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# Love on a Blighted Star: Nature and Female Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy

Emily M. Armstrong  
*College of William and Mary*

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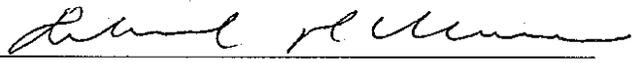
Love on a Blighted Star: Nature and Female Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy

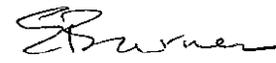
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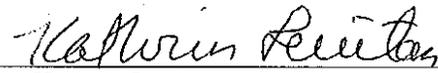
by

Emily Margaret Armstrong

Accepted for Honors  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Deborah Morse, Director

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Elizabeth Barnes

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Kathrin Levitan

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Professor Mary Ann Melfi

Williamsburg, VA  
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*Introduction*

*The outskirts of the garden in which Tess found herself had been left uncultivated for some years, and was now damp and rank with juicy grass which sent up mists of pollen at the touch... She went stealthily as a cat through this profusion of growth, gathering cuckoo-spittle on her skirts, cracking snails that were underfoot, staining her hands with thistle-milk and slug-slime, and rubbing off upon her naked arms the sticky blights, which, though snow white on the apple trunks, made blood-red stains on her skin... Tess was conscious of neither time nor space. The exaltation which she had described as being producible at will by gazing at a star, came now without any determination of hers; she undulated upon the thin notes as upon billows, and their harmonies passed like breezes through her, bringing tears into her eyes.*

*–Tess of the D'Urbervilles, 122-3*

In the works of Thomas Hardy, natural landscapes define the fictional region of Wessex, pervading each narrative. As the plots of the novels evolve to take on increasingly tragic tones, so does the role of the natural world assume greater significance, with particular relation to female characters. Each text expresses a deep appreciation for the beauty of natural landscapes, while progressively developing heightened degrees of connection between Nature and female figures. In the works *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native*, *The Woodlanders*, and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, Nature's influence and connection to Hardy's women becomes increasingly more profound. Its prevalence grows across these narratives; from Bathsheba Everdene's empowerment as a female farmer, to Tess Durbeyfield's transcendent, elevated consciousness, Hardy's heroines are palpably connected to Nature.

Courtship and marriage are the driving forces of Hardy's novels, and questions of female agency and power are quick to arise. The author's upbringing amongst empowered women is distinctly evident in his writing, as he modeled Bathsheba and Mrs. Yeobright upon his Aunt Martha and mother, Jemima, respectively (Tomalin 22, 28). The

most influential personal experience, perhaps, was Jemima's asserted view on marriage: "She proved a loyal wife, but she was against the condition of marriage itself, and she advised all her own children not to repeat her mistake and admonished them to remain single. Such was the force of her words and character that three out of four obeyed her" (Tomalin 14). This instillation of anti-marital feeling, alongside the author's tumultuous first marriage, perhaps influenced the repetition of unconventional, tragic marriage plots across his work. However, Hardy's heroines prove themselves as powerful beings in their own right, and the author strives for greater female agency in his works.

Female sexual experiences come to be inherently connected to and dependent upon natural spaces. Regardless of class or social standing, the women in each novel benefit from the opportunity and agency provided by Nature. They are allowed a far greater measure of privacy and candid conversation than when exposed to the prying eyes and impressed judgment of populated or indoor areas. In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Bathsheba's pursuit of Sergeant Troy is directly enabled by natural provision. From their physically intense meeting in the dark amongst the firs, to their meeting alone in the lush green hollow, these experiences are overtly sexual and phallic (spurs pinning skirts, thrusting swordplay). The heroine is deeply connected to Nature, as with the horseback episode at the novel's start: "...she dexterously dropped backwards flat upon the pony's back, her head over its tail, her feet against its shoulder and her eyes to the sky" (*FFMC* 15). The connection shared between the heroine and Nature reveals the land's role in advancing the female heroic plot. For the purposes of this argument, the "female heroic plot" refers to Hardy's efforts to establish female protagonists as empowered figures, both within and in spite of the central courtship and marriage plots, doing so through the

recognition and exploration of their sexual expression. From Bathsheba to Tess, this connection evolves and grows deeper. Hardy's final rural heroine is proffered as the ideal, "pure woman." In spite of the crimes involved in the narrative—those carried out against her and those she herself comes to commit—Tess's alignment with Nature pulls away from the judgment and convention forced upon her by society. In this sense, the natural world reveals Tess's purity, maintaining her heroic status and validating her narrative:

But this encompassment of her own characterization, based on shreds of convention, peopled by phantoms and voices antipathetic to her, was a sorry and mistaken creation of Tess's fancy—a cloud of moral hobgoblins by which she was terrified without reason. It was they who were out of harmony with the actual world, not she. (*Tess* 85)

In providing removal from the invasive forces of social change and judgment, the "cloud of moral hobgoblins," Nature gives value to the heroine's experiences. Alongside the recognition of female sexuality, Hardy's treatment of male figures works to bolster his heroines. Katharine Rogers explicates this point, stating, "He devastatingly exposed male chauvinism in characters like Sergeant Troy, who assumed a right to use women's bodies and money, and Angel Clare, who excoriated the woman he was supposed to love because she did not fit his egocentric ideal of womanhood" (Rogers 249). In exposing these "heroic" men for their chauvinism, Hardy works to further validate the trials of female experiences in courtship and marriage. In the romantic plots of each novel, Hardy embraces and explores female sexual expression. Using explicit language through natural terms (as with the sexually charged garden scene in *Tess*), the author works to validate the sexual experiences of women in his works. The driving force in enabling sexual awareness and experience, Nature lends power to Hardy's heroines.

As heroines are confronted by romantic prospects, their plots are convoluted by social complexities. Urban development looms, a specter encroaching upon the picturesque tableaux of rural life. However, Hardy's views of the potential offered by urban development are complex. With a keen awareness of the privileges of his own upbringing and education (Tomalin 35), he was observant of the advantages offered by a developing society. A proponent of class mobility from a young age, his first disagreement with the Church was rooted in the local clergyman's harsh stance against mobility for the lower classes (Tomalin 42). Peter Widdowson explores Hardy's ideas regarding class mobility in a time where society and class structure were evolving:

...Hardy speaks of the 'metamorphic classes of society' (Hardy 1996, 312)—thus exactly summing up the social group he focuses on: classes undergoing, as the dictionary puts it, 'complete transformation.' For most of his protagonists are indeed in transition...are experiencing some structural change in their social positioning. If tragedies... develop, it is not principally because 'Character is Destiny' or because a cosmic fate brings individuals low, it is because the social order is rapidly changing and individuals on the move become involved with others also on the move, neither of whom have any familiar bearings or coordinates by which to navigate. (Widdowson 183)

The Hardyian members of the "metamorphic classes of society," are embodied in characters such as Tess Durbeyfield and Jude Fawley, who strive to better themselves through varying combinations of work, social movement, and education. Though Hardy was a staunch proponent of class mobility, he was, however, careful to note the disadvantages and oversights of development. This is observed with particular regard to rural communities' forced migration to urban centers, seen in the Durbeyfields' plight following their patriarch's death and Tess's social rejection (*Tess* 352).

Hardy's stance on religion was a point of contention in his marriage to Emma (Tomalin 240), and his views are more directly explored in *Tess* and *Jude the Obscure*. In

conjunction with his views on urban development, his self-declared identification with “evolutionary meliorism” in his preamble to *Late Lyrics and Earlier*, “Apology” explicates his stance on morality, religion, and even Darwinism:

...that is to say, by the exploration of reality, and its frank recognition stage by stage along the survey, with an eye to the best consummation possible: briefly, evolutionary meliorism. But it is called pessimism nevertheless; under which word, expressed with condemnatory emphasis, it is regarded by many as some pernicious new thing (though so old as to underlie the Christian idea, and even to permeate the Greek drama); and the subject is charitably left to decent silence, as if further comment were needless. (Hardy, *Late Lyrics and Earlier*)

In Hardy’s own words, he explicates his worldview as recognition of the world’s potential and its reality—at once appreciative and bitter. In applying this view to the narratives of his novels, it becomes apparent that the plots are not simply romances doomed to tragic ends, but rather human experiences subject to the shifting tides of a changing world.

In view of Hardy’s stance on urban development, the identities of his characters must be duly assessed. Male suitors and urban women are easily perceived as intruders and imperial conquerors, with rural communities at their mercy. Jane Bownas’s *Thomas Hardy and Empire* looks at the complexities inherent in rural-urban relationships. She delves into Fitzpiers’ stance as an outsider in *The Woodlanders*, outlining the bounds of his influence and power, with regard to his “capture” of Grace during the Midsummer run: “Hardy’s use of the word ‘capture’ ... might suggest an analogy with colonial slavery, for it is Fitzpiers, the outsider and intruder into this community, who is successful in capturing Grace, rather than Giles Winterborne her kinsman and native of the woodland” (Bownas 109). Bownas deems Fitzpiers as an “outsider and intruder,” recognizing his position of power in that sense, analogizing sexual domination over the

heroine with imperial domination. Though urban outsiders possess an inherent power (ascribed to education and urban experience) over the rural communities, it is clear that Hardy's aim is not innately to vilify urban figures. While rural women enjoy greater romantic ease through their deep connection to the land in daily work (Kerridge, "Ecological Hardy" 134, 137), all women are afforded the same agency and opportunity by Nature. In spite of this, confusion and tragedy prevail in the novels as urban ways are projected upon rural communities. These struggles are mirrored in Hardy's characters, as noted by Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City*: "People choose wrongly but under terrible pressures: under the confusions of class, under its misunderstandings under the calculated rejections of a divided separating world" (R. Williams 213). Williams' argument regarding the role of social change and urban development in Hardy's tragedy is supported by Widdowson, as he states that tragedies develop, "because the social order is rapidly changing and individuals on the move become involved with others also on the move, neither of whom have any familiar bearings or coordinates by which to navigate" (Widdowson 183). Though it would be easy to blame urban-aligned women, such as Felice Charmond and Eustacia Vye, and fault them for their own tragic fates, this conclusion is not satisfactorily comprehensive. While tragedies are inflicted upon sexual women, perhaps more so with urban sexual women, these events are a result of complicated social shifts and the lack of coping mechanisms with which to mitigate them. Nature recognizes and supports the sexuality of all Hardy's women, regardless of their class alignment; it does not function as a judge, but instead stands as an entity that provides and supports agency for female sexuality. However, where it is observed that Nature is limited in the protection it extends to sexual women, as seen in the tragic fates

of Eustacia and Tess, this protection is further limited for women who reject its power and provision for sexuality outright. This is seen with Felice Charmond, an urban sexual woman, who finds the woodlands “dull” and upon her departure from Hintock is shot by a former lover on the continent.

In following with Hardy’s support of heroic female narratives, and the heroines’ sexual expression, one must question the reasoning behind the inclusion of class struggle and tragedy in the novels. Hardy’s aforementioned “evolutionary meliorism” echoes social Darwinism, with particular relation to the “survival of the fittest.” Andrzej Diniejko’s piece “Charles Darwin’s Theory of Evolution and the Intellectual Ferment of the Mid- and Late Victorian Periods” notes the profound impact of Darwinism on the author:

Inspired by Darwin’s biologism, Thomas Hardy showed that man is the only animal for whom existence is a problem that he has to solve by his own choice and from which he cannot escape. Hardy adapted Darwin’s ideas to his later fiction showing characters to be at the mercy of their environment, heredity and adaptability rather than more in control of fate. His [novels]... depict a ruthless Darwinian world in which protagonists fail to survive because they cannot adapt to the changing social environment. (Diniejko)

In applying Darwinian concepts in the reading of Hardy’s work, the quandary of social survival is somewhat unraveled. As Diniejko additionally notes, it is important to recognize the meaning of “survival of the fittest” outside of the common misconception: “It is a sinister world where everybody “fights” against everybody, but “survival of the fittest” does not literally mean fighting better, or making more money, or dominating others thanks to one’s higher intelligence. Instead, it refers solely to *reproductive fitness*. In other words, whichever group or individual reproduces more successfully is most fit” (Diniejko). The individuals in Hardy’s tragedies are not simply fighting one another, rural

pitted against urban, for the ultimate social victory. Rather, all are struggling against the tide of change they are entirely unequipped to handle—the victory of survival achieved by those who are able to adapt in an evolving social environment. Where the heroines of each novel rarely emerge as victors in survival, Hardy brings to light the tragic nature of urban development, despite the good it proffers.

Despite Hardy's effort to empower women in his novels, the elements of tragedy in each text are typically harsh. To ascribe the fates of these women to judgment by a higher moral being goes against Hardy's agnosticism. Additionally, making this assumption is a disservice to the author's efforts to engage in deeper social and existential commentary. In observing the tragedy of Hardy plots, elements of both Greek and Shakespearean tragedy are brought into play. Hardy tragedy is a force removed from a deistic figure or judge, comprised instead of an amalgamation of the Greek "incidents arousing pity and fear" (Aristotle) and the Shakespearean "loss of givens" (Kottman). Jeanette King, in *Tragedy in the Victorian Novel*, further suggests the impact of Aristotle upon Hardy's concept of tragedy:

The influence of Aristotelian tragic theory on these novels is clearly seen in the relationship they assert between event and character.... For [Hardy], as for Aristotle, the plot was the most important element. His tragedies are of situation, rather than of character...The conflict of ideas or feelings is made tragic by the situation. (King 99)

In asserting the connection between Hardy and Aristotle, King asserts the author's effort to center his tragedies around situation and the forces at play, rather than intricacies of character. Ultimately, the tragedies that occur in the novels are the product of larger forces, with individuals caught in the ripples of social shifts and complex class struggle they are ill equipped to navigate and survive.

