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SOCIAL CHANGE AND MORAL DECAY IN THE NOVELS OF THOMAS HARDY

IT IS NO WONDER that the most impressive of Hardy's novels are tragedies, for his concept of existence as a crude chain of circumstances working independently of man through a blind and brainless Immanent Will continually absorbed him in the possibilities for human conflict and suffering. As peculiar as his notions of the cosmos may seem, they do account for many of the painful facts of life. They explain how man's moral and psychological predicaments may arise from his attempt to impose a rationale on a universe which remains adamant in its unconcern for human happiness. Despite its rather stultifying pessimism, this view provided Hardy with a cogent philosophy for contriving dramatic situations in his novels.

Hardy's vision of the world is one in which the creative force manifests itself unconsciously and indifferently, though not necessarily maliciously, through Nature. Consequently he sees in Nature the most obvious, and at the same time the most inscrutable, signs of what a controlling fate has in store for man. Though such characters as Gabriel Oak in *Far from the Madding Crowd* occasionally have an advantage because they live on the most intimate terms with Nature, others, such as Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* suffer both spiritual and material losses because of their alienation from Nature or their inability to predict its changing moods. In a letter to the *Academy* in 1902 concerning a review of Maeterlinck's *Apology for Nature*, Hardy pointedly denied Nature's benevolence and discounted its validity as an ethical norm. To Maeterlinck's proposal that Nature contained a hidden morality incomprehensible to man, Hardy replied that Nature's injustice is proved "by present and past pain . . . which no future morality can exonerate it from. Nor can future morality be rationalized, since omnipotence can not be developed."

According to this view it is obvious that no trust can be placed in Nature as a guide to ethical behaviour: Nature's reliability must always be suspect. But this inimical view of Hardy's is not always consistent. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, for instance, Nature is decidedly destructive, but in *Tess of the*

D'Urbervilles, as Arthur McDowall points out, it has "taken the place of Tess's conscience," which always aspires to be moral. In its beneficence, Nature elevates Giles Winterborne in Grace's eyes to the level of a sylvan god when it decorates him with apple seeds from the cider wring; but in its maliciousness, in the form of a storm, it takes his life as if in conscious opposition to his moral scruples.

Man is, however, not only the victim of Nature; he is also the victim of his own psychological development. He has arrived at a stage of consciousness and emotional sensitivity which the power that created him does not itself possess. In an entry in his diary for May 9, 1881, Hardy wrote:

General Principles. Law has produced in man a child who cannot but constantly reproach its parent for doing much and yet not all, and constantly say to such parent that it would have been better never to have begun doing than to have overdone so indecisively; that is, than to have created so far beyond all apparent first intention (on the emotional side), without mending matters by a second intent and execution, to eliminate the evils of the blunder of overdoing. The emotions have no place in a world of defect, and it is a cruel injustice that they should have developed in it.

If Law had consciousness, how the aspect of its creatures would terrify it, fill it with remorse!

Here is the germ of further human disaster: not only does man's consciousness painfully register his incongruous relationship with his creator or first cause, but his perfected attribute, consciousness, is abraded by other imperfections in his own nature.

These two predicaments, the one metaphysical and the other psychological, both find their dramatic form in the novels. Some of Hardy's works dramatize the impact of personality with an exterior world; others exhibit the agony of the divided over-sensitive self. Henchard's fortunes, for instance, are to a certain extent determined by Nature, but Sue Bridehead, on the other hand, is involved in a tragic issue which springs from her own divided mind.

The bungling job of creation does not even end with the defects produced in man, for man himself is a creator. Society, that complex structure of human relationships, is man's own particular handiwork, and in constructing it he has unfortunately tinged it with the imperfections of his own nature. It seems that since the first cause, the Immanent Will, is imperfect, all the entities that derive from it—Nature, man, and finally society—must also be imperfect, and must also be in conflict.

The drama of society at war with natural human tendencies is the last act, as it were, in Hardy's panoramic view of human misery: society is the final expression of the Immanent Will acting through the intermediaries Nature and Man. And just as man's intelligence detects the imperfections of the natural order it is also capable of severely criticizing those that lie at the foundation of society—its moral codes, traditions and customs, and the consequences of industrial change.

Although there is some inkling of social problems in the novels written as early as *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the theme of man in conflict with society is most characteristic of Hardy's final works. Not until *The Woodlanders*, which may be called a transitional novel, does Hardy's interest show signs of shifting from human relationships conceived of in terms of both personal problems alone to human relationships conceived of in terms of both personal and social problems. In *The Woodlanders* the emphasis upon the problem of sexual selection, which the conventional attitude towards marriage complicates, prepares the way for Hardy's more violent and overt attack upon conventions in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude The Obscure*.

