the intolerable antilogy of making figments feel."

The quandary, in which "Life's doom to feel" has placed man, is accentuated by the operations "of cruel Nature's law." The girls at Talbothays Dairy—Izz, Retty, and Marion—"writhed feverishly under the oppressiveness of an emotion thrust on them by cruel Nature's law—an emotion which they had neither expected nor desired. . . . The differences which distinguished them as individuals were abstracted by this passion

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30 *Jude the Obscure*, p. 353.

31 Thomas Hardy, "New Year's Eve," ll. 11-25.

[for Angel Clare], and each was but a portion of one organism called sex."[32] Nature's prime objective is the propagation of species; "sex relations are at the base of Nature which is endowed with the Will to be."[33] In order to achieve this, she has made physical attraction the basis for mating. While Man is endowed with an irresistible instinct for Woman's charms and beauty, Woman is motivated by a desire "to fascinate and influence those more powerful than she."[34] Ethelberta, in The Hand of Ethelberta, is coquettish and knows that her physical charms will affect men. Fancy Day, as her name suggests, is also a coquette. Dick Dewy recognizes her to be the kind of girl who cares "a great deal too much how she appear[s] in the eyes of other men."[35] Likewise, when Eustacia visits Blooms-End with the Egdon mummers, she is nettled by the disguise which hides her attractive qualities.

> Had she known the full effect of the encounter she would have moved heaven and earth to get here [Blooms-End] in a natural manner. The power of her face all lost, the charm of her emotions all disguised, the fascinations of her coquetry denied existence, nothing but a voice left to her: she had a sense of the doom of Echo.[36]

Hardy seems to imply that love is Woman's motivating passion, the one thing that she believes will bring happiness and

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[32] Tess of the d'Urbervilles, p. 171.

[33] Albert Pettigrew Elliott, p. 92.

[34] Thomas Hardy, A Pair of Blue Eyes (London, 1912), p. 215.

[35] Under the Greenwood Tree, p. 146.

[36] The Return of the Native, p. 151.

enjoyment. Based on the insecure foundation of sex, however, love frequently brings pain. Yet human beings are not really able to help themselves, because passion is the most difficult thing in the world to suppress.

Passion clearly rules Eustacia Vye. Possessed of unbridled emotions and blind to all consequences, she strives for love as the supreme experience in life. Once, she tells Clym, "I saw an officer of the Hussars ride down the street at Budmouth, and though he was a total stranger and never spoke to me, I loved him till I thought I should really die of love."[37] Impelled by the same dangerous instincts, she has idealized Wildeve and now begins to adore Clym.

> A series of attentions paid to her . . . by the first man [Clym] she had ever been inclined to adore, complicated her emotions indescribably. She had loved him partly because he was exceptional in this scene [the Christmas-party at Blooms-End], partly because she had determined to love him, chiefly because she was in desperate need of loving somebody after wearying of Wildeve.[38]

She even feels that she must love Clym "in spite of herself!" Hardy comments on this fanciful and irrational nature of Woman. "Once let a maiden admit the possibility of her being stricken with love for someone at a certain hour and place, and the thing is as good as done."[38] Such reactions are not particularly pleasant, but they play an essential part in Nature's plan, and Eustacia, mere puppet that she is, responds accordingly.

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37 Ibid., p. 207.