Though Hardy's women come to experience horrific tragedy in attempting to mitigate a complex social landscape, these outcomes are not reflective of their powerful sexual experiences. The tragic events of Hardy's novels provide an overarching commentary on the complexities of social development; they are not a judgment passed on female sexual expression. Though the author's narrative is multifaceted, this does not detract from the heroic female plot. Rather, the complexities of the author's social commentary work to bolster the strength of the women who survive, and mourn the undue demises of those who do not. Ultimately, the author's use of the natural world—the entity that prevails, predating and surviving mankind—works to provide for, support, and validate the sexual expression of Hardy's female characters.

*Far from the Madding Crowd*

*“It is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs.” (FFMC 308)*

*To persons standing alone on a hill during a clear midnight such as this—the roll of the world eastward is almost a palpable movement... The poetry of motion is a phrase much in use, and to enjoy the epic form of that gratification it is necessary to stand on a hill at a small hour of the night, and, first enlarging the consciousness with a sense of difference from the mass of civilized mankind, who are horizontal and disregarding of all such proceedings at this time, long and quietly watch your stately progress through the stars. (FFMC 9)*

Heroine of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Bathsheba Everdene is a force to be reckoned with. Effortlessly one with Nature, the female farmer is ascribed power through the landscape—not only through her work of the land, but also through command of her sexuality. Bathsheba is unabashed in her sexual expression (as in her pursuit of Sergeant Troy), and uses the agency provided by natural spaces to her advantage. As she becomes embroiled in romantic pursuit as the object of three suitors, her dynamic power is assessed through differing male gazes. Where tragedy comes to pass, Bathsheba maintains her power and agency in spite of male efforts to tame her—comforted, bolstered, and preserved by the natural world.

Bathsheba’s self-awareness and power are cultivated by her deep connection with Nature. Her effortless control and ease in riding bareback under close-drooping boughs stuns Gabriel Oak to admiring silence, revealing an unforced intimacy of being with her surroundings:

The girl, who wore no riding habit, looked around for a moment as if to assure herself that all humanity was out of view, she dexterously dropped backwards flat upon the pony’s back, her head over its tail, her feet against its shoulder and her eyes to the sky. The rapidity of her glide into this position was that of a

kingfisher—its noiselessness that of a hawk... Thus she passed under the level boughs. (*FFMC* 15)

Bathsheba's conduct—carried out unaware of any observant figures—emphasizes her oneness with her natural surroundings. The manner with which she drops flat to the horse's back is almost involuntary in her expressed level of comfort. Her movement is graceful, awe-inspiring, evoking the likenesses of impressive birds of prey, the kingfisher and the hawk. Rather than likening her movements to that of something gentler in nature, such as a stream or a sparrow, the narrative choice to liken her to birds of prey emphasizes innate power in conjunction with beauty. Bathsheba's beauty and power are closely connected, and are expressed with a self-awareness that cements these traits, defining her character. Oak's discrete observation of her in the novel's opening scene establishes beauty, power, and Nature as defining aspects of her visage and personality:

The picture was a delicate one. Woman's prescriptive infirmity had stalked into the sunlight, which had invested it with the freshness of an originality. A cynical inference was irresistible by Gabriel Oak as he regarded the scene, generous though he fain would have been: there was no necessity whatever for her looking in the glass. She did not adjust her hat, or pat her hair, or press a dimple into shape, or do one thing to signify that any such intention had been her motive in taking up the glass. She simply observed herself as a fair product of Nature in a feminine direction—her expression seeming to glide into far-off though likely dramas in which men would play a part—vistas of probable triumphs—and won. Still, this was but conjecture, and the whole series of actions were so idly put forth as to make it rash to assert that intention had any part in them at all. (6)

As the heroine observes herself in a glass for no other reason than to appreciate her appearance in the morning light, Oak sets the brand of Vanity upon the exercise.

However, the narration of the scene presents more nuances with regard to the workings of Bathsheba's character. The self-conscious "prescriptive infirmity" of checking one's appearance to assure perfection is negated; rather, Bathsheba's observation of her beauty is regarded "with the freshness of an originality." She sees herself like any other being in

creation, save for the “fair,” “feminine” definitions of her visage. Her sexuality is brought into play as well, as she daydreams of “probable triumphs” with men in “likely dramas.” Rosemarie Morgan delves further into this passage, emphasizing the sexual undercurrents of self-appreciation:

...[She] perceives for herself that warm creature aglow with the soft heat of her sex. Her feminine sensuousness prompts first a parting of lips then a roseate tumescent glow. A dawning is clearly taking place and not only in the morning skies; but while Hardy’s appreciative gaze rests upon Bathsheba’s open-eyed wonder and soft arousal, a second observer, the clandestine Oak, sees things a little differently. He promptly assumes vanity in place of sensuous self-delight. (Morgan 34)

Morgan’s assessment of the passage as an overt sexual awakening reads deeply into Bathsheba’s self-awareness and –appreciation. This reading of the scene underscores the importance of recognizing the distinctly sexual tones in Bathsheba’s self-appreciation. Though the passage is presented with the caveat of “conjecture,” its inclusion in the narrative’s opening lines works to support the defining foundation of Bathsheba’s character. With consciousness of her beauty and romantic capabilities hovering so close to the surface, her self-awareness is underscored as a dominant portion of her character—self-awareness that, exercised so carefully, exacts power.

While Bathsheba’s character is strengthened by her natural surroundings, the agency she is provided for her robust sexuality draws her closer into connection with Nature. Her sexual expression, with Nature’s support, bolsters and cultivates her power. She is bold in her romantic experiences, taking overt, forward action—sending the Valentine to Farmer Boldwood, consenting to meeting Troy alone in the lush, green hollow, and finally asking Oak to marry her. Bathsheba takes full advantage of the opportunities leant her by natural spaces. Going past candid conversation—as this comes

easily to her—she uses natural space for the privacy it allows her to pursue romantic endeavors, particularly with Sergeant Troy. In their initial encounter, the two are afforded privacy on a dark wooded path for their unplanned union:

The noise approached, came close, and a figure was apparently on the point of gliding past her when something tugged at her skirt and pinned it forcibly to the ground. The instantaneous check nearly threw Bathsheba off her balance. In recovering she struck against warm clothes and buttons... He looked hard into her eyes when she raised them for a moment: Bathsheba looked down again, for his gaze was too strong for her to receive pointblank with her own. (*FFMC* 141-2)

The explicit imagery of spur pinning down skirts—the ostensibly male object penetrating the female—brings immediate sexual charge to the scene. Under cover of night, the two are brought physically closer than most situations would allow—permitting a thrilling physical experience. Morgan points out the physicality of this scene, explicating further:

...disentanglement involves a certain amount of touching and handling of his person... In the meantime her unaverted eyes have taken in this ‘young and slim’ soldier... whose flirtatious overtures during the scuffle have disturbed and embarrassed her. And excited her. Thus, as the protracted course of her delivery from ‘captivity’ is concluded, instead of walking home demurely in a dignified assertion of womanly pride, she breaks into a run. (Morgan 33)

Morgan reads further into the physical intricacies of this experience, pointing particularly to the building excitement that culminates in Bathsheba’s running home. The immediate physical draw between the couple comes to light by that of Bathsheba’s lantern in the darkness, the very act of holding his gaze proving “too strong for her to receive pointblank with her own.”

This overtly sexual experience is allowed by the uniquely private space provided by natural surroundings—an allowance seen again as the two reunite among the ferns in the hollow. Troy’s display of swordsmanship echoes their first meeting with set focus upon a distinctly masculine, phallic symbol of conquest. The scene is charged with

meaning—Bathsheba’s agreement to meet Troy alone, without a maid, in a remote location, reveals a scene laden with innuendo. Even Bathsheba’s descent into the hollow, preceding Troy’s explicitly phallic display, carries sexual overtones:

She was now literally trembling and panting at this her temerity in such an errant undertaking: her breath came and went quickly and her eyes shone with an infrequent light. Yet go she must. She reached the verge of a pit in the middle of the ferns. Troy stood at the bottom, looking up towards her. (*FFMC* 160)

The scene carries with it an undeniable sense of sexual experience, as Bathsheba “literally trembles and pants” in anticipation of the scandalous private encounter. Despite the power Troy comes to hold over her, bringing about a mismatched marriage and eventual tragedy, the intense sexual experiences provided by natural settings are vital to the development of Bathsheba’s character. In challenging her self-assured power and awareness, as in the hollow, “overcome by a hundred tumultuous feelings resulting from the scene” (163), the heroine is provided experiences to develop the sexual aspect of her being.

The sexual agency afforded to Bathsheba by the natural world is imperative to the preservation of her power amidst the struggle for her hand. While the male suitors in *Far from the Madding Crowd* are impressed by Bathsheba’s power, they each perceive it in vastly different ways. Farmer Boldwood, despite observing her professional power as a farmer at the markets where they initially interact, fails to grasp the power in her nature. Instead, his singular aim in courting Bathsheba is to mold her to the exact vision he has for a wife. Despite her refusals to submit to his pleas for an engagement, he maintains a vice-like grip upon his idealized version of Mrs. Boldwood. The postmortem discovery of an entire wardrobe purchased and assembled, at the ready for Bathsheba, underscores the Farmer’s failure to recognize the agency of the woman he had proclaimed to love:

In a locked closet was now discovered an extraordinary collection of articles. There were several sets of lady's dresses in the piece, of sundry expensive materials... all of colors which from Bathsheba's style of dress might have been judged to be her favorites... They were all carefully packed in paper, and each package was labeled "Bathsheba Boldwood," a date being subjoined six years in advance in every instance. (338)

Boldwood's infringement upon Bathsheba's agency is embodied in this preemptive attempt to groom his unrealized fiancée. Despite having the wherewithal to observe and procure the styles of dress "judged to be her favorites," Boldwood fails to grasp the obvious power at the core of the heroine's being. The prepared wardrobe invokes imagery of the kept woman, removing Bathsheba from her power as the mistress of her farm, removing her from the natural world. The Farmer's ultimate goal is to mold Bathsheba to fit his expectations of an idealized version of her being—deliberately negating her autonomy in the fallacy of a relationship.

Though Sergeant Troy wields sexual power over Bathsheba, he acknowledges her strength. In attaching himself to the female farmer, he recognizes the dynamic of power in their relationship: "But [Bathsheba] has a will—not to say a temper, and I shall be a mere slave to her. I could do anything with poor Fanny Robin" (203). In comparing Bathsheba to Fanny, particularly where power is involved, it is significant that Troy's wiles failed to completely overpower the heroine where they had been so devastating to his former lover. Despite his recognition of Bathsheba's will, Troy manipulates her for his own benefit. Troy's amorphous social status as the bastard of an Earl, well educated, and enlisted in the army, places him as a complex social figure. This complexity takes on a malicious tone, as his assimilation into the role of Bathsheba's husband shows him literally taking the reigns from her position of power:

She was sitting listlessly in the second seat of the gig... Though on foot, he held the reins and the whip... This man was her husband, formerly Sergeant Troy, who having bought his discharge with Bathsheba's money, was gradually transforming himself into a farmer of a spirited and very modern school. (226)

While Hardy is careful not to generalize non-rural figures as inherently malignant intruders, Troy's actions are clearly motivated by selfish priorities. He uses Bathsheba in this sense, from their sexually charged courtship to her financially enabling his newfound character, Farmer Troy. The Sergeant's undertaking of various roles, including that of the heroine's husband, is regarded with distrust throughout the narrative—from his scattered origins to eventual profession as an actor, he is constantly taking up new roles. Merryyn Williams notes this as an “inauthentic personality” (M. Williams 160), which defines not only his adaptability, but also his character as a whole. Despite taking part in Bathsheba's natural sexual experiences, Troy's position as a nefarious intruder is exposed by natural means. Bathsheba avows her lover's purity of character to Oak in the form of his humble church going by way of the building's back door; however, the undisturbed leafy overhang reveals the reality of Troy's deception:

The pale lustre yet hanging in the north-western heaven was sufficient to show that a sprig of ivy had grown from the wall across the door to a length of more than a foot, delicately tying the panel to the stone jamb. It was a decisive proof that the door had not been opened at least since Troy came back to Weatherbury. (170)

In spite of Troy's partaking in Bathsheba's sexual exploration, he is duly exposed by natural means, as “decisive proof” is provided of the true nature of his character. The Sergeant is aligned as an intruder in Bathsheba's natural sphere, as through Jane Bownas's exploration of imperial themes in Hardy's work. In defining the experience of intrusive figures as carrying out “The invasion of heathland, woodland and village by outsiders intent on pursuing their own interests” (Bownas 4), Troy's selfish motivations

label him as such. This initial untruth foreshadows the Sergeant's further deceptions and lies of omission. In spite of his participation in Bathsheba's natural sexual experiences, Troy's status as a self-involved intruder indicates harmful intent towards the heroine, forewarning eventual tragedy.

Gabriel Oak is presented as the Darwinian ideal, natural partner for the novel's heroine, as he recognizes and appreciates her power. Where Bathsheba rejects Boldwood and Troy, Oak's long game is successfully played through Nature's medium of agricultural work. Despite the eventual union of the couple, it is necessary to point out the relationship's original failure. Oak's initial observations of Bathsheba (those that work to align her so closely with Nature) are rooted in the judgment of her appearance—particularly with the mirror episode, as he states her greatest fault to be “Vanity” (7). This misperception of Bathsheba's character is further embodied by Oak's failed proposal. His presumption—anticipating that of Boldwood's later error—to idealize Bathsheba to the mold of a model wife is turned on its head by her strongly stated beliefs regarding marriage: “I *hate* to be thought men's property in that way—though possibly I shall be to be had some day” (26). A direct reference to Jemima Hardy's beliefs and experience regarding matrimony, Bathsheba's exhibit of power, turning down Oak's proposal, emphasizes the mismatched nature of the couple at this point in the narrative. In spite of this initial failure, it is plainly evident that Gabriel stands as the best ultimate match for Bathsheba following her romantic missteps and the violence of Troy's murder and Boldwood's madness.