Special Victorian conditions account for the fact that such themes remained merely implicit until these later novels. The editorial restrictions involved in the serial publication of a novel in family magazines frequently affected the first form in which Hardy's work reached the public. It was only when his novels were published in book form that Hardy was able to represent fully his original intentions. The serial version of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, for example, kept nearer to the proprieties demanded by convention than the completed volume, and by the time Hardy was ready to insist upon giving full vent to his criticisms of Victorian morality in *Tess* and *Jude*, the problem of censorship in serial publication created such a disparity between the two versions that they were barely recognizable as the same novel. It was the tedium of having continually to compromise to suit the moral squeamishness of magazine editors that accounted in large part for Hardy's abandonment of fiction after the publication of the controversial *Jude*.

Several circumstances seem to have combined to intensify Hardy's desire to portray in his novels what he considered to be society's obstruction to the laws of human nature. One of these was the Parnell scandal of 1890, which forced the British public to re-evaluate certain conventional attitudes towards love, marriage, and divorce. The Irish Home Rule leader was named as correspondent in divorce proceedings instigated by a Captain O'Shea against his wife. The revelation of Parnell's liaison with Mrs. O'Shea led to widespread

public disapproval and a disavowal of his leadership both by the English Non-Conformists who had been favourable to Home Rule and also by many Irish Catholics. Despite the public outcry, however, there were many people who considered that special circumstances, both political and personal, made it unreasonable to apply the conventional standards of the day to Parnell's behaviour.

To Hardy, the Parnell case symbolized the tragic lack of legal sanction and public tolerance of a type of social behaviour which seemed justified in exceptional cases. A rough parallel to Parnell's misfortune can be seen, of course, in Jude's failure to achieve social acceptance or sexual happiness after his breach of the accepted moral code. In an article entitled "Candour in English Fiction," published in 1890 (after the publication of *The Woodlanders* and before the appearance of *Tess* and *Jude*), Hardy discussed the literary possibilities inherent in such a theme:

... in perceiving that taste is arriving anew at the point of high tragedy, writers are conscious that its revived presentation demands enrichment by further truths: ... treatment which seeks to show Nature's unconsciousness not of essential laws, but of those laws framed merely as social expedients by humanity, without a basis in the heart of things; treatment which expresses the triumph of the crowd over the hero, of the commonplace majority over the exceptional few.

Hardy's endeavours to treat social problems in fiction were further encouraged by the appearance of Ibsen's problem plays on the English stage. In 1891 Hardy, together with Meredith and George Moore, joined the Independent Theatre Association founded in that year to sponsor the production of Ibsen in England. But Ibsen's English productions could have exerted little direct influence on Hardy's own work since they appeared later than *The Woodlanders* and *Tess*, and preceded only *The Well-Beloved* and *Jude*. Nevertheless, the indictment of society by the widowed socialite Felice Charmond in *The Woodlanders* sounds very much like the cry of Ibsen's socially rebellious "new woman":

The terrible insistencies of society—how severe they are, and cold, and inexorable—ghastly towards those who are made of wax and not of stone. O, I am afraid of them; a stab for this error, and a stab for that—correctives and regulations pretendedly formed that society may tend to perfection—an end which I don't care for in the least. Yet for this, all I do care for has to be stunted and starved.

That society is a force of unhealthy repression is a notion that becomes almost axiomatic in Hardy's later image of it in *Tess* and *Jude*.

Hardy's concept of society as a force out of harmony with Nature and antagonistic to human welfare expresses itself as several antitheses. One of his most basic notions about society is that social evils are especially predominant in town life and stand in contrast to an intrinsic, natural goodness to be found only in a rural existence. Since the modern urban spirit represents for Hardy the careworn spirit, it is no wonder that we find the town community crass and unsympathetic towards the sensitive individual. A sense of the town's unjust and irritating lack of personal interest is felt strongly in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and in *Jude the Obscure*. Here there are echoes of earlier themes in *The Hand of Ethelberta* and *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, in which Hardy deplored the town's absorption of the individual into a rigid class structure.