38 Ibid., p. 149.

If Eustacia acts in accordance with Nature's law, so do her three 'admirers,' Wildeve, Clym, and Charley, the heath-boy. All of them are captivated by Eustacia's beauty and charm. Wildeve finds her irresistible, while Charley regards her as "a romantic and sweet vision, scarcely incarnate." Clym's feelings are hardly less intense. "Let me look into your [Eustacia's] moonlit face, and dwell on every line and curve in it! Only a few hair-breadths make the difference between this face and faces I have seen many times before I knew you; yet what a difference—the difference between everything and nothing at all."[39] At first, Clym regards Eustacia as one who may be able to help him in his plans to run a school. With this in mind, he pays a visit to Mistover Knap and suggests the idea to her. Although his suggestion meets with a rather negative reaction, he is not at all discouraged. On the contrary, he is elated at having made her acquaintance. "During his [Clym's] walk home his most intelligible sensation was that his scheme had somehow become glorified. A beautiful woman had been intertwined with it."[40] Clym's heart is easily won and, after a few weeks, he proposes. Eustacia's beauty, however, has caused Clym to misjudge. Even though he realizes that Eustacia loves him as a visitant from "a gay world to which she [Eustacia] rightly belonged," he refuses, or is unable, to heed his mother's warning that such a "voluptuous, idle woman"

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39 Ibid., p. 203.

40 Ibid., p. 194.

cannot bring him happiness.

Both Clym and Wildeve suffer as a result of their relationships with Eustacia. Their actions, however, make others suffer. Mrs. Yeobright never recovers from Clym's decision to desert her in favour of Eustacia, and Wildeve's unfaithful behaviour brings pain not only to his wife, Thomasin, but to Diggory Venn as well. Even Charley is caught up in this web of unhappiness. When Eustacia leaves her grandfather's house to live with Clym, he finds Mistover Knap very empty and forlorn. One is reminded here of Sergeant Troy's speech on the effects of misery caused by beautiful women.

> Why, Miss Everdene, it is in this manner that your good looks may do more harm than good in the world. . . . Such women as you a hundred men always covet—your eyes will bewitch scores on scores into an unavailing fancy for you—you can only marry one of that many. . . . All these men will be saddened. And not only those ninety-nine men, but the ninety-nine women they might have married are saddened with them. . . . That's why I say that a woman so charming as yourself, Miss Everdene, is hardly a blessing to her race.[41]

In the Wessex novels, much of the unhappiness produced by love centres on an attractive woman. The woman, however, is rarely held responsible because Hardy recognizes that she is merely a pawn in Nature's plan.

Eustacia's "predicament" is aggravated immeasurably by Egdon Heath. Egdon's "sinister condition," we are told, "was not, on the face of it, friendly to women."[42] To one who yearned for love and for the gay, resplendent atmosphere of

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41 *Far from the Madding Crowd*, pp. 194-195.

42 *The Return of the Native*, p. 60.

Paris, it was intolerable, because its melancholy countenance seemed to suggest that the realization of either was impossible. Nothing, however, makes us more determined to achieve certain goals than the suggestion that they are beyond our reach. Such reactions are extremely dangerous, for we become increasingly less able to respond to the voice of reason. Hence, Eustacia's irrational longing "for the abstraction called passionate love more than for any particular lover."[43] Eustacia, of course, has reason, but it cannot make her lead her life in any rational fashion. Although she knows that Wildeve is not to be trusted, she takes no notice. "She knew that he trifled with her; but she loved on."[44] Similar misgivings occur to her after the adventure to Blooms-End, disguised as one of the Egdon mummers. When the initial exultation at meeting Clym has begun to wear off, she fears that "the unreasonable nimbus of romance with which she had encircled that man [Clym] might be her misery."[45] Indeed it is, but, even though Eustacia recognizes its possibility, she can do little to help herself.

Egdon Heath, therefore, plays a prominent part in Eustacia's tragedy. It influences her first to pursue Wildeve and then Clym, neither of whom is capable of satisfying her demands upon life. Had she remained in Budmouth, her romantic

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43 Ibid., p. 77.