In a passage that anticipates “Autumn's very brother,” Giles Winterborne of *The Woodlanders*, Oak is indelibly connected to the natural world:

Being a man not without a frequent consciousness that there was some beauty in this life he led, he stood still after looking at the sky as a useful instrument, and regarded it in an appreciative spirit, as a work of art superlatively beautiful. For a moment he seemed impressed with the speaking loneliness of the scene, or rather with 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, and there seemed to be on the shaded hemisphere of the globe no sentient being save himself: he could fancy them all gone round to the sunny side. (12)

In this moment of sheer connectivity with Nature, Oak's experience enters into the same transcendent consciousness as that of Tess Durbeyfield. In spite of the initial misperception of Bathsheba's character, Oak's alignment as an intensely natural figure is accentuated in this dynamic experience. The couple is reconciled and provided renewed romantic opportunity in the shared work of Bathsheba's land. In assessing sources of pleasure in the natural world, Richard Kerridge sorts its residents into two populations—the 'alienated' and 'unalienated': "The unalienated lover of nature inhabits; the alienated lover of nature gazes. The first is a native, deeply embedded in a stable ecosystem; the second is a Romantic, a tourist, a newcomer, and a reader" (Kerridge 134). In assuming the unalienated to be residents of rural communities—Bathsheba and Gabriel in this case—Kerridge asserts that the physical work of the land provides a deeper pleasure, available exclusively to rural, working class individuals whose existence is inherently natural: "Unalienated pleasure in nature occurs, by contrast, neither in distress nor leisure; it happens in the course of daily work" (136). The experiences of shared work and companionship in shearing sheep and saving the hayricks from destruction are vital to the development of a healthily balanced relationship for Bathsheba and Oak. Kerridge's argument bridges the divide from work to pleasure, validating the development of the coupling.

In basing the relationship upon the land—not only within a natural space that supports female sexuality and agency, but within the particular space of Bathsheba’s ownership and empowerment—it is clear that Oak is presented as the only acceptable option for partnership with Bathsheba. Ultimately, this judgment of Oak as the ideal romantic prospect is sealed by the heroine’s final expression of power, accepting the idea of marriage to him, establishing a relationship built to last:

Theirs was a substantial affection which arises... when the two who are thrown together begin first by knowing the rougher sides of each other’s character, and not the best till further on, the romance growing up in the interstices of a mass of hard prosaic reality. This good-fellowship—*camaraderie*, usually occurring through similarity of pursuits, is unfortunately seldom superadded to love between the sexes, because they associate not in their labours but in their pleasures merely. Where however happy circumstance permits its development the compounded feeling proves itself to be the only love which is strong as death—that love which many waters cannot quench, nor the floods drown, beside which the passion usually called by the name is evanescent as steam. (*FFMC* 348)

In ensuring the companionate nature of the relationship, Hardy brings an end to the tragic events of the novel. In referencing the Song of Solomon, with “love which is strong as death,” the narrative carries with it a sense of romantic finality and closure. Rosemarie Morgan’s introduction to the novel points out that this particular verse refers to “a woman’s lust for the male body” (*FFMC* xxxi); while the inclusion of this verse does not uphold the impending sacrament of marriage, it supports the narrative of female sexuality, as Bathsheba has found her ultimate mate in spite of the tragedies that have come to pass. As Morgan goes on to point out, the novel’s “tastelessly irrelevant” final lines from Joseph Poorgress referencing the book of Hosea declare “it all ‘might have been worse,’” lending a comical note to the pair’s coupling. The ultimate narrative approval of Bathsheba’s final mate, which takes into account the unique strength of

shared work and camaraderie, seals the happy ending in spite of “the incongruity of utterances” to a romantically tumultuous text.

Despite the novel’s eventual happy ending, the heroine triumphant in romance, bolstered by natural support and provision of sexual agency, tragedy still pervades the text. Class complications invade the agricultural scenes—Boldwood’s higher status as a wealthy farmer, Troy’s “noble blood” and intrusions upon rural life, and Oak’s struggles of inequality against Bathsheba’s status as a landowner. These complications are woven into the romantic narrative, adding a supplementary element of competition between the suitors vying for Bathsheba’s hand. This sense of class and romantic competition culminates in Troy’s violent death at Boldwood’s hands, and the disgraced Farmer’s madness and imprisonment.

This pervading sense of social struggle is seen most prominently in the narrative of Fanny Robin. The maid is a direct foil to Bathsheba’s character—even her surname evokes the softer cousin of the predatory birds, kingfisher and hawk, that the heroine is likened to in the text’s opening scene. The young woman is cast aside by Troy upon his entanglement with Bathsheba—an event that occurs as he is on his way to rectify his situation with Fanny, as she awaits their marriage. Fanny’s later reentrance into the narrative finds her destitute on the side of the road, barely recognizable. As opposed to the resilient figure of Suke Damson in the later novel, *The Woodlanders*—a rural working class woman able to successfully carry out her extramarital affair with Edred Fitzpiers—Fanny falls victim to the tides of social change with her unmet need for marriage to legitimize her affair. Deserted by her lover, bearing his child, unable to return to her work, Nature can provide neither agency nor protection in her tragic situation. As she

stumbles along the road, close to death, even the light of the night skies seems to desert her. Fanny has stumbled too far from Nature's dominion, her destiny set in stone:

When the woman awoke it was to find herself in the depths of a moonless and starless night. A heavy unbroken crust of cloud stretched across the sky, shutting out every speck of heaven; and a distant halo which hung over the town of Casterbridge was visible against the black concave, the luminosity appearing the brighter by its great contrast with the circumscribing darkness. Towards this weak soft glow the woman turned her eyes. (229)

Driven from Nature's protection by no fault of her own, all that remains is the siren glow of the urban center of Casterbridge, too far removed (both spatially and socially) to proffer salvation, only presenting the inevitability of her impending death. Despite Fanny's experiences in the natural world, she is denied Nature's protection and agency by no fault of her own; rather, she is swept up in the confusion of others' actions, her life a single casualty amidst the tragedies to be wrought, man against man, in the name of romance. Fanny's presence in the novel is an innately tragic one, used as a foil to Bathsheba's romantic experiences. Where the heroine is afforded agency and opportunity by Nature to explore romantic potential, Fanny is shown as the result of those experiences when exposed to malicious presences such as Sergeant Troy—a fate only escaped by Bathsheba through her power of character and ability to adapt in the face of tragedy.

Ultimately, Nature serves as a provider for female sexual agency as well as a source of female empowerment. Though its influence is limited by encroaching social and tragic forces, it serves as the heroine's bolstering, driving force throughout the novel. Even in a climactic moment of great distress, following the discovery of Troy's child in Fanny's coffin, Bathsheba flees outdoors in search of relief:

She could think of nothing better to do with her palpitating self than to go in here and hid; and entering she lighted on a spot sheltered from the damp fog by a reclining trunk, where she sank down upon a tangled couch of fronds and stems. She mechanically pulled some armfuls round her to keep off the breezes, and closed her eyes. (264)

Finding respite in the natural space, Bathsheba finds peace amongst the tragedy wrought upon her life:

Day was just dawning, and beside its cool air and colors, her heated actions and resolves of the night stood out in lurid contrast. She perceived that in her lap, and clinging to her hair, were red and yellow leaves that had come down from the tree and settled silently upon her during her partial sleep. (265)

This scene of peace before the final tragic events of the novel is a moment of escape and beauty, showing Nature as a protective force for the young woman. Her close connection to her natural surroundings is accentuated here, as the leaves that had fallen in the night settle in her lap, and “cling to her hair.” Nature provides solace in the heroine’s emotional time of need, as she states, “I shall not come indoors yet—perhaps never” (267).

Despite Nature’s inability to prevent the tragedies that come to pass, it provides vital support to female figures in their sexual autonomy and preservation of power.

As the novel comes to its end, Bathsheba is provided power and agency by Nature in spite of the tragedies that have transpired. Concluding with her marriage to Gabriel Oak, this ending seems a sorry final provision for the heroine who had previously rejected him. However, in light of the tragedies that have come to pass in her name with Troy and Boldwood, the final union with Oak is a triumph in its own right—a partnership based in “camaraderie” and work of the land. Initially, an ultimate union between the two figures is deemed unlikely, due to Bathsheba’s aversion to marriage and Oak’s idealized perception of the heroine. Indeed, the biblical aspects of their names reinforce this discrepancy—Gabriel being an angel of the Lord, Bathsheba the woman who tempts

King David, who, fuelled by his sexual attraction to her physical form, sends her husband, Uriah, to the front lines of conflict (presumably to die). One could argue that, as the future mother of King Solomon, the biblical Bathsheba's sexual empowerment worked as a positive force—though this requires excusing effective murder. In all respects, the biblical references behind Bathsheba and Oak's names place them in opposition to one another; however, the reference to the Song of Solomon in describing their love in the novel's penultimate chapter reassures the foundation of their union. In the end, the land and their shared work of it have built a solid foundation for love amidst the repercussions of violent tragedy, and Nature proves itself once again to be vital in the empowerment and provision of agency for Hardy women.

*The Return of the Native*

*It was at present a place perfectly accordant with man's nature—neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly: neither commonplace, unmeaning, nor tame; but, like man, slighted and enduring; and withal singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy monotony. As with some persons who have long lived apart, solitude seemed to look out of its countenance. It had a lonely face, suggesting tragical possibilities.*

—*The Return of the Native* (11)

*The Return of the Native* marks the transition into Hardy heroines who are, in all aspects, one with the natural world. Where Bathsheba is connected to the land through her work, roots, and romantic experiences, Eustacia Vye is expressed as a physical extension and embodiment of the land—setting precedent for Tess's transcendent natural consciousness. In conjunction with the following novel, *The Woodlanders*, the primary struggle of the text revolves around class identity and struggle. Eustacia believes herself to be an outsider and acts as such—overwhelmed with repulsion for and desire to escape the heath. A departure from the amorphous landscapes of preceding novels, Egdon Heath in *Return* takes on a tangible presence. Avrom Fleischman's "The Buried Giant of Egdon Heath" explores the palpable connection between the land and its tenants in this novel: "The ruling passions of the protagonists in *The Return* and the awesome powers of the heath need to be treated as forces of a like nature—the heath manifesting the same impulses as do the fictional characters" (141). In delving into the relationship between the novel's heroine and the natural world, it is vital to recognize the hovering entity of the heath and its force felt throughout the text. Though romance in *Return* is as centric as in Hardy's other works, Eustacia's experiences are driven by her overpowering need to flee from the Heath. In spite of the heroine's drive to escape and resulting inner conflict, Nature maintains its provision of sexual agency and opportunity.

Every aspect of Eustacia Vye's existence is indivisible from the heath, despite her best efforts to distance herself from it. The heroine's dramatic entrance in the text immediately integrates her with the heath while setting the tone of her character. Diggory Venn observes the summit of the landscape, only upon closer inspection recognizing a human form placed at its peak:

As the resting man looked at the barrow he became aware that its summit, hitherto the highest object in the whole prospect round, was surmounted by something higher... There the form stood, motionless as the hill beneath. Above the plain rose the hill, above the hill rose the barrow, above the barrow rose the figure. Above the figure was nothing that could be mapped elsewhere than on a celestial globe... The form was so much like an organic part of the entire motionless structure that to see it move would have impressed the mind as a strange phenomenon. (*Return* 17)

This otherworldly scene places Eustacia as a pagan, mythic being—even described as the “raw material of divinity” (66). Presiding over all that occurs below, her stance is at once commanding and removed—echoing the ever-present force of Egdon Heath. Eustacia is placed as a physical extension of the land—her moves and actions mirroring and being reflected by those of the surrounding scene. In immediately connecting Eustacia to the landscape, noting, “that to see it move would have impressed the mind as a strange phenomenon,” the depth of her natural connection is incontrovertibly asserted. The intricacies of her character and conduct exude natural processes; as Clym awaits her appearance to reconcile their marriage, his hopeful assumptions strengthen this connection:

When a leaf floated to the earth he turned his head, thinking it might be her footfall. A bird searching for worms in the mold of the flower beds sounded like her hand on the latch of the gate; and at dusk, when soft strange ventriloquisms came from holes in the ground, hollow stalks, curled dead leaves, and other crannies... he fancied that they were Eustacia standing without and breathing wishes of reconciliation. (331)

These movements that are uniquely individual—footfalls and the breath from her lungs—are identical between Eustacia and natural processes. Clym's association of his wife with the natural world—standing as her husband and lover, one who knows her intimately—seals her identity as a natural being.

In spite of her connection to the land, Eustacia maintains her need to abandon the heath in favor of a cosmopolitan, urban destination. An element of profound struggle pervades text, as diametrically opposed forces clash within the heroine. Eustacia's complaint of the landscape to Wildeve at the novel's start betrays a morbid sense of what is to come: "'Tis my cross, my misery, and will be my death'" (84). This direct statement, made perhaps in melodrama, perhaps with a true grasp of the conflict's weight, nevertheless betrays the fatal nature of Eustacia's inner struggle. In spite of her connection to the heath, the heroine asserts her stance as an "other" amongst the heath dwellers. Born in Budmouth, a port town, Eustacia turns a blind eye to her palpable connection with the land. Instead, she brands herself as an urban figure, striving towards Parisian glamour. It is important to mention here Hardy's decision to place Eustacia in direct class conflict with herself. According to Tomalin's biography of the author, in the first draft of the novel, "Eustacia had no foreign father, naval grandfather or girlhood in Budmouth, but had always lived on the heath" (Tomalin 167). The author's decision to intensify the theme of class conflict lends more weight to Eustacia's inner struggle, and the tragedy of her death. Had Eustacia always lived on the heath, her narrative would have almost identically mirrored that of Grace Melbury's. Instead, this lends greater power to the natural entity of Egdon Heath and its claim over the Eustacia. The class

confusion leant by the heroine's muddled status builds throughout the novel's course, drawing Nature directly into the tragedy of her death.