Impressions of the sharp differences between urban life and rural existence were strongly imprinted upon Hardy's mind in his early youth. As an architect's assistant in London, to which he commuted from his rural home, Hardy witnessed within the compass of a single day two completely dissimilar environments—the rapid movement and mechanization of London seeming for the moment unreal in contrast with the life he had just left. *Under the Greenwood Tree*, Hardy's second novel, represents the first of these worlds virtually uncontaminated by the conflicts of modern urban society, and *Far from the Madding Crowd* again illustrates the pastoral traditions of a community relatively isolated from the disturbances of either the conventions of town society or the artifice of town manners.

In *Far from the Madding Crowd* there is one disastrous invasion from the outside world in the person of Sergeant Troy—a stock type of swashbuckler who plunges in and out of the rural circle, aiming like a dagger at the heart of its simple ideology. But the bulk of the tragedy does not come from the clash of the ideals of the rural community with the urban values that are embodied by Troy; difference in personality is considered apart from the difference of conditioning by dissimilar environments. In this novel, Hardy's quarrel with society as society has not yet fully emerged.

In *The Return of the Native*, however, the intrusion of the values of an urban culture into the social and cultural values of a rural existence is made a more integral part of the tragic situation. Not only is there a renunciation of the false values in the artificial, unstable life of Paris by one character (Clym Yeobright), but there is the opposite striving after these very same values by other characters (Eustacia and Wildeve) in reaction against the rural ideal of stability and naturalness.

A more direct representation of the pernicious aspects of town life is given in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and the tragic potentialities inherent in social organization are more fully exploited. Instead of taking the isolated rustic community as the basic setting and introducing only a modicum of urban contrasts, Hardy reverses the situation by allowing urban idealism to exact its full toll from a simple rustic intelligence. The crude though well-intentioned Henchard, who with typical rusticity is adverse to the changing conditions, is introduced into the progress-conscious urban community of Casterbridge where his inability to utilize the latest methods in agriculture contributes to his ruin.

In *The Woodlanders* the scene of social conflict shifts again to the rural community, with its raw untamed natural surroundings. But here in Little Hintock the invasion of the elements of town life creates a greater disturbance than in previous novels. Felice Charmond and Edred Fitzpiers are complete aliens in the forest-world of Hintock, and the tastes, manners, and education which they have acquired in town render them incapable of communication with the rustics and imperceptive of the real, as opposed to the apparent, workings of Nature. A microcosmic version of this impingement of urban upon rural values is given in the character of Grace Melbury, whose urban education superimposed upon her rustic background causes her to be at odds with herself as to which values she will choose. Within her own character the conflict is more crucial than, let us say, in the character of Clym Yeobright in *The Return of the Native*, who at the beginning of the novel has already renounced urban life and must merely combat the acceptance of it in his wife Eustacia.

The sophisticated manners of urban life, and in fact the whole web of conventions of organized society, serve to operate against the innocence and amorality present in the character of Tess in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. In Tess's sensitive perception of Nature and her love for rural life, Hardy finds the attributes of the "standard woman" of uncorrupted innocence. From Angel Clare she experiences the poignant psychological effects of a judgment based on a double standard of morality. And in Alec D'Urberville, whose appropriation of a family name of the country gentry and whose management of a sham chicken farm are all part of a rustic pose, Tess discovers an urban vulgarity underlying an assumed rustic idealism.

False values inherent in urban life are again made the theme of another novel, *Jude the Obscure*. Although the educational opportunities which tantalize Jude and lead him to Christminster seem to be more worth while than Eustacia's vision of the glamour of Parisian life, they prove to be just as false and perhaps even more of an illusion.

All the major novels involve in some way this transplantation of persons, together with the attitudes they have absorbed from their native environments, to a foreign environment. (An exception is *Under the Greenwood Tree*, which nevertheless hints at the possible infringement of urban ideas of progress upon rural ideas of fixity.) Naturally the separation of the two environments involves more than the naïve notion of town versus country. In this simple contrast, Hardy supplies himself with two opposing settings which he is able to use as a kind of working symbol for various conflicts. He saw exemplified in town life the most debilitating effects of industrial change; its artificialities of wealth, breeding, and manners provided the milieu in which education and sophistication divorced man from his more natural and human qualities.