44 Ibid., p. 73.

45 Ibid., p. 153.

dreams would have probably subsided; there was hardly fuel enough there to set her imagination afire. Circumstance, however, had intervened and placed Eustacia in a situation, calculated to arouse her romantic fantasies of a great and sublime love. Egdon's mournful loneliness plays havoc with her sensitive nature and engenders her reckless desire "to be loved to madness." Even though she had concluded that love was but a "doleful joy . . . she desired it, as one in a desert would be thankful for brackish water."[46] Love, she feels, is the only way to escape the heath's indifference and "the eating loneliness of her days." Such irrational responses are not guaranteed to produce happiness, as Eustacia discovers only too well. Her tragedy, it seems, is "the inevitable answer to personality's self-assertion against the impersonal power of the world."[47]

Plagued by consciousness and "cruel Nature's law," man is bound to suffer. The Wessex novels, in fact, present us with the terrible implication that man suffers simply because he is alive. The emergence of consciousness reveals to "the more thinking among mankind" "the defects of natural laws, and . . . the quandary that man is in by their operation."[48] This is the dilemma with which man is faced, and Hardy, aware that "happiness was but the occasional episode in a general

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46 Ibid., p. 78.

47 Lascelles Abercrombie, Thomas Hardy: A Critical Study (London, 1912), p. 119.

48 The Return of the Native, p. 174.

drama of pain,"[49] seems to advocate a stoical acceptance of things rather than rebellion. In the Wessex novels, those characters who accept their lot achieve in the end a contentment impossible for those who rebel unnecessarily. Rebellion increases, rather than takes away, the pain inherent in the coil of things. Eustacia's tragic death serves as a pertinent example. Her unsuccessful rebellion against Egdon's cruel indifference merely leads her to that awful position that feels nothing is really worth the doing. Death, in fact, becomes the only way to escape "the satire of Heaven." Her suicidal act is as much an example "of the coming universal wish not to live"[50] as is Father Time's death in Jude the Obscure.

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[49] Thomas Hardy, The Mayor of Casterbridge (New York, 1966), p.334.

[50] Jude the Obscure, p. 348.

CONCLUSION

Hardy was deeply impressed with the insignificance of man in this vast universe, "in a timeless Nature which seemed to swallow up his pretensions to individuality."[1] In Two on a Tower, in which Hardy's purpose is "to set the emotional history of two infinitesimal lives against the stupendous background of the stellar universe,"[2] contemplation of space fills the characters with an awful sense of man's helplessness in such an enormous cosmic system. Man seems to be so small and so frail. This idea is also suggested in Far from the Madding Crowd, as Gabriel Oak stands on Norcombe Hill, surveying "the panoramic glide of the stars." He is overawed by the loneliness of the scene and by "the complete abstraction from all its compass of the sights and sounds of man. Human shapes, interferences, troubles, and joys were all as if they were not."[3]

In the struggle for survival, man always has to reckon with the forces of nature. Although he must usually work with, rather than against nature, there are times when this would prove calamitous. In Far from the Madding Crowd, Gabriel

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1 Albert Pettigrew Elliott, p. 85.

2 Thomas Hardy, Two on a Tower (London, 1912), Preface, p. vii.

3 Far from the Madding Crowd, p. 20.

Oak recognizes that the storm poses a distinct threat to Bathsheba's ricks. Nature appears as both creator and destroyer here, for she is ready to destroy the bountiful harvest that she has helped to create. Man, therefore, must intervene if it is to be saved. Aided by Bathsheba herself, Gabriel manages to protect the harvest, though at a great risk to his own life. His refusal to accept the possibility of disaster is strictly contrasted with Troy's unconcern at the approaching storm. But for Gabriel's quick thinking and courage, the greater part of Bathsheba's crop would have been ruined; "by acting before Nature ends, like Oak, man replaces Nature's amorality and lack of law by human intelligence and morality."[4] Survival often depends upon a prompt and sensible interpretation of nature's ways.