Despite Eustacia's struggle with the opposing rural and urban forces that duel within, she depends upon Nature for her sexual agency and expression. Like other Hardy heroines, she utilizes natural spaces for their privacy, carrying out candid conversations and sexual experiences with both Wildeve and Clym. Her most direct use for Nature's provisions, however, is to carry out her affair with Wildeve: "Their black figures sank and disappeared from against the sky. They were as two horns which the sluggish heath had put forth from its crown, like a mollusk, and had now again drawn in" (*Return* 85). As the two retreat into the heath together, their forms are melded together in a natural shape, that of a snail. This melding of two into one in explicit, natural terms further demonstrates Nature's provision for female sexual expression. Rosemarie Morgan delves into the explicit nature of the mollusk imagery, supporting Eustacia's sexual empowerment through the narrative:

Reinforcing the sense of mutuality, reciprocity, and sexual equivalence which the hermaphrodite (mollusk) image introduces, Hardy invokes here the metonym 'horns' which serves aptly in its significant plurality—twinned erectile protuberances—to suggest sharpened appetites and sexual arousal in *both* his lovers. (Morgan 60)

In recognizing the "sharpened appetites and sexual arousal in *both* of his lovers," Hardy brings recognition to the heroine's sexual awareness and expression, likening hers to that of the overtly sexual, "lady killing" Wildeve. Eustacia revels in the power she holds over her lover, as the act of lighting her own fire during the Guy Fawkes celebration—and the fires she lights later on, amidst the complexities of their respective marriages—draws Wildeve swiftly to her side: "I determined you should come, and you have come. I have

shown my power. A mile and half hither, and a mile and half back again to your home—three miles in the dark for me. Have I not shown my power?” (65). These direct, unabashed statements of “I have shown my power” are telling of the heroine’s value of sexual power. Her use of Nature’s provisions is vital to the execution and success of these displays, despite her hatred towards the landscape that affords them.

Where Eustacia’s use of natural agency complicates her internal struggle, so do her romantic partners. Wildeve is defined from the start by his “lady-killing career” (45), and selfishly fuelled deception towards both Eustacia and Thomasin. In spite of his stance as a native of Egdon, he is placed in the ranks of Sergeant Troy and Edred Fitzpiers. In approaching him to speak on the issue of his marriage to Thomasin, Mrs. Yeobright sheds light upon the nature of Eustacia’s lover:

[Mrs. Yeobright] first reached Wildeve’s Patch, as it was called, a plot of land redeemed from the heath, and after long and laborious years brought into cultivation. The man who had discovered that it could be broken up died of the labour: the man who succeeded him in possession ruined himself in fertilizing it. Wildeve came like Amerigo Vespucci, and received the honors due to those who had gone before. (39)

Following the ruin and death of his forefathers, Wildeve rests easy, having “received the honors due to those who had gone before.” Much like other antagonistic Hardyian lovers, Wildeve emerges as an intruder seeking conquest. Despite this he does not quite reach Sergeant Troy’s levels of malicious deception, as Merryn Williams states, an “inauthentic personality” (M. Williams 160). His love for Eustacia runs deep—indeed, a romantic commitment solidified in his fatal attempt to rescue the heroine. In spite of this, the intrusive womanizer fails to stand in comparison to the titular native, Clym Yeobright.

Eustacia’s husband emerges as a decidedly natural, idealized figure—akin to Giles Winterborne and Gabriel Oak. Clym displays dedication to his roots, as he forays

out into the urban sphere, and returns, rejecting the merchant profession that requires “pandering to the meanest vanities” (*Return* 173). His journey is a direct reflection of Eustacia’s—a conflict of experience exposed in their earliest conversations with a foreboding tone:

“I cannot endure the heath, except in its purple season. The heath is a cruel taskmaster to me.” “Can you say so?” he asked. “To my mind it is most exhilarating, and strengthening, and soothing. I would rather live on these hills than anywhere else in the world... And there is a very curious Druidical stone just out there... Do you often go and see it?” “I was not even aware that there existed any such curious Druidical stone. I am aware that there is a parade at Budmouth.” Yeobright looked thoughtfully on the ground. “That means much,” he said. (83)

Just as the forces within Eustacia’s being stand diametrically opposed, so do the souls of the lovers. In spite of the heroine’s pagan features, “the passions and instincts which make a model goddess” (66), she fails to show any interest in the mythic features of the landscape—rather, she abandons them willingly for more cosmopolitan interests, such as “a parade at Budmouth.” This divide between the couple remains pervasive throughout the relationship’s course. Such unfortunate difference between the lovers’ souls is noted by the narrator: “Take all the varying hates felt by Eustacia Vye towards the heath, and translate them into loves, and you have the heart of Clym. He gazed upon the wide prospect as he walked, and was glad” (171). With the distant promise of an urban life crucial to Eustacia’s pursuit of Clym, she recognizes its share in her feelings for him, confessing as much to Wildev: ““I married him because I loved him. But I won’t say that I didn’t love him partly because I thought I saw a promise of that life in him”” (273). Eustacia’s conditional love for her husband is, in and of itself, a tragedy. Clym stands as a natural ideal; even as his eyes fail in vigorous study, he is drawn back into the land:

His daily life was of a curious microscopic sort, his whole world being limited to a circuit of a few feet from his person... The strange amber-coloured butterflies

which Egdon produced, and which were never seen elsewhere, quivered in the breath of his lips, alighted upon his bowed back, and sported with the glittering point of his hook as he flourished it up and down. Tribes of emerald-green grasshoppers leaped over his feet... Huge flies, ignorant of ladders and wire-netting... buzzed about him without knowing that he was a man. (244)

Joining with the god-like descriptions of Oak in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and Winterborne in *The Woodlanders*, Clym's natural status is inarguable. The land has fully reclaimed him from his time as a diamond merchant, a cosmopolitan resident of Paris—Eustacia's model urban lover. In *The Ambiguities of Thomas Hardy*, William Clyde Brown emphasizes the tragic star-crossed nature of the lovers:

Even as they make idols of their lovers, idealized means to the end of happiness and fullness of being, the characters are destined to experience frustration and disappointment. Against Clym's own warnings, Eustacia at first misperceives him as a man of the world who will take her to Paris; she perceives Clym as a means to the end of her own happiness. Clym, against Eustacia's own warnings, at first misperceives her as a suitable helper in his plan to teach the heath-dwellers" (Brown 96)

In the unfortunate mismatch of their souls and aims, miscommunication and influential social forces doom the love between Clym and Eustacia. Their marriage disintegrates, and Clym is seamlessly reintegrated with the creatures surrounding him, standing as the Hardy ideal, the natural man, the one that Eustacia cannot fully commit herself to.

As Eustacia's social and romantic struggles come to a head, tragedy comes to pass upon the heroine. Though she pines for a reprieve from rural life on the heath, levying her romantic and sexual power towards this directive, Eustacia cannot leave. The narrator provides fundamental reason to this point, stating, "Isolation on a heath renders vulgarity well-nigh impossible...A narrow life in Budmouth might have completely demeaned her" (68). In leaving the heath, Eustacia would have brought harm to her own character. Her attempt to escape the natural world which so viciously attempts maintain its protective

hold upon her escalates her inner conflict to an all-consuming scale, threatening to devour her from within. As the struggle between rural roots and urban striving comes to a head, Eustacia succumbs, true escape proving impossible. Returning to her grandfather's home following separation from Clym, Eustacia desperately seeks release from the battling forces within, turning to the pistols mounted on the bedroom wall:

Eustacia regarded them long, as if they were the page of a book in which she read a new and strange matter. Quickly, like one afraid of herself, she returned downstairs, and stood deep in thought. 'If only I could do it,' she said. 'It would be doing much good to myself and all connected to me; and no harm to a single one.' The idea seemed to gather force within her... when a certain finality was expressed in her gaze, and no longer the blankness of indecision. She turned and went up the second time... The pistols were gone. (323)

The heath dwelling boy, Charley, acts as a natural agent in preventing Eustacia's violent death by suicide. However, the heroine's fate is sealed, with the "certain finality... expressed in her gaze." Eustacia's end is certain, though the means by which it comes to pass is taken into Nature's grasp. In the midst of a tempestuous storm, Wildeve and Clym come across her body in the weir—the reader is denied view of the heroine's final moments. The question of whether Eustacia's death was a suicide or an accident is addressed by the finality in her gaze, "no longer the blankness of indecision," in her grandfather's house. Rather than the violent death by means of a firearm, the natural forces that empowered and sustained her make a final claim over the heroine. Rosemarie Morgan explicates the nature of Eustacia's death, underscoring it as a powerful, final movement made by Nature: "...Hardy cannot permit her simply to drown. The skies must break and the Barrow must seek to draw her back to itself. Her death must become a victory over life—a mortal life that had, to her, been empty of significance and purpose" (Morgan 81). Ultimately, Eustacia's death is necessitated by the degree of her internal

struggle with the opposing social forces of the natural and the urban. Though the heroine succumbs to this struggle, she is afforded peace and sublimity in death, as observed by those who survive her:

They stood silently looking upon Eustacia, who as she lay there still in death eclipsed all her living phases. Pallor did not include all the quality of her complexion, which seemed more than whiteness; it was almost light... Her black hair was looser now than either of them had ever seen it before, and surrounded her brow like a forest. The stateliness of look which had been almost too marked for a dweller in a country domicile had at last found an artistically happy background. (361)

The release expressed in the heroine's countenance and appearance, her complexion "almost light," her hair "looser... like a forest," displays the peace finally, tragically achieved in her death. Though Eustacia indisputably uses Nature for her sexual expression and empowerment, the novel's focus revolves around the depiction of her class struggle, culminating in unspeakable tragedy.

As disaster comes to pass at the novel's end, the reader is left with the fates of those who are left behind, accompanied by an unexpected social commentary. Thomasin Yeobright is presented as a foil to Eustacia's sexual being, reminiscent of the relationship between Fanny Robin and Bathsheba. Echoing Fanny's descriptive evocative "Robin," Thomasin is compared similarly to the softer members of the avian family:

"In her movements, in her gaze, she reminded the beholder of the feathered creatures who lived around her home. All similes and allegories concerning her began and ended with birds. There was as much variety in her motions as in their flight... When she was serene she skimmed like a swallow, and that is how she was moving now" (207)

Where Eustacia presents as a dynamically powerful embodiment of the Heath, Thomasin resides in the background of the narrative, flitting bird-like through the building sense of tragedy that eventually comes to pass. In the end, Thomasin and Diggory Venn, the

reddleman, are left as primary survivors. Clym endures through the tragedy that claims his wife and her lover, but is changed—a muted version of his former self, wandering the Heath as an itinerant preacher. Both Thomasin and Venn are asserted as natural figures, and their survival takes on a particularly profound note at the end of the text. The reddleman in his profession is portrayed as primal, almost feral: “His eye, which glared so strangely through his stain, was in itself attractive—keen as that of a bird of prey, and blue as autumn mist” (14). However, Venn transforms completely—taking on his father’s dairy as well as a distinctly gentlemanly countenance. Morgan points out the strange nature of this abrupt transition from natural agent to gentleman dairy farmer:

There is no genuine attempt, on Hardy’s part, to conceal the unnaturalness of Venn’s transformation, where he becomes an overnight success with Thomasin, hitherto indifferent to his charms. Hardy, in fact, openly admits that this *volte-face* goes right against his ‘original conception.’ Venn, he says, ‘was to have retained his isolated and weird character to the last, and to have disappeared mysteriously from the heath, nobody knowing whither’ (*RN* p.470). A token ‘cleaning up’ nevertheless has to take place at some point, if the readers’ expectations of marriage-and-happy-endings are to be met. (Morgan 71)

As Hardy’s “original conception” would have functioned as a more comfortable fit for the narrative’s end, his authorial choice to so alter Venn’s original character must here be questioned. The assertion of the marriage plot here feels like a forced conclusion—the need for a couple to survive, to address the need for procreation, is fulfilled. Despite this abandonment of Venn as an ultimately natural figure for the sake of a Darwinian conclusion, this ending to the text functions as a profound social commentary. Where tragedy stemming from social confusion and conflict comes to pass, those who survive are the figures that are able to adapt and exhibit class mobility. Where Nature provides for the sexual expression and empowerment of Hardy’s heroines, the increasingly affective forces of social change bring with them challenges that they are forced to

navigate, and are tragically ill-equipped to handle. In spite of this, Nature remains an overwhelmingly present force, bolstering female figures in light of the immense social challenges by which they are confronted.