The old-world complexion of Wessex life, devoid of sophistication, had in Hardy's youth lingered on as a result of the primitive means of transportation and communication and the lack of public education. We can recall from the novels how indispensable the horse was to the Durbeyfields, how laborious was travel on foot, and how seemingly distant and unattainable the adjacent town of Budmouth seemed to Eustacia, and Christminster to Jude. Mostly because of a feeling of complete isolation, the rustics achieved a greater intimacy with Nature and evolved traditions and customs based on superstitions and biblical wisdom, while the urban community occupied itself with its own material progress, its fads and fashions, and the formalizing of its education. In *Under the Greenwood Tree* an idealization of rustic culture is implicit in the notion of its stability—its freedom from any change more serious than that of the displacement of the church musicians by an organist. Various trivial alterations in the rural community of Mellstock are regarded with awe by the Dewys and their neighbours as efforts to completely renovate their way of life. The rustics seriously consider the fall of an apple tree to reflect the beginning of "stirring times," and they describe the installation of a new pump on the village green as a part of "great revolutions". Here the disaster immanent in change is kept subdued in mock-tragic, humourous tones, but *Under the Greenwood Tree* nevertheless carries Hardy's conviction that change in the form of material progress is undesirable. As late as 1887, Hardy was still complaining that the over-accelerated movement of town life was detrimental to an ideal—the ideal of fixity and changelessness embodied in rustic culture:

It is the on-going—i.e., the "becoming"—of the world that produces its sadness. If the world stood still at a felicitous moment there would be no sadness

in it. The sun and the moon standing still on Ajalon was not a catastrophe for Israel, but a type of Paradise.

In a perceptive essay, Arthur Mizener argues that Hardy could not seriously maintain this ideal of changelessness as a functional part of his philosophy. He writes:

The on-going of the world worked among the Wessex people too, if more slowly; and even if it did not, only the illusion of nostalgia could make one who knew that earth's conditions are ingrained suppose there had even been a felicitous moment in the past. The life of these peasants can be, for Hardy, only a charming anachronism; and their comments, though Hardy uses them chorically in his novels, are really irrelevant to any meaning which is possible for him The weary weight of . . . [the Wessex world's] unintelligible actuality so burdened him that he was never able to see it as a type of Paradise, to make it a part of his means, in Yeats's phrase, for 'holding in a single thought reality and justice.'

Implicit in Mizener's comment is the accusation that the rustic ideal of fixity is inconsistent with the rest of Hardy's thought—a charge that seems just when we recall that a notion of change is basic to Hardy's concept of the Immanent Will as an evolutionary force, and that the social conditions with which Hardy deals in his later novels are based upon the premise that change is inevitable. Admittedly whatever hope Hardy expresses for social meliorism in these later novels is certainly not based upon the incredible assumption that the "on-going" modern urban community will revert to the petty pace of rural life. But it is certainly undeniable that Hardy, throughout all his novels, forever maintains the almost instinctive feeling that rustic life, regardless of what ideal it embodies, is nearest to the "heart of things".

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* the quasi-rural town of Casterbridge exemplifies the old rustic order undergoing its metamorphosis into a modern urban community. The permeating atmosphere of its once having been dominated by ancient Rome characterizes the many underlying traditions which are soon to be swept away by the new industrialization. An amusing and effective way in which Hardy indicates the residue of rustic elements in this transitional phase of the town is his mention of the insouciance with which the butterflies flit through the city's streets.

Although the time of the action in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* corresponds to his childhood rather than to his maturity (it is set in the England of the 1840s), the tragic elements Hardy observed as a man in the life of contemporary London were developments which he sought to embody embryonic-

ally in the novel. During the actual composition of *The Mayor* he made the following entry in his diary:

This hum of the wheel—the roar of London! What is it composed of? Hurry, speech, laughter, moans, cries of little children. The people in this tragedy laugh, sing, smoke, toss off wines, etc., make love to girls in drawing-rooms and areas; and yet are playing their parts in the tragedy just the same. Some wear jewels and feathers, some wear rags. All are caged birds; the only difference lies in the size of the cage. This too is part of the tragedy.

In like manner, Casterbridge, which seems poised and waiting for the Industrial Revolution (note the enthusiasm over the new seeding machine) becomes the cage which imprisons the unhappy Henchard as he tries to conform both to its conventions and to its progressive spirit.

With Hardy's shift in interest to the problems of complex urban society in the later novels, his concern for Nature as an antagonist of man is less apparent but does not disappear. In these last works Hardy was merely incorporating another concept—the social concept—into his definition of tragedy. As Hardy himself remarks of *The Woodlanders*, *Tess*, and *Jude*, he is writing simultaneously about two tragedies: that which is "created by an opposing environment . . . of things inherent in the universe" and that which is "created by an opposing environment . . . of human institutions."