From reading the Wessex novels, we realize that nature plays an important part in determining the outcome of events. In The Return of the Native and The Woodlanders, in fact, it directs the action. Egdon Heath controls the lives of its inhabitants in much the same way as Old South's tree holds in its clutches the destinies of several Hintock people. When the tree is cut down, John South dies and Giles Winterborne loses his cottage. He also loses Grace because Mr. Melbury does not relish the idea of his daughter marrying a man "without even a home to take her to." Grace consequently turns to Fitzpiers, while Giles has to look for somewhere to

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[4] Roy Morrell, p. 16.

live. He finds a lonely, disused hut just beyond the boundary of Mrs. Charmond's estate. This hut, however, is terribly dilapidated and Giles ~~catches~~ becomes a serious illness, ~~which~~ The illness recurs, with fatal results, at the end of the following summer. Although the tree was cut down to save Old South's life, it brought nothing but misery. Implicit here is the warning that a mis-reading of nature may very well have devastating consequences, as it does in The Return of the Native. Eustacia Vye really causes her own death, for, "by so pitiably mistaking the indifference of its [Egdon's] motion for malignity, [she] does actually turn it into malignity on herself and others."[5]

There are times, however, when it is very difficult to believe that nature is not actively malign. In A Pair of Blue Eyes, the cliff to which Knight clings for his life seems to possess a distinctly hostile personality, and nothing could be more ominous than the approaching storm that threatens Bathsheba's hayricks. "The moon vanished not to reappear. It was the farewell of the ambassador previous to war. The night had a haggard look, like a sick thing; and there came finally an utter expiration of air from the whole heaven in the form of a slow breeze, which might have been likened to death."[6] Then there is Egdon Heath, described as the enemy of civilization and a place which could "retard the dawn, sadden noon,

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5 Abercrombie, p. 119.

6 Far from the Madding Crowd, p. 276.

anticipate the frowning of storms scarcely generated, and intensify the opacity of a moonless midnight to a cause of shaking and dread."[7] No wonder Eustacia Vye feels that "the world is all wrong" on Egdon! Although Hardy believes that nature is fundamentally indifferent to man's lot, it brings so much unhappiness that the reader is likely to assume that something sinister controls the action.

Any novel by Hardy will plainly indicate his deep concern with the plight of "God-forgotten" man in a universe that "does not supply the materials for happiness to higher existences."[8] It was perhaps this painful realization that led him to write in his diary: "in time one might get to regard every object, and every action, as composed, not of this or that material, this or that movement, but of the qualities pleasure and pain in varying proportions."[9] For Hardy, it was too often the experience of pain, but his distress was surely tempered by his recognition in man's nature of a basic joie-de-vivre, an indescribable "zest for life which helps him to overcome and forget his sorrows."[10] "The irresistible, universal, automatic tendency to find sweet pleasure somewhere, which pervades all life, from the meanest to the highest, had at length

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7 The Return of the Native, p. 11.

8 F.E. Hardy, p. 218.

9 Ibid., p. 217.

10 R.E. Zachrisson, Thomas Hardy's Twilight View of Life (Uppsala, 1931), p. 232.

mastered Tess."[11] Although this "tendency to find sweet pleasure" normally ends in failure, it nevertheless brings to light that ennobling strain in man that will ceaselessly continue to struggle against overwhelming odds. Even at the time of "The Breaking of Nations," when the First World War had destroyed any conception that Hardy may have nourished "of a fundamental ultimate Wisdom at the back of things,"[12] he was still able to proclaim the persistence of the human spirit.

Only a man harrowing clods
  In a slow silent walk,
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
  Half asleep as they stalk.

Only thin smoke without flame
  From the heaps of couch grass:
Yet this will go onward the same
  Though Dynasties pass.

Yonder a maid and her wight
  Come whispering by;
War's annals will fade into night
  Ere their story die.[13]

Despite many moments of dark despair, Hardy never completely lost his faith in life as a worthwhile experience.

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[11] Tess of the d'Urbervilles, p. 124.

[12] F.E. Hardy, p. 368.

[13] Thomas Hardy, "In Time Of "The Breaking of Nations"."

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