*The Woodlanders*

*Here the trees, timber or fruit-bearing as the case may be, make the wayside hedges ragged by their drip and shade; their lower limbs stretching over the road with easeful horizontality, as though reclining on the insubstantial air. At one place, on the skirts of Blackmoor Vale, where the bold brow of High-Stoy Hill is seen two or three miles ahead, the leaves lie so thick in autumn as to completely bury the track. The spot is lonely, and when the days are darkening the many gay charioteers now perished who have rolled along the way, the blistered soles that have trodden it, and the tears that have wetted it, return upon the mind of the loiterer. (Woodlanders 5)*

*The Woodlanders* sheds light upon complex class dynamics in a rapidly evolving society, and their effect on the rural community of Little Hintock. The plot's focus upon social challenges is embodied in the heroine, Grace Melbury. With rural roots and an urban education, her romantic experiences are heavily impacted by her unclear status. Native woodlander Giles Winterborne (with the season of tragedy, winter, present in his surname) is the obvious romantic ideal for Grace, portrayed as a natural, chthonic god; Edred Fitzpiers, the cosmopolitan physician of upper-class origins, is an intellectual force to be reckoned with. In spite of his overt invasive character, interfering in the "Hintock ways," Grace is intensely attracted to the surgeon both physically and intellectually. In a departure from the clear alignment between heroine and the natural world seen with Bathsheba in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and Eustacia in *The Return of the Native*, Grace's muddled status opens up the scope of Nature's impact, showing its connection to all women in the narrative. In a community coming to terms with unforeseen social change, Nature's support and provision for female sexuality proves vital to the maintenance of the female heroic narrative (which, as defined in the Introduction, refers to Hardy's efforts to establish female protagonists as empowered figures through the validation of their sexual expression).

From the start of the novel, it is abundantly clear that Grace's status, and her relationship with Nature, is far removed from the workings of Bathsheba and Eustacia's power and connection to the natural world. Despite her distinctly rural roots in Hintock, Grace's father's decision to provide her with an education unwittingly complicates her subsequent romantic life. In returning home as an educated woman, Grace's arranged marriage to Giles is invalidated by the emergent class discrepancy, to the misfortune of all involved. Her father had promised her to the laborer, as he won Grace's mother away from Giles' father "by a trick, because he wanted to marry her himself" (17). Despite attempts to keep to the oath that binds the two, Melbury bemoans the match in light of his daughter's newfound superiority: "'Tis a pity to let such a girl throw herself away upon him—a thousand pities! ...And yet 'tis my duty, for his father's sake'" (31). In spite of this glaring difference, it quickly becomes clear that Grace is not governed solely by her newly acquired status. Rather, she is very much in touch with her sexuality and romantic attraction; following Giles' misfortune upon John South's death, she finds herself more drawn to him in spite of it: "And yet at that very moment the impracticability to which poor Winterborne's suit had been reduced was touching Grace's heart to a warmer sentiment on his behalf than she had felt for years concerning him" (*Woodlanders* 95). Despite Grace's return as an individual removed from her roots and community—as Giles notes, "fallen from the good old Hintock ways" (40)—her disregard of the "impracticability" of Giles as a romantic prospect reveals a maintained sense of romance and sexuality in the heroine. In spite of this maintained connection with her rural roots, Grace remains a socially confused figure—a member of the "metamorphic class of

society” (Widdowson 183). In *Thomas Hardy and Women*, Penny Boumelha dissects the heroine’s character:

...it is not possible to represent Grace satisfactorily throughout as a realist heroine: rather, she migrates unsettlingly between pastoral survival, tragic protagonist, realist center of consciousness, and melodramatic heroine. The very fluidity of her narrative role and function makes of her at times an almost nebulous figure. (Boumelha 100)

Though Grace indeed presents as “an almost nebulous figure,” the aspects of the contributing parts of her character—urban, rural, and undefined—are vital in representing and contributing to the larger narrative regarding the disruptive forces that inspire tragedy.

Giles Winterborne is cast as the ideal natural man, a position emphasized by his closeness to the land through physical labor. His ideal stature awakens Grace’s obscured rural origins:

He looked and smelt like Autumn’s very brother, his face being sunburnt to wheat-colour, his eyes blue as corn-flowers, his sleeves and leggings dyed with fruit stains, his hands clammy with the sweet juice of apples, his hat sprinkled with pips, and everywhere about him that atmosphere of cider which at its first return each season has such an indescribable fascination for those who have been born and bred among the orchards. Her heart released from its late sadness like a released bough; her senses reveled in the sudden lapse back to Nature unadorned. The consciousness of having to be genteel because of her husband’s profession, the veneer of artificiality which she had acquired at the fashionable schools, were thrown off, and she became the crude country girl of her latent, early instincts. (186)

Giles is cast as the ultimate natural ideal—a status that is deeply mourned in Grace’s inability to secure him as a lover and husband. In spite of this, while unhindered by Fitzpiers’ influence, the heroine makes a final attempt to secure the heart of the natural man—an attempt that is hampered by her acquired sense of social convention. Grace’s action with regard to Giles is limited to the hopeful rendering of promise in editing

Marty's condemnation of their relationship potential. Marty, spurned in her love for Giles by Grace's return, inscribes the following rhyme on the wall of her love's home: "O Giles, you've lost your dwelling-place/And therefore, Giles, you'll lose your Grace" (99). The prophetic inscription is reclaimed by Grace, as she indirectly instills hope for a potential union with the assumption that Giles witnesses her forward act: "Feeling pretty sure that Winterborne would observe her action she quickly went up to the wall, rubbed out 'lose' and inserted 'keep' in its stead. Then she made the best of her way home without looking behind her. Giles could draw an inference now, if he chose" (100). In demonstrating her feelings regarding his destitution, "therefore, Giles, you'll keep your Grace," the heroine asserts her romantic pursuits as a sure priority, regardless of consequence. Indeed, this dedication leads her to danger, as she is quick to be attracted to Edred Fitzpiers—the urban doctor come to make a living in rural Hintock. In considering marriage prospects at her father's urging, Grace is inwardly frank about the reality of her feelings for Fitzpiers:

...it was plain that though Fitzpiers when he was present exercised a certain fascination over her—or even more, an almost psychic influence, as it is called—and though his impulsive act in the wood had stirred her feelings indescribably, she had never regarded him in the light of a destined husband. (143)

Following the Midsummer's Eve episode—a pagan-rooted ritual where the girls of Hintock cast a spell to reveal their lifelong lovers, and subsequently run through the woods in the hope that they will stumble in to the arms of the aforementioned individuals (*Woodlanders* 130)—Grace realizes her sexual attraction to the surgeon, while also maintaining his lack of marital draw. The heroine's connection to her sensual priorities relates her to rural counterparts Marty South and Suke Damson, and removes her from the colder, somewhat detached sexual conduct of the cosmopolitan Felice Charmond. In

this sense, Grace is able to enjoy the privileges of natural support in her sexual expression, despite the tragedies that come to pass amidst class confusion.

Where Nature is a direct vessel for female sexuality and power in Hardy's preceding novels, the class complexities in *The Woodlanders* further develop this relationship. Rural women are afforded a greater degree of expression with sexual and romantic experiences. As opposed to more closely infringing social judgment and convention in urban communities, Hintock's customs recognize and provide space for female sexuality. The ritual "spell" and running of the maids on Midsummer's Eve, imbued with flirtation, gives the women the opportunity for a few fleeting private moments with their lovers. Grammer Oliver voices her hopes for this experience shared between Grace and Giles:

"We ought to act the part o' Providence sometimes—do go and tell him that if he stands just behind the bush at the bottom of the slope, Miss Grace must pass down it when she comes back, and she will most likely rush into his arms; for as soon as the clock strikes they'll bundle back home-along like hares. I've seen such larries before." (132)

The Midsummer event, rooted in pagan belief, provides the opportunity for open female sexual expression among the residents of Hintock not likely to be seen in urban communities. Grammer Oliver's choice of language underscores the event's explicit nature, with the image of "[bundling] back home-along like hares," and reference to "larries" (excited scenes).

Though Marty South is not provided the opportunity to seize the agency provided her by Nature, this is due neither to her status, nor to any shortcoming of Nature's provision; rather, she loves one she cannot have—a situation mirrored in the object of her affections, Giles, and his love for Grace. While she does not express her sexuality due to

this unrequited love, Marty embodies the natural ideal. Her connection to Nature is emphasized through her work, as she is able to present near-perfect fruits of labor despite a lack of training—a skill recognized by the natural man himself, Giles:

“Marty,” he said with dry admiration, “your father with his forty years of practice never made a spar better than that. They are too good for the thatching of houses, they are good enough for the furniture. But I won’t tell. Let me look at your hands, your poor hands!” (21)

As the idealized chthonic god figure, Giles’ recognition of Marty’s innate talent with regard to labor of the land immediately sets her apart with regard to her woodlander status. Though her natural skill aligns her as a natural figure, Marty’s sexuality complicates her experiences. As she is forced into cutting her hair to sell to Felice Charmond due to her economic circumstances, she relinquishes the prize aspect of her physical appearance: “...knowing what a deflowered visage would look back at her [in the mirror] and almost break her heart; she dreaded it as much as did her own ancestral goddess the reflection in the pool after the rape of her locks by Loke the Malicious” (19). Though Marty partially abandons her sexuality in the forms of her hair and her love for Giles with Grace’s return, her status as a natural figure is not invalidated. She is related to her “ancestral goddess,” referring to the Norse goddess Sif, wife of Thor. This matriarchal connection through time and realm deepens the feeling of loss with regard to Marty’s hair, a distinctly feminizing and sexual feature. The final scene sees her at Giles’ grave alone, Grace gone off to renew her relationship with her husband, swearing to maintain his memory through the work of the land they had shared.

“Now, my own love... you are mine, and only mine; for she has forgot ‘ee at last, although for her you died. But I—whenever I get up I’ll think of ‘ee... Whenever I plant the young larches I’ll think that none can plant as you planted... If ever I forget your name let me forget home and heaven... But no, no, my love, I never can forget ‘ee; for you was a good man, and did good things” (331)

Though Marty is aligned as an unquestionably natural figure in this final statement, her sworn oath to Giles' memory, devoting herself to him, paints her as a widow figure. In spite of embodying a fit Hardyian and Darwinian figure in the battle to survive and procreate, this final sentiment leaves Marty solitary and barren. Regardless, the opportunity and agency provided to her by Nature provide empowerment for Marty, aligning her as Giles' ideal counterpart.

Conversely, Suke Damson is presented as an overtly sexual rural female figure. Her surname presents a sense of natural ripeness, as it is shared with damson plums. She is able to take part in an affair with Fitzpiers and have that information be revealed to her fiancé, avoiding personal tragedy completely. She takes direct advantage of natural spaces for her sexual expression, seen directly in her experience with Fitzpiers in the hayricks following the Midsummer's run. With the revelation of her indiscretion, her only consequence is a move to New Zealand with her newlywed husband in order to avoid rumors and judgment. Where rural women are provided opportunity for romance in Nature, agency of urban women in the natural context must also be considered.

Felice Charmond would presumably be afforded the same power and agency as rural women. As a landowner, likened to Bathsheba's position, she would gain professional power from the land as well. However, the lady is instantly regarded as an intrusive figure—her Francophone name alone sets her apart from the residents of Hintock. Jane Bownas' work, *Thomas Hardy and Empire*, directly defines Felice's actions as landlady as imperial and intrusive in nature and practice: "The invasion of heathland, woodland and village by outsiders intent on pursuing their own interests, reflects the profound changes which were occurring in rural England during Hardy's

lifetime” (Bownas 4). Felice is aligned as an urban intruder, similarly to Fitzpiers. Where the surgeon manipulates rural culture for his own selfish benefit (in ambushing Grace on Midsummer’s, and cutting down the tree superstitiously tied to John South’s life for the sake of his own curiosity), the lady holds no respect for the landscapes she holds ownership over. As Marty curiously observes the woman who purchased her own locks for beauty’s sake, she is surprised to hear Mrs. Charmond’s feelings regarding Hintock:

Here the carriage drew up that the gate might be opened; and in the momentary silence Marty heard a gentle oral sound, soft as a breeze. ‘What’s that?’ she whispered. ‘Mis’ess yawning.’ ‘Why should she yawn?’ ‘Oh, because she’s been used to such wonderfully good life, and finds it dull here. She’ll soon be off again on account of it.’ ‘So rich and so powerful; and yet to yawn!’ the girl murmured. ‘Then things don’t fay with her any more than with we!’ (37-8)

This interaction makes it abundantly clear that Mrs. Charmond is not a sympathetic resident of Little Hintock, indeed hating the woodland. Finding it “dull,” the lady’s time in the area is believed to be but short—instead, she remains to carry out her affair with Fitzpiers, once established. Marty is apt in equalizing the lady to the members of the rural community; using the term “fay” (meaning to prosper or flourish), she makes clear that, in spite of being “so rich and so powerful,” Felice is no better off in being satisfied with her life than any other resident of Hintock. In spite of this, her prominence and money place Felice in a position of decided power over the rural community. Unfortunately, she misuses this power. Bownas points out the harmful, self-centered manner with which the lady conducts herself as landlord:

Mrs. Charmond is aware of the power which she can wield over the woodland people and uses it to disastrous effect in the case of her refusal to renew the lifehold on Winterborne’s house. However, it is in the purchase of Marty South’s hair that the true extent of her power is revealed... [Mr. Percomb] reminds her that she is living in one of the ‘lady’s cottages,’ and could be turned out if she refuses to give in to this request. (Bownas 110)

Wielding incredible power over the residents of Hintock, as with her inadvertent role in Giles' eventual death after being turned out, Felice is aligned as an inarguably intrusive, imperial figure. She carries out an affair with Grace's husband, eventually taking him with her to the continent, drawing along the tragic plots that follow. Merryn Williams' *Thomas Hardy and Rural England* delves into the romance between Felice and Fitzpiers, noting its differences from the romances carried out by other Hardyan women:

Fitzpiers' affair with Mrs. Charmond is quite different—not a casual sexual encounter but a decadent and sentimental romance... It is broadly similar to the relationship of Eustacia and Wildeve... She is 'a body who has smiled where she has not loved, and loved where she has not married,' who has been an actress (this is associated here, as in Troy... with an inauthentic personality) but having married money can find nothing to interest her. (M. Williams 160)

Felice's love for Fitzpiers is exposed as a malignant force, as their affair leaves victims in its wake. Classifying Felice as an "inauthentic personality" works in tandem with her expressed boredom with the rural Hintock community, in spite of her immense power over the lives of its residents. As landowner, Felice has a hand in displacing Giles from his dwelling, precipitating the events that lead to him deserting his shelter in the throes of serious illness to provide harbor for Grace, resulting in the death of the natural god-like figure. Williams further illuminates Felice's implication in the novel's tragedy from her position of power:

Mrs. Charmond has another role in the novel, that of the non-productive landowner whose relationship with the land and her tenants is entirely predatory. This is not an exaggeration; her treatment of Giles over the houses is typical of the worst landlords. She owns the woods but dislikes and does not know her way round them... When she is forced into a direct relationship with any of them it is because she wants to deprive them of something—Marty's hair, Giles' home, Grace's husband. (M. Williams 161-2)

In understanding the implications of Felice's malicious conduct as landlord, the reader comprehends that she is decidedly removed from the likeness of Bathsheba Everdene—

the naturally aligned, empowered female landowner. Felice's rejection of the natural world precludes her from its advantages of sexual agency and power—her ultimate fate, shot by a lover on the continent, is a bitter inevitability far removed from the sphere of protection offered by Nature.