This modified concept of tragedy receives treatment in *The Woodlanders* in a unique manner. Nature becomes a kind of "pathetic fallacy" into which are projected some of the entanglements of human society. The outer world is often the reflection of man's inner world; when man suffers, Nature suffers, and when man is antagonistic, Nature becomes antagonistic. As an illustration of this principle Hardy's description of trees is unparalleled by those in any other novel. As Grace Melbury glances through the window of Winterborne's cottage she notes that "Next were more trees close together, wrestling for existence, their branches disfigured with wounds resulting from their mutual rubbings and blows. It was the struggle between these neighbours that she had heard in the night."

So permeating is the mysterious aura surrounding trees that it helps to define character and class distinctions: at one extreme is Felice Charmond whose lack of adaptation to the forest world of Hintock is indicated by her inability to distinguish, in the words of the rustics, "a beech from a woak"; at the other extreme are Marty South, who is sensitive to the trees' feelings about existence, and Marty's father, whose whole emotional awareness becomes riveted

upon the tree growing outside his door. Old Mr. South's hallucination about the intrinsic evil of the tree is especially weird; it represents in terms of Nature one of society's greatest evils—the master-slave relationship. As Marty explains to the doctor, "The shape of it [the tree] seems to haunt him like an evil spirit. He says that it is exactly his own age, that it has got a human sense, and sprouted up when he was born on purpose to rule him as its slave. Others have been like it afore in Hintock."

In undergoing the subtle transformation of the seasons, the forest world of *The Woodlanders* becomes symbolic of the change, conflict, and inconsistency of the social world. Unlike Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*, which concentrates the lives of the personages, this forest world disperses the human lives it conceals more than it unites them, and thus becomes a powerful symbol of social unrest. From this point on in Hardy's work we must read the word *Nature* not as "natural surroundings," but as "*human nature*," the arch-antagonist being the same.

Society, with its onerous impositions upon human nature, is finally openly indicted and placed on trial in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Unfortunately the appalling amount of evidence that Hardy amasses against society in defence of the unhampered impulses of Tess (who is in fact almost too passive to have any impulses at all) is presented in terms so sentimental and trite that the tone of the novel too closely resembles that of the daytime serial of American television. We encounter an intolerable amount of sociological cant: that Tess's baby is a "bastard gift of shameless Nature who respects not the social law," that Tess would not be wretched on a desert island separated from our cultural mores, and that without social convention Tess's experience would have been merely a liberal education. Most abominable of all is the manner in which Tess's concept of existence is expressed: it is in terms of the theme of Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode* reversed: "Tess found in the Ode a ghastly satire, for to her and to her like, birth was an ordeal of degrading personal compulsion whose gratuitousness nothing in the result seemed to justify."

But in spite of the unfortunate choice of expression, Hardy does manage to carry his social criticism into some new and complex situations. The oversimplified schism between Tess's all-too-pure nature and the hardened bitterness of modern society is redeemed by the more complex character of Angel Clare, in whose personality is concentrated the whole hypocrisy arising from the irreconcilability of human law and social law. Unconscious of his own acceptance of a double standard of morality—an ethical code which excuses his

own indiscretion but condemns Tess's—Clare assumes the role of Tess's psychological tormentor and becomes the real villain of the tragedy.

Social convention, a type of social law which Hardy always speaks of pejoratively, must be carefully distinguished from custom and tradition, of which he generally approves. Custom and tradition belong to the older, more stable, rustic cultures and are valued by Hardy as a patterned expression of man's most fundamental impulses. Convention, on the other hand, although it may have originally served a human need, is conceived of by Hardy as a code outworn and completely alien to human nature.

Rural customs and traditions announce a kind of standard of morality in human behaviour by allowing the rustics to express their private desires publicly and with social sanction. In Freudian terms, custom might be described as the means which allows the libido to find expression in the super-ego. Rural dancing, for instance, which enters into almost all the Hardy novels, is a sensual, though not immoral, pleasure, and becomes significant as a socially approved release from a strict decorum. Even in so subdued a novel as *Under the Greenwood Tree* the dance is significant as a socially accepted reprieve from strict morality. Fancy Day is described by her lover Dick Dewy as willing to be kissed while dancing but almost entirely unapproachable otherwise. In a passage describing Egdon in *The Return of the Native* Hardy traces the primordial nature of gaiety in the rituals of rustic culture:

The instincts of merry England lingered on here with exceptional vitality and the symbolic customs which trade has attached to each season of the year were yet a reality on Egdon. Indeed the impulse of all such outlandish Hamlets are pagan still; in these spots homage to Nature, self-adoration, frantic gaieties, fragments of Teutonic rites to divinities whose names are forgotten, seem in some way or other to have survived medieval doctrine.

In *The Well-Beloved* Hardy sketches the customs of a community whose extreme isolation accounts for a number of exceptionally odd unbroken traditions. The setting is the strange Isle of Slingers, where the inhabitants, who look upon the mainlanders (called "kimberlins") as foreigners, maintain the ancient rite of conveying property in church, and carry out betrothal customs. Similar deeply ingrained customs are found on Egdon Heath: the mummers' play, for instance, which Hardy characterizes as a "fossilized survival" in a "refurbishing age".

Along with the rural customs that publicize the basic urges of man and win for him social acceptance, there are other customs which serve to reprobate

certain types of unethical behaviour. Any breach of moral law, particularly an act of infidelity, was derided by the whole community with a "skimmity-ride", a procession led by a donkey carrying effigies of the offenders. In *Far from the Madding Crowd* the threat of a skimmity-ride does not go much beyond the intention of a mere satire, but in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, in the semi-rural town of Casterbridge, it is perpetrated in a punitive spirit by the "town rustics", who are decidedly more crude, sordid, and ruthless than the more well-intentioned, sensitive rustics of the earlier novels. It is the skimmity-ride, with its suggestion of moral laxity, that causes Lucetta's death.

From a rustic device for gently chiding those who deviated from a moral norm, the skimmity-ride develops along with the urban spirit into a cruel device of torture. Custom is becoming exploited by convention to such a degree that it shows a disregard for human feeling and sensitivity rather than an expression of them. This transformation foreshadows the development of the marriage laws, education, and the church into obstacles rather than aids to man. The custom and tradition that seem in *Under the Greenwood Tree* to be so closely interwoven with rustic idealism show signs in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* of becoming an inexorable convention.

When a tradition which is supposedly in touch with man's natural impulses is undergoing its transition into a hardened convention, the situation created is ambiguous and confusing. Its twilight status causes the ambivalence that lies at the root of Angel Clare's hypocrisy in *Tess*. His shifting attitudes towards the tradition behind old family names is almost a *tour de force* of rationalization, for in his concept of Tess as a "child of nature" he makes the tacit assumption that because of an aristocratic name she somehow instinctively adheres to a set of conventions. Posing as a free-thinker, he disparages a distinguished ancestry, while at the same he admits to an aesthetic appreciation of it. But after Tess's confession this dilettantism crystallizes into an admiration of aristocratic lineage as the embodiment of an unimpeachable code of conduct. Nothing is more ridiculous, and more hypocritical, than his association of Tess's "loss of virtue" with the loss of her family's prestige, although it indicates how deeply his judgments are rooted in a sense of tradition. He says:

I cannot help associating your decline as a family with this other fact—of your want of firmness. Decrepit families imply decrepit wills, decrepit conduct. Heaven, why did you give me a handle for despising you more by informing me of your descent! Here was I thinking you a new-sprung child of nature; there were you, the belated seedling of an effete aristocracy!

Another person of the same kind as Clare—one of those contemplative types

of men who imagine themselves to be liberal-minded but who are enslaved by convention more than they are aware—is Henry Knight, the journalist in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, whose rejection of Elfride is similar to Clare's rejection of Tess.

Another significant aspect of rural custom in Hardy's novels is superstition, for superstition lies in the very heart of the rustics' theology. In so far as the peasants themselves are orthodox Christians, it is usually the external trappings of religion that attract them—the church music and the rhetoric of the sermons, for example. Their deepest faith is reserved for witches, charms, and oracles. We are not, however, to consider these superstitious underpinnings of the rustics' theology a part of Hardy's idealization of the rustic order, for, as we may remember, it is the superstition lurking in Henchard's character that gives the false direction to his reason. On the contrary, superstition is no more exalted by Hardy than is Christian orthodoxy. Even though superstition, as a tradition, re-enforces the sense of fixity of the rural environment, it is nevertheless recognized by Hardy as one of the great flaws of rural society. In *The Return of the Native* it is the most serious obstacle that Clym must overcome as an evangelical reformer of the peasantry.

When education is regarded as a means for reaching a higher stratum of society, as it is by old Melbury in *The Woodlanders*, or when it is considered as representing the pinnacle of worldly prestige, as it is by Jude in *Jude the Obscure*, it falls under Hardy's severest criticism. In *The Woodlanders* formalized education and inflexible marriage laws emerge as the most noxious elements of society that work contrary to the laws of human nature. Education is one of the products of organized society which negates its own ideals by intensifying social inequality and by placing a mould of ultra-rationalism upon human nature. Grace Melbury's education places her in a demi-world, "between two storeys of society", where she is torn between an obligation to mix with high society and a desire to return to her previous primitive existence, which she still reveres.