The final events in *The Woodlanders* leave its characters struck, adrift in the wake of morose tragedies. The most significant of these, perhaps, is Grace's inability to embrace and consummate her love for Giles. The heroine's desperate flight to escape Fitzpiers' return brings her directly to Giles' door, turning him out of his shelter in the name of decency. Though the decision to sleep outdoors is his own, with likely knowledge of his fate in light of the serious illness he has been plagued with, Giles' death feels anything but justified. Social convention drives a wedge between the couple, preventing consummation of their love and precipitating Giles' death:

Her timid morality had, indeed, underrated his chivalry till now, though she knew him so well. The purity of his nature, his freedom from the grosser passions, his scrupulous delicacy, had never been fully understood by Grace till this strange self-sacrifice in lonely juxtaposition to her own person was revealed.  
(*Woodlanders* 282)

Ideally, Grace would have been able to overcome her "timid morality," sharing a dwelling for the night with the ideal natural lover. However, she is unable to overcome the instilled fear of judgment and consequence, and "Autumn's very brother," with his love for her and "scrupulous delicacy," expires. Marjorie Garson's *Hardy's Fables of Integrity* suggests a reflection of the female piety plot in Giles' death:

The martyrdom of Giles is a kind of Clarissa [referring to Samuel Richardson's 1748 novel] situation in reverse, not the locking in of a woman but the locking out of a man by the inhumanity of a sexual code which overvalues female inviolability. Though Grace's mortal power over Giles is camouflaged by the narrating of the episode from her point of view, the episode literalizes the conceit of the sonneteers: her inaccessibility actually kills him. (Garson 89)

Pointing out the tragic nature of the “sexual code which overvalues female inviolability,” Garson reinforces the author’s placement of indirect blame for Giles’ death. However, it is important to realize the influence of the “sexual code,” which has been instilled in Grace by her time away from Hintock. Regardless, the “code” and its associated beliefs regarding her “female inviolability” direct her actions and precipitate the chthonic god figure’s death. In the end, Grace returns to her husband, the philandering urban invader. Though the pair survives as the fittest, one cannot help but feel the tragic loss of the naturally ideal Giles—perhaps better suited to survive had he recognized Marty’s pure, unadulterated love for him, as is emphasized in their shared work of the land. In spite of the novel’s tragic end, Grace is still provided natural agency and empowerment for her romantic pursuits. She meets Fitzpiers in the woodlands to talk and reconcile in private, away from the judgment and interference of her father and other residents of Hintock, finding themselves “in an encircled glade in the densest part of the wood” (*Woodlanders* 323). In spite of the imagery of the man-trap ensnaring her skirts, and being observed following reconcile with Fitzpiers, transfixed as if she were sleepwalking (325), Grace remains dedicated to her decision. Her family and the residents of Hintock respect her choice, lending some semblance of hope to the tragic ending, noting, ““She’s got him quite tame”” (330). In spite of the tragedies enacted upon the people of Hintock, Nature prevails as an entity to support and provide for female sexual expression.

*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

*Either the change in the quality of the air from heavy to light, or the sense of being amid new scenes where there were no invidious eyes set upon her, sent up her spirits wonderfully. Her hopes mingled with the sunshine in an ideal photosphere which surrounded her as she bounded along against the soft south wind. She heard a pleasant voice in every breeze, and in every bird's note seemed to lurk a joy. Her face had latterly changed with changings states of mind, continually fluctuating between beauty and ordinariness, according as the thoughts were gay or grave...It was her best face physically that was now set against the south wind.*

—*Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (103)

The culmination of Hardy's women down the line of Bathsheba, Eustacia, and Grace, Tess Durbeyfield is the consummate ideal natural heroine. The text is pervaded by the veneration of her character—an adoration that echoes Hardy's personal feeling. The author's love for the character proved so great, that when presented with her human embodiment—Gertrude Bugler, the actress who took on the role of Tess in Hardy's own stage adaptation of the novel—his infatuation reached such a point that Florence Hardy felt forced to intervene. Despite the author's advanced age of eighty-four, and Gertrude being happily married and a new mother at the age of twenty-seven, Florence visited the actress in person, pleading with her to withdraw from the London production, which Mrs. Bugler consented to (Tomalin). If anything, the author's adoration for Tess's dramatic representation serves to show the extent of his feelings towards her as a character. Tess's status as an ideal natural figure goes hand in hand with her sexual expression. The novel confronts issues previously explored by Hardy's preceding works—class struggle, urban development, social convention, and female sexuality. The misfortunes wrought upon Tess set the text apart from Hardy's precedent in their sheer magnitude of tragedy. The only comparable experience is that of Eustacia's death, due to vast forces outside her comprehension and control. With Tess, she is forced to pay for sins levied against her,

and the ultimate justice she attains in Alec's murder results in her public execution at the hands of the society that had vilified and rejected her. In attempting to understand the complex reasoning behind the death of Hardy's ideal heroine, it is vital to grasp Nature's role. Amidst the challenges of unprecedented social change, the natural world provides a solace and source of power for the women forced to confront immeasurable change.

Where the natural connection of other Hardyian heroines must at times be searched for, Tess's all-encompassing relationship with the land is immediately established. Her initial physical description works to this effect: "She was a fine and handsome girl—not handsomer than some others, possibly—but her mobile peony mouth and large innocent eyes added eloquence to color and shape" (*Tess* 14). This depiction of the heroine's visage aligns her with Nature, her "mobile peony mouth...[adding] eloquence to color and shape," while also establishing her innocent nature at the novel's start. The attribution of floral imagery to Tess's visage invokes the intrepid fragility of flower petals—delicate, though able to weather the harshest spring frost. Felicia Bonaparte connects the use of this natural imagery to a mythic character in the heroine: "Always the mythological characters are associated with the features that define their mythic roles. Tess is repeatedly, in this way, described in image of flowers" (Bonaparte 422). This "mythic role," likening the heroine to a natural goddess, in conjunction with her recent emergence from childhood, underscores the horrific extent of the injustices enacted against her. However, Hardy's assertions of Tess's purity of character, which will be addressed later in this chapter, are not invalidated by her emergent sexuality. Tess's stance as a natural figure is indivisible from her sexual expression and

experiences. In the garden at Talbothays Dairy, Tess's experience in the profusion of growth is explicitly sexual in nature and language:

The outskirts of the garden in which Tess found herself had been left uncultivated for some years, and was now damp and rank with juicy grass which sent up mists of pollen at the touch... She went stealthily as a cat through this profusion of growth, gathering cuckoo-spittle on her skirts, cracking snails that were underfoot, staining her hands with thistle-milk and slug-slime, and rubbing off upon her naked arms the sticky blights, which, though snow white on the apple trunks, made blood-red stains on her skin; thus she drew quite near to Clare, still unobserved of him. Tess was conscious of neither time nor space. The exaltation which she had described as being producible at will by gazing at a star, came now without any determination of hers; she undulated upon the thin notes as upon billows, and their harmonies passed like breezes through her, bringing tears into her eyes. (*Tess* 122-3)

This distinctly sexual experience holds overtones of a new awakening, the garden having been "left uncultivated for some years." This is significant with regard to Tess's sexuality in light of her assault at Alec D'Urberville's hands. For Tess, it is vital that her sexual awakening is under Nature's protection, where she is able to maintain control over feelings and expression following past trauma. The ecstasy she experiences, "conscious of neither time nor space," "bringing tears to her eyes," is distinctly climactic. This scene reclaims the Garden (in an Edenic sense) for Tess as a fallen woman, in spite of her sexual impurity; her erotic experience in the garden is portrayed as sublimely transcendent. As the experience takes place under the protection of natural space, Tess experiences her sexuality on her own terms.

Like other Hardy heroines, Tess utilizes natural spaces for her romantic encounters. The close physical contact afforded heroines and their lovers by natural spaces is essential to the development of Hardy romance. The scene in which Angel carries Tess across the swollen river is not only intimately private, but also explicitly sexual in nature:

It was now her turn. She was embarrassed to discover that excitement at the proximity of Mr. Clare's breath and eyes, which she had contemned in her companions, was intensified in herself... Clare stood still, and inclined his face towards hers. 'O Tessy!' he exclaimed. The girl's cheeks burned to the breeze, and she could not look into his eyes for her emotion. It reminded Angel that he was somewhat unfairly taking advantage of an accidental position; and he went no further with it. No definite words of love had crossed their lips as yet, and suspension at this point was desirable now. (145-6)

Angel's portage of Tess provides the rare chance to experience physical intimacy. Their shared physical attraction is obvious, Tess experiencing "that excitement at the proximity of Mr. Clare's breath and eyes." The power in their shared gaze emulates the episode with Bathsheba and Troy, as Tess "could not look into his eyes for her emotion." As Angel and Tess mirror the earlier couple's meeting with the phallic spur pinning skirts to the ground, Bathsheba unable to maintain Troy's powerful gaze, natural space proves its value in romantic and sexual experiences.

Though Tess's sexual experiences are evidence of her connection with Nature, her relationship with it is more profound. Where sexuality and work are the primary links between women and Nature with Bathsheba and Grace, Eustacia and Tess have a deeper connection on the level of consciousness and physical being. Eustacia's connection is emulated in every aspect of her being, as the Heath draws her to itself. Tess's relationship with Nature is all-encompassing, pervading her consciousness to a transcendent level. In *Women in Thomas Hardy*, Katharine Rogers states: "Tess herself is almost less a personality than a beautiful portion of nature violated by human selfishness and over-intellectualizing" (Rogers 249-50). Though Tess's humanity allows her to operate in both human and natural spheres, Rogers' observation of the heroine as "a beautiful portion of nature violated by human selfishness and over-intellectualizing" demonstrates the tragedy of society's influence. The heroine's connection to the natural world is revealed

in her use of it following social judgment. In being ostracized by her family's community following her return, single and pregnant, she turns to Nature for solace and peace under cover of night:

The only exercise that Tess took at this time was after dark; and it was then, when out in the woods, that she seemed least solitary. She knew how to hit to a hair's-breadth that moment of evening when the light and the darkness are so evenly balanced that the constraint of day and the suspense of night neutralize each other, leaving absolute mental liberty. It is then that the plight of being alive becomes attenuated to its least possible dimensions. She had no fear of the shadows; her sole idea seemed to be to shun mankind... On these lonely hills and dales her quiescent glide was of a piece with the element she moved in. Her flexuous and stealthy figure became an integral part of the scene. At times her whimsical fancy would intensify natural processes around her till they seemed a part of her own story. Rather they became a part of it; for the world is only a psychological phenomenon, and what they seemed they were... Walking among the sleeping birds in the hedges, watching the skipping rabbits on a moonlit warren, or standing under a pheasant-laden bough, she looked upon herself as a figure of Guilt intruding into the haunts of Innocence... She had been made to break a necessary social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly. (85-6)

In this passage, Tess emerges as the ultimate natural heroine across the scope of Hardy's work. She is seamlessly in tune with Nature so as to perfectly balance the timing of her emergence, such that, "the constraint of day and the suspense of night neutralize each other, leaving absolute mental liberty." She is proclaimed by the narrator as "an integral part of the scene," "[intensifying] natural processes around her till they seemed a part of her own story." These narrative assertions place Tess as one with her surroundings while also taking Nature into her own being—an ultimate shared consciousness and existence. Though Tess feels isolated and guilt-ridden in her walks, made to feel as such by the social judgment impressed upon her victimhood, the narrator asserts that her "sin" is not recognized as such by her surroundings—"no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly." As Tess's character develops to reveal its complete

integration, Nature's provision of agency is as vital as ever in the empowerment of Hardy's ultimate heroine.

While romance and the marriage plot are centric points of the Hardy universe, the men Tess is subjected to cause direct harm in their pursuits. As with Sergeant Troy and Edred Fitzpiers, Alec D'Urberville emerges as an intruder seeking sexual conquest (an intruder in the literal sense, as Alec's father appropriates the surname to lend his family an air of distinction). Jane Bownas explicates the imperial, intrusive nature of Alec's conquest of the heroine:

Alec D'Urberville, the son of a 'colonizer' from the North who built a modern estate in close proximity to the ancient forest land of The Chase, behaves like a slave owner, sexually exploiting the local girls. On their drive to Trantridge, Alec constantly attempts to kiss Tess despite her protestations, and ultimately gives her 'the kiss of mastery' ... Tess's rape occurs under 'the primeval yews and oaks of The Chase,' suggesting a rape of the ancient country by foreign intruder, as well as the rape of an individual. (Bownas 129)

In analogizing Alec's domineering nature and rape of the heroine to the actions of imperial colonizers, the villain is solidly cast in the role of intruder. Where the heroines of their respective novels seek out romance with invading men, Alec's advances upon Tess are spurned from the start. The horror of the young heroine's experience is underscored by her rapist's use of Nature in his transgressions. From the earlier manipulative episode, forcing strawberries between Tess's lips and bedecking her with flowers, to the assault in The Chase, Alec abuses Nature's provision for female sexuality for his own nefarious means. It is important to note here the power dynamic that forces Tess into this position. Where other heroines such as Bathsheba and Eustacia are empowered by the natural setting for their romantic exploits, Tess is subjected to Alec's social standing and power over her family. She is cowed into false compliance by his

ability to raise or reject her family as “distant relations,” a position exacerbated by her guilt in killing Prince, the family horse. Her assault is in no way an act of compliance, however, as she is exhausted and drugged into a state of unconsciousness in order for Alec to have his way with her. Alec’s direct abuse of natural space and its provision of agency for female sexuality brings the intruder narrative to a horrific head, exposing class confusion and power dynamics as truly dangerous forces.

Angel Clare presents as an ideal romantic prospect for Tess, and their naturally forged relationship follows the standard of model Hardyian couplings. Their relationship comes to bloom in their shared experience working the land—harkening once again to Kerridge’s assessment of rural pleasure: “Unalienated pleasure in nature occurs, by contrast, neither in distress nor leisure; it happens in the course of daily work” (Kerridge 136). Their time at Talbothays Dairy enables access to natural spaces and privacy, leading to deep conversations and physical encounters that allow their genuine love to grow. The two present an ideal, natural pair—a love between them forged and bolstered by their surroundings:

They were never out of sound of some purling weir, whose buzz accompanied their own murmuring, while the beams of the sun, almost as horizontal as the mead itself, formed a pollen of radiance over the landscape... The sun was so near the ground, and the sward so flat, that the shadows of Clare and Tess would stretch a quarter of a mile ahead of them, like two long fingers pointing afar to where the green alluvial reaches abutted against the sloping sides of the vale.  
(*Tess* 193)

The integration of natural space with the couple’s relationship solidifies their status as an archetypal Hardyian couple. The image of their shadows stretching ahead of them “like two long fingers pointing afar” seems to signify the assumed longevity of their paired companionship.

Despite the ideal nature of the relationship, tragedy looms in the form of Tess's past, coming once again to strike the heroine down. With Tess's confession of the crime enacted against her and subsequent pregnancy, Angel turns on his newlywed wife. The irony of their situation is painfully clear, as his own willfully pursued sexual experience holds an intentional aspect entirely absent from Tess's assault. Regardless of this, Angel rejects the love of his life, abandoning her to eventual destitution and the nefarious embrace of Alec D'Urberville. Angel's revelation in South America, following life-threatening illness, leads him to abandon his previous school of thought—"a slave to custom and conventionality" (265). His ruminations on morality bring him to change his mind regarding his wife's "transgression," realizing for himself the purity of her character:

During this time of absence he had mentally aged a dozen years... Having long discredited the old systems of mysticism, he now began to discredit the old appraisements of morality... Who was the moral woman? The beauty or ugliness of a character lay not only in its achievements, but in its aims and impulses; its true history lay, not among these things done, but among things willed. How, then, about Tess? Viewing her in these lights, a regret for his hasty judgment began to oppress him. Did he reject her eternally, or did he not? He could no longer say that he would always reject her, and not to say that was in spirit to accept her now. (340)

Angel's change of heart, "a regret for his hasty judgment," and following return are very much too little, too late. His decision to leave Tess plays directly into the further horrors she experiences. This reveals that in spite of their status as an idealized natural couple, the larger forces at play—idealized romance, class confusion, social convention, and looming urban development—hold ultimate heft in impacting destiny. Rogers notes, "While his cruel rejection of Tess is odious, it results not so much from his character as from the male chauvinism of his culture coupled with an exceptionally unfortunate set of

circumstances” (Rogers 252). Though his actions are not the fault of an inherently malicious character, Angel’s unquestioning adherence to cultural norms is tragic. Tess’s wish to hold a confession preceding their marriage is denied until after the ceremony—at which point Angel professes his experience in London, completely abandoning himself to lust. His confession provides Tess comfort in revealing the tragedy of her assault—a comfort quickly denied her as Angel enacts an unreasonable double standard. He instantly judges Tess for her sexual impurity, despite her innocence in the assault. In light of the willful nature of his own transgression, and his following invitation to Izz to join him in South America, his judgment of his newlywed wife is wildly unfair. Additionally, Jane Bownas notes the heightened domination present in their relationship—a force that works to disempower the heroine:

Her relationship with Angel Clare is often shown as that between a wise parent and ignorant child or between a master and his servant. In his first discussions with her at Talbothays, he dismisses the idea that she may have any serious ideas of her own... Later when Angel is trying to persuade her to accept his proposal of marriage she seems to have accepted the role of naïve child. (Bownas 128)

Invoking the uncomfortable paternal imagery in the domineering nature of the heroine’s marriage, Bownas elucidates the unfortunate disempowering nature of the heroine’s “ideal” lover. Ultimately, Hardy holds Angel accountable in the heroine’s death, implicating him in the final scene at Stonehenge. Felicia Bonaparte observes the overtly pagan scene with regard to its echoes of ritual sacrifice, and Angel’s role at Tess’s side:

As in the ritual of the Druids... the virgin to be offered as a sacrifice was placed on the sacramental altar, so does Tess now place herself, exhausted by her journey hither, on the altar stone to rest (and it is obvious she is acceptable as a virgin sacrifice only because she is *A Pure Woman*, as the novel’s subtitle proclaims her). In the old ritual, the Druid priest knelt on the ground beside his victim. Angel falls to his knees beside Tess. And while it is not his hand, once more, that actually causes Tess’s death, as it would have been the priest’s, we cannot doubt

that, as the police gather around them to arrest her, it is Angel whom Hardy holds ultimately responsible. (Bonaparte 429)

Observing Angel's placement at the altar, Bonaparte asserts his implicated guilt, as he observes the sacrifice of his lover to society. In spite of the couple's love forged in Nature's realm, Angel's dominance and judgment of Tess's sexual experience—in full light of the double standard with his own—leads to unthinkable further tragedy for a heroine who has already experienced extraordinary trauma.

As tragedies come to pass in Tess's narrative, it becomes clear that Nature's empowerment and protection are limited. This limitation takes form across the narrative, emerging fully from the echoing footfalls of tragedy in Hardy's preceding works. Increasingly pervasive forces come into play; the urban development occurring during the time of Hardy's writing brings along with it social change, class confusion, intruder figures (such as Alec and Troy, akin to imperial colonizers in Bownas's reading), and amorphous expectations of convention and conduct for women. For Tess, her tragedies are spawned directly from the interference of these forces. The initial spark of her misfortune is born of her family's discovery of lost heritage, and their misguided hope to reclaim their status as D'Urbervilles. The following tragedies at the hands of Alec D'Urberville and social judgment—and those inadvertently brought about by Angel's abandonment—are direct products of the aforementioned forces hovering over the surface of all Hardyian narratives. Merryn Williams' *Thomas Hardy and Rural England* attempts to classify Tess's closeness with nature, along with her lower social status, as weaknesses that carry her steadily towards tragedy at the hands of Alec:

The method by which the heroine is thus merged and identified both with the landscape in which she works and the other women who work with her reinforces our impression of her as an essentially passive and suffering figure. Tess is doubly

vulnerable because she belongs to the working class and because she is a girl. She is liable to be reduced, not only to the status of an unskilled laborer, but also to that of a mere sexual object, in a society which she has no means of resisting. (M. Williams 90)

Where Williams argues that Nature works to weaken the heroine, this is a gravely mistaken assumption. Aligning Nature with ‘passive and suffering’ figures flies in the face of the author’s efforts to place Nature in line with the strength of his female figures, lending them sexual agency and empowerment. Williams’ point does, however, touch upon an important facet of the force of Nature in *Tess*, with regard to the protection it casts over female figures in light of the “society which she has no means of resisting.” Eustacia Vye’s fate in particular, drowning in the weir in *The Return of the Native*, asserts that Nature’s protection cannot extend past a certain point of struggle or conflict, with the self or certain pervading forces—as those that result from urban development. As Tess forays into the act of claiming kin, placing her within Alec’s grasp, she ventures beyond the protection proffered by Nature, by no fault of her own. This is mirrored in the novel’s end, as Angel and Tess flee into the wilderness but cannot escape her impending capture for Alec’s murder.

Barbara Hardy’s essay, “Passion in Context” attempts to explicate the natural world’s bounds in protecting sexual women: “Nature seems sympathetic, but like humanity, cannot console... His assertion of the connection and the separation, at this point of crisis and conclusion, defines the loneliness of the human pair, as the environment closes around them after an interval which lets them love” (B. Hardy 79) Though Nature provides agency and opportunity for Hardy’s heroines, and a measure of protection, it is vital to avoid personifying the force as a deistic figure (as this would be ignorant of Hardy’s agnosticism). The initial tragic episode of Prince’s murder, directly

caused by Tess's inadvertent slumber (and indirectly brought about by her parents' celebration of their D'Urberville roots), goes seemingly unnoticed by the natural surroundings. As the horse's lifeblood collects in the road, the sun rises, and, "a million prismatic hues were reflected from it" (33). The out-of-place sense of natural beauty in such a tragic scene for the heroine solidifies Nature as a force, which though seemingly sympathetic, "cannot console." This feeling is underscored in Alec's use of natural objects and opportunity for his own malicious use against Tess. The setting of the heroine's rape, in *The Chase*, is particularly unsettling in this respect. Where Nature in Hardy's preceding novels has provided for female sexual expression, and a degree of protection for such, Tess's first sexual experiences are violent and non-consensual—and yet they occur in spite of Nature's presence. Though the natural world provides a space for healing and later sexual expression following this tragedy, its "betrayal" in these episodes is presented with a palpable discomfort. With reference to Tess's "mailed ancestors," that had likely "dealt the same wrong even more ruthlessly upon peasant girls of their time" (74), the scene is imbued with the sense of greater, darker forces at play. Just as Alec has been enabled by social developments and class complexities to have his way with Tess, so have these "mailed ancestors" been enabled by the greater forces of their time to commit such atrocities in Nature's realm. Thus, the overarching tragedy of Hardy's works is asserted—where society trudges forward, much must be sacrificed and tread upon in the name of progress. However, where Nature cannot provide protection for Tess, it provides a reprieve from the forces that inflict tragedy. From her walks at dusk to avoid communal judgment, to the exploration of her sexuality at Talbothays, and finally

to Stonehenge for one final peaceful night preceding her capture, Nature provides solace from the tragic currents that sweep the heroine towards her impending death.

Tess's stance as Hardy's ideal heroine leads the reader to question the reasoning behind the extraordinary tragedies she faces, culminating in public execution. It is clear that, aside from Alec's murder, the tragedies brought against the heroine are not due to any fault of her own. Hardy asserts Tess's purity from start to finish—even including the subtitle, "A Pure Woman," "...which he had added at the last minute to proofs of the three-volume first edition" (*Tess*, Morgan, xix). As sexual purity cannot be ascribed to Tess, the primary point of contention that leads to Angel's departure, what then is Hardy's definition or meaning of the term 'pure?' As Merryn Williams puts it:

Nothing in the novel caused more offence to critics than Hardy's description of Tess in the subtitle as 'a pure woman'... There were plenty of similar reactions, condemning Hardy as immoral because he called a girl who had lost her virginity 'pure.' Hardy replied that these critics were being too literal-minded... She remains pure, despite her involvement in adultery, and finally murder, because her destiny is not freely chosen but forced upon her by the circumstances which Hardy calls Fate. What this means is that in her particular social situation it was inevitable that her innocence should be destroyed. (M. Williams 91)

While that which works against Tess is not a single figure such as "Fate," but rather a collection of forces (this sense of "Fate," is brought on by the feeling of looming power in the forces of social shifts, convention, and class confusion), Williams' assessment is correct in asserting Tess's purity of character throughout the tragic events of the text. In the days following Alec's murder, Tess and Angel find idyllic peace at the abandoned manor house of Bramhurst, and finally move to Tess's final night of freedom at Stonehenge. In arriving at the pagan site, the heroine immediately identifies with it on a deeply rooted level: "One of my mother's people was a shepherd hereabouts, now I think of it. And you used to say at Talbothays that I was a heathen. So now I am at

home” (*Tess* 393). The stone structure provides Tess a sense of belonging and peace in her final hours preceding capture. Even as her captors surround her, she is afforded peace and safety in her slumber, awakened naturally by the light of the rising sun:

When they saw where she lay, which they had not done till then, they showed no objection, and stood watching her, as still as the pillars around. [Angel] went to the stone and bent over her, holding one poor little hand; her breathing now was quick and small, like that of a lesser creature than a woman. All waited in the growing light, their faces and hands as if they were silvered, the remainder of their figures dark, the stones glistening green-gray, the Plain still a mass of shade. Soon the light was strong, and a ray shone upon her unconscious form, peering under her eyelids and waking her... ‘I am ready,’ she said quietly. (395-6).