If Jude had possessed the same power of self-examination, he would have discovered that his ambitions were much more mundane than spiritual. Entangled with his early thoughts about entering the Church were visions of becoming a powerful bishop or deacon. The old adage, "Knowledge is power", seems to have been the underlying motive for his desire to be enlightened. As Mizener points out, the more valuable enlightenment, which Jude finally receives, is the sense that his desire for learning had been "only

a social unrest which had no foundation in the nobler instincts; which was purely an artificial product of civilization."

Whereas Jude had mostly regretted that his natural sexual drive spoiled his chance to study, Angel Clare, Clym Yeobright, and Henry Knight—all as a result of acquiring the formal education that Jude yearned for—came to make impossible, unbending demands upon human nature. Unknowingly they became sponsors of all the over-systematized institutions, including even marriage, which had become divorced from man's basic needs. As if the unwritten and tacitly understood moral code of society were not detrimental enough to happiness, man in his perversity had actually legislated himself into further misery by transforming marriage into an almost irrevocable civil contract. Until *The Woodlanders*, Hardy attributed marital unhappiness only to certain quirks in human nature or to the accidental workings of the universe, never to the organization of society. When Eustacia, for instance, balks against the conditions of her marriage, it is not society she rails against but rather destiny.

As several critics have pointed out, it is not marriage *per se* that Hardy attacks in the later novels, but rather it is society's legal and sacerdotal sanction of its inflexibility that arouses his criticism. He saw that marriage was only too often contracted under a temporary emotion which no law could make truly binding. In *Jude the Obscure* the marriage bond which climaxes the sexual passion of Jude and Arabella can in no way guarantee the compatibility of Jude's intellectual idealism and Arabella's earthiness.

In *The Woodlanders* Hardy obviously intends us to share Grace Melbury's shock in discovering that Fitzpiers disavows any religious or spiritual significance in marriage. "Marriage is a civil contract," he says, "and the shorter and simpler it is made, the better." After her marriage, Grace considers the marriage service and wonders confusedly if God really assumes the responsibility of joining man and wife together. In *Jude*, Sue Bridehead's cynicism surpasses even Grace's; her conclusion is that legal marriage means that a woman must give her love "to the chamber officer licensed by the Bishop to receive it."

Any remnant of a convention or law which falsifies and distorts the human natural law will, according to Hardy, inevitably cause a psychological derangement. When the individual is restrained by society from obeying his natural urges he will find some other way of expressing this energy, either by a perversion or by a symbolic protest. As an illustration of this inevitability,

Hardy remarked in his diary, with probable reference to Tess's murder of Alec, that "when a married woman who has a lover kills her husband, she does not really wish to kill her husband; she wishes to kill the situation." Another instance of the momentary release from the repression of the convention-ridden super-ego is Angel Clare's sleep-walking experience, in which his free subconscious self temporarily breaks through his conscious idealism. In going through the whole ritual of burying Tess he is able to justify his estrangement from her; in imagination he substitutes the unavoidable natural force, death, for his own self-willed prudishness.

Psychological exacerbation, often bordering on neuroticism, is the greatest price that complex modern society exacts from Hardy's later characters. In *The Woodlanders*, Grace Melbury's divided loyalty to the urban society which educated her and to the rural society which nurtured her makes her in a sense schizophrenic. In Hardy's phrase, she is an "impressionable creature, who combined modern nerves with primitive feelings, and was doomed by such co-existence to be numbered among the distressed, and to take her scourings to their extremity." But psychologically Grace is the prototype for the more thoroughly modern and urbanized Sue Bridehead, whom Hardy describes in a later preface to *Jude* (1912) as "the intellectualized, emancipated bundle of nerves that modern conditions were producing mainly in cities as yet . . ."

One must keep in mind that Hardy's quarrel with modern society for afflicting the human nervous system to an almost pathological degree is only one facet of his criticism of the whole order of existence. In other words the criticism of society's psychological cruelty to man is in a sense only tangential, for the fault is chiefly due to the first cause—the Immanent Will—which developed in man the overwrought sensibilities to be thus affected. An entry in Hardy's diary for April, 1889, records in Darwinian language his unhappiness with the evolution of man's nature:

A woeful fact—that the human race is too extremely developed for its corporeal conditions, the nerves being evolved to an activity abnormal in such an environment. Even the higher animals are in excess in this respect. It may be questioned if Nature, or what we call Nature, so far back as when she crossed the line from invertebrates to vertebrates, did not exceed her mission. This planet does not supply the materials for happiness to higher existences. Other planets may, though one can hardly see how.

The cliff scene in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* is a kind of allegory of this predicament of mankind caught between the force which "over-developed" it and the social

and natural environment which is inadequate to satisfy it. The precariousness of man's position in life is symbolized by Knight's clinging to a cliff remarkable for its scarcity of vegetation: "He still clutched the face of the escarpment . . . with a dogged determination to make the most of his every jot of endurance. . . . The inveterate antagonism of these black precipices to all strugglers for life is in no way more forcibly suggested than by the paucity of tufts of grass, lichens, or confervae on their outermost ledges."

Knight's awareness of the fossilized primitive animal embedded in the rock, and his vision of all the previous stages of life form a kind of geological survey of the conditions from which man finally evolves into a creature too sensitively developed for his own environment: ". . . underneath [the fossil] were fishy beings of lower development and so on, till the lifetime scenes of the fossil confronting him were a present and modern condition of things. . . . The immense lapses of time of each formation represented had known nothing of the dignity of man."

The theme of *Jude the Obscure* is the struggle of man to achieve dignity in spite of society and his own physical and psychological imperfections. Both Jude's and Sue's conflicts exist within their own natures as well as between themselves and society. Christian ideals are at war with a passionate sex drive in Jude; in Sue the turmoil is of exactly the opposite sort: for her the conflict is between a pagan idealism and a relatively weak sex drive. The attempt to reconcile the conflict within themselves and to bridge their differences in temperament in their relations with each other creates anomalies of behaviour which immediately encounter the censure of society.

The modernity of Sue Bridehead is her rationalism—a type of free thought more extreme than that of Angel Clare because it entirely circumvents Christianity in order to find inspiration, not in the new science (as one might expect), but in pagan philosophy and art. In Sue's recoiling from the replica of Jerusalem and in her impatience with medievalism Hardy sees an occasion for questioning the whole Christian tradition. Previously, in Tess's conversation with the clergyman about baptism in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, he had ironically exposed the inconsistency of canon law.

What Hardy ultimately tries to prove in both these cases is that values which appear to be spiritual are in reality psychological. The clergyman's fallacious reasoning about baptism stems from his inordinate, egotistic desire to retain the sacrament as a professional prerogative. In *Jude the Obscure*, Sue's eventual martyrdom for the sake of Christian propriety is psychological and pathological.

Since all the social institutions which Hardy criticizes are ultimately traceable to a delinquent first cause, one might well ask of Hardy's philosophy: wherein lies the possibility of social amelioration? In an attempt to counterbalance the charges that Hardy was a complete pessimist, several critics have asserted that he continually demonstrates in his novels the prospects for social improvement. If this is true, it is difficult to overlook the obvious scepticism in his statement in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* that ". . . the Gods [reduce] human possibilities of amelioration to a minimum—which arranges that wisdom to do shall come *pari passu* with the departure of the zest for doing."

Moreover, when we observe Clym's efforts at the end of *The Return of the Native* to improve society through formal education, we wonder what chance he has for success. Two questions arise: first, to what extent is education itself conducive to happiness? The unhappiness of Jude and Sue would seem to make formal education a very weak basis for any scheme for reorganizing society. The second question is: should not the physical comforts of social amelioration come before enlightenment? Apparently in Hardy's opinion they should, for in *The Return of the Native* he foreshadows Clym's failure by disparaging the premature use of education: "We can hardly imagine bucolic placidity quickening to intellectual aims without imagining social aims as the transitional phase. . . . In consequence of this relatively advanced position, Yeobright might have been called unfortunate." At best, Hardy's concept of social amelioration remains stated only in negative terms. Witness Jude's dying speech, in which one critic, H. C. Webster, finds all of Hardy's philosophy of social meliorism concentrated: "I am in a chaos of principles—groping in the dark—acting by instinct and not after example. . . . I perceive that there is something wrong somewhere in our social formulas; what it is can only be discovered by men or women with greater insight than mine."

Perhaps a clearer insight into social disorder can become a basis for ultimate improvement. But any positive statement that social amelioration is possible—any mapping out of a plan in which certain social institutions can accomplish it—is not to be found in any of the novels. For any further hope one must go to the *Dynasts* where the suggestion of the possibility of the development of consciousness in the Immanent Will implies that eventually man might arrive at a perfection which will gradually fall upon society, man's own creation.