In the heroine’s, final, vulnerable moments as a free woman, she is likened to a small creature, “her breathing...quick and small.” In this moment of intense defenselessness, Nature provides a site and feeling of protection for the heroine, despite its inability to prevent her execution at the hands of society. In another argument supporting Tess’s connection to Nature, Gayla Steel points out the profound meaning in Tess’s final rest at Stonehenge:

In ending Tess’s journey at Stonehenge, Hardy consciously alludes to the superstitions surrounding the stones’ healing power current then and persisting even today... For Tess, the site is a destination, a sanctuary, and the ancient court seems to pass judgment and absolve her, for she awakens completely at peace, her composure drawing attention to the novel’s subtitle: ‘A Pure Woman.’ Hardy seems to be saying that older gods and older laws find her pure, even though her own society hangs her for killing her demon. (Steel 106)

In the end, it is Tess’s purity of character, rather than purity of body or action, that sustains in spite of her death. Felicia Bonaparte addresses the similarities drawn between Christ’s crucifixion and Tess’s last scene, particularly in light of the scene at pagan Stonehenge preceding her arrest:

To many, the scene of Tess at Stonehenge shadows the crucifixion of Christ and it seems clear that Hardy intends the reader to make this association... this scene in *Tess* reminds us that such a sacrifice makes her a victim of the wrong mores. That

is why the Druidical rite supersedes the Christian ritual. The one not only displaces the other, it tells us what the other means. (Bonaparte 429)

In recognizing Hardy's intent in precipitating the drawn similarity between Tess and Christ, Bonaparte asserts the pagan "superseding" the Christian. Where likening the heroine to Christ "makes her a victim of the wrong mores," viewing Tess's experience at Stonehenge as a pagan rite legitimizes her tragic experiences.

Hardy's perspective on the heroine's purity is imperative; Tess's hanging is directly inspired by the author's experience observing the public hanging of Elizabeth Martha Brown—a woman hanged for the murder of her abusive husband (Tomalin 43). Merryn Williams takes the author's unique stance regarding Tess into account alongside the social climate of his time:

In the intervening generation the world of George Eliot, in which really guilty individuals can still escape the worst punishments, has darkened into the world of Hardy, in which an essentially innocent girl can be hanged. In this process the values of a whole society have been radically called into question... Hardy *mourns* Tess, and this is new. (M. Williams 99)

This mourning of a strong, pure female figure, justified by the tragedies inflicted upon her as an innocent, challenged the critical reception at the time as well as social convention for female literary figures. The groundbreaking nature of such a revelatory female figure is further enunciated in Rosemarie Morgan's words—an opinion that I myself wholeheartedly share:

What Hardy denounces, in his creation of Tess, is the popular belief... that a voluptuous woman, a sexy woman, is intellectually vapid or morally 'loose,' or as many Victorians believed, diseased in body and mind. It is, in my opinion, the combination of sexual rigor and moral rigor that makes Tess not just one of the greatest but also one of the strongest women in the annals of English literature. (Morgan 85)

To her tragic end, Tess is pure, accepting her fate at society's hands after doing her best in an innately unfair fight for survival weighted against her from start to finish. The tragedies inflicted against Tess are not due to an inherently deserving nature—as narration and author alike assert her purity—rather, they are due to greater forces—imposing urban development and a complex social landscape. In her role as a woman in this changing world, Tess's heroism is complicated by her status as an agricultural laborer and the domineering men who impact her life. Forced to confront terrible tragedies, she must take on a more profound heroic role. Joanna Devereux explores the patriarchal themes in Hardy's work, particularly in how Tess is forced to take on a more masculine heroic role in order to survive:

...the role [Tess] adopts in life conforms less closely with that of a feminine heroine to that of a masculine hero—in terms of its adherence to a code of honor, in terms of actively fighting to protect one's name and reputation, and—especially—in terms of seeing male heroism as the pinnacle of human achievement. It is her own belief system that leaves no room for the possibility of feminine heroism, at least in her own perception. Unable to find a male who will save her and her family, she is finally forced to take the role upon herself. However, her belief that heroism is exclusively a male province prevents her recognition of her own heroic stature. (Devereux 119)

As Devereux asserts, Tess's disbelief in her ability to take on a feminine heroic role, given her traumatic experiences at the hands of men, forces the heroine to take on the typically “masculine” heroic role. Throughout the plot, Tess is forced to take matters into her own hands—baptizing Sorrow as she dies, working to support herself and her family as a laborer, and finally in murdering her rapist, Alec. Despite being unable to recognize her own innate “heroic stature,” Tess's assumption of male heroism in the absence of such a figure in her life leads her to the realization of her role as heroine. In spite of the

circuitous nature of this role assumption, Tess is able to perform as heroine, persevering through intense tragedy.

Nature emerges as a vital force in empowering Hardy women through their sexual expression through tragic narratives. Though it is limited in the protection it can offer in such violently changing times, Hardy asserts that we must appreciate the immense support it offers to heroines faced with horrific tragedy and uncertain change. As forces come into play that Tess and other Hardy heroines are not equipped to understand or handle, Nature's provision of agency and reprieve are vital to their sustained empowerment.

*Conclusion*

*Instead of there being before him the pale face of Eustacia, and a masculine shape unknown, there was only the imperturbable countenance of the heath, which, having defied the cataclysmal onsets of centuries, reduced to insignificance by its seamed and antique features the wildest turmoil of a single man. (Return 312)*

The connection between Hardy's heroines and Nature comes to define courtship and marriage plots in the rural novels. The looming forces of urban development and social change inflict profound confusion upon rural communities, leading to the development of tragic plots. While Hardy champions the positive progress inherent in urban development, he laments those who are sacrificed along the way, as seen in his distinct mourning of Natural female figures who do not survive the tragedies inflicted upon them. The author's "evolutionary meliorism," as he terms in "Apology," is "the exploration of reality, and its frank recognition stage by stage along the survey, with an eye to the best consummation possible" (Hardy, *Late Lyrics and Earlier*). Hardy articulates how this recognition of greater consequences of each stage of progress easily lends itself to "pessimism." Where many critics default assuming the author's dark sense of the world in this view, the author's perception of reality is not so bleak as this.

Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* clearly explicates the author's reality with regard to his outlook on the world:

This is what is sometimes called Hardy's bitterness, but in fact it is only sober and just observation. What Hardy sees and feels about the educated world of his day, locked in its deep social prejudices and in its consequent human alienation, is so clearly true that the only surprise is that critics now should still feel sufficiently identified with that world—the world which coarsely and coldly dismissed Jude and millions of other men—to be willing to perform the literary equivalent of that stalest of political tactics: the transfer of bitterness, of a merely class way of thinking, from those who exclude to those who protest. . . . It is not the countryman awkward in his town clothes but the more significant tension—of course with its awkwardness and its spurts of bitterness and nostalgia—of the man caught by his

personal history in the general crisis of the relations between education and class, relations which in practice are between intelligence and fellow-feeling. (R. Williams 206-7)

Williams works to illuminate the deeper struggle and reality of Hardy's work—a darkness and tragedy that should not be simply attributed to a pessimistic world view, but rather the severe personal crisis of writing as “a man caught by his personal history in the general crisis of the relations between education and class.” Hardy's recognition of the darker implications of urban development for the rural class is complicated by his picturesque portrayals of rural life. Where the author attempts to lend reality to his portrayals of country communities, his readership at the time of publication was largely educated and urban. This readership's view of rural life required a level of picturesque portrayal in Hardy's work that at once demanded and vilified such a depiction. As Merryn Williams observes, “[Critics] continually abused his best and most serious work because they would have liked to reduce him to a mass entertainer, giving support to their own conventional and misleading views of what the English countryside was like” (M. Williams xi). In spite of this, Hardy works within the recognition of his privilege as an educated resident of both rural and urban spaces, attempting to assign value to rural narratives. Indy Clark's *Thomas Hardy's Pastoral: An Unkindly May* elucidates this work on the author's part:

Hardy's pastoral is a result of his position as observer... the natural world was not simply a result of the inventorial reporting of surface realities. Instead, his reading of the natural landscape, and therefore, his pastoral, looks deeper into the processes at work beneath the surface. In order to understand Hardy's approach to the bucolic, it is necessary to explore the influences on his ways of seeing the rural environment, chief amongst which are Romantic subjectivity and Darwinian science. It is a combination of these ways of seeing that contributes to the uniqueness of Hardy's pastoral... Hardy recognizes the politics of landscape, the construction of nature, and the primacy of work; perhaps most importantly, he understands the interconnectedness of all three. (Clark 59)

While Hardy's writing on the rural world for an urban audience necessitates a somewhat sublimated perspective of country life, Clark points out his vital recognition of the "interconnectedness" of "the politics of the landscape, the construction of nature, and the primacy of work," that validate his narratives. Though Hardy champions urban development and the social progress it has to offer, his realistic perspective through "evolutionary meliorism" of rural life lends significance to his narratives and heroines.

Tragedy comes to pass upon Hardyian heroines in the tides of shifting social forces. As acknowledged by both Raymond Williams and Peter Widdowson, rural individuals are faced with tragedy due to their lack of "any familiar bearings or coordinates by which to navigate" (Widdowson 183). In spite of his professed agnosticism, Hardy sheds light on the feeling of a singular looming figure that casts down horrific fates on the beings below. Though Eustacia's tragedy is born of her inner struggle between urban strivings and a strong bond with the Heath, she feels distinctly a foreboding presence casting tragedy in her path: "Yet instead of blaming herself for the issue she laid the fault upon the shoulders of some indistinct, colossal Prince of the World, who had framed her situation and ruined her lot" (*Return* 287). In this sense, Hardy points out her displacement of culpability onto this "Prince of the World," rather than holding herself accountable for her indirect part in Mrs. Yeobright's death. Though Eustacia's experience of a looming figure is a mere displacement of blame, Tess's experiences of acute tragedy—being manipulated and assaulted, observing the death of her child, and finding herself, destitute, forced back into the grasp of her rapist—justify the narrative's reference to a malicious higher being:

Darkness and silence ruled everywhere around. Above them rose the primeval yews and oaks of the Chase, in which were poised gentle roosting birds in their last nap; and around them the hopping rabbits and hares. But where was Tess's guardian angel? Where was Providence? Perhaps, like that other god...he was talking, or he was pursuing, or he was in a journey, or peradventure he was sleeping and was not to be awaked...Why was it that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive. (73-4)

In questioning the lack of "Providence" or a "guardian angel," Hardy not only points out the complete absence of a benevolent higher being, but the tragic nature of the social forces at play that allow for Tess's assault to happen. In her assessment of female fates in Hardy's work, Sarah Nicholson assesses the "Providence" figure:

A name commonly give to this ambivalent force in Hardy's fiction is Providence, which is particularly appropriate as an umbrella term for these forces because of its association with the idea of events being ordered or arranged for a purpose, though for many of Hardy's characters the deity's purpose is malign. (Nicholson 32)

Where it is clear in the novels that a higher being is indeed absent, it is important to note the assumption of assigning a singular name as, in Nicholson's terms, "an umbrella term for these forces." Though it is easier to refer to the forces that inspire tragedy as a single named being or entity, it is vital to recognize the vast number of powers at play in these narratives. The many forces that influence Hardyan tragedy—social progress, class confusion, and complex invading personalities—come together to be perceived as "Fate," or "The Prince of the World" in their tragic influence. Though it is easier to consolidate the feeling of these forces under a single name, it is vital to understand that they do not, in fact, stand as a single entity, despite being felt as one. In considering Hardy's "evolutionary meliorism" alongside his agnosticism, the weighty consequences of urban development and progress are exposed in their tragic glory, wrought upon rural heroines.

By recognizing the immense value of Nature's role in Hardy female narratives, the significance of provision for female sexual agency comes to light. The natural world is vital in this role, as it works to empower female figures through their sexual expression. However, in light of the tragedies wrought upon Hardy heroines, culminating in Tess's "sacrifice" at Stonehenge, it is revealed that Nature's protective ability is limited. As Barbara Hardy notes, "Nature seems sympathetic, but like humanity, cannot console... His assertion of the connection and the separation, at this point of crisis and conclusion, defines the loneliness of the human pair, as the environment closes around them after an interval which lets them love" (B. Hardy 79). In spite of the immensely profound and valuable role Nature plays in the heroic female narrative, it is limited in its ability to "sympathize" and "console." The greater forces of the world cannot be repressed, not even by Nature's power and infinite existence. However, this is not to say that Nature takes the role of a higher being. William Clyde Brown substantiates the rejection of Nature as a sympathetic, replacement deistic figure:

...Hardy refuses to accept the vindication of general nature personified as an 'omnipotent Mother' whose 'future generosity' will rectify past injustice. Pain is an undeniable reality. A moral conversion of Nature could not eliminate the pain of former times, could not transform it into pleasure for those who have already suffered keenly. And if she were truly omnipotent, Hardy asks, what would make her previous actions necessary? She can be absolved only if she is blind and unable to judge what she has done or if she is 'an automaton' and unable to control her actions. In either case, she would not be omnipotent; responsibility would lie with a power beyond her. (Brown 99)

Working alongside Hardy's agnosticism, it would be incorrect to place Nature in a deistic role. As per Brown's explication, Nature as an "omnipotent Mother" figure would be invalidated in view of the "undeniable reality" of pain and tragedy wrought upon its inhabitants. Rather, Nature stands neither as judge, nor deistic figure. It works through its

very existence to empower women in Hardy's texts, providing agency for sexual expression and empowerment, as they face disruptive forces and resulting tragedies.

In light of Nature's vital role in empowering and providing sexual agency for Hardyian women, one must question the modern value of the author's assertion. Observing the social progress made since Hardy's death, and the movements that continue to bring our society into the future, it is important to appreciate the evolutionarily melioristic view of progress. Positive additions to society must be appreciated, while also taking into account the evils and tragedies that came to pass in the name of such progress. Nature's provision and protection (though limited) directly enable female heroism and survival, despite the greater forces that precipitate tragedy. In the end, we must recognize the immense value of female sexual expression, and Nature's role in providing for those experiences in a restrictive society. In a modern context, it is important to appreciate the value of the natural world in supporting invaluable human experiences such as these, for in the end, regardless of epoch or society, there was and forever will continue to be "the imperturbable countenance of the heath."

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