

THOMAS HARDY AS ECOFEMINIST AUTHOR WITH EXAMPLES FROM HIS MAJOR  
TRAGIC NOVELS

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The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in English.

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## DEDICATION

To my family (in all their various incarnations)

## ABSTRACT

The research and writing of this thesis began with strong interest in the compelling area of ecofeminist theory (specifically, its successful application to literary theory) and the realization that Thomas Hardy's tragic fiction seemed to echo many of the assertions made by contemporary ecofeminist critics. A close reading of Hardy's last four tragic novels revealed seemingly limitless approaches within an ecofeminist reading of Hardy's work, so a reading from a perspective viewing the author as ecofeminist developed.

In the interests of accuracy and tracing social causes of Victorian era events that contributed to Hardy's ecofeminism, the research necessary was diverse and interconnected in many ways. Industrial Revolution, urbanization, changes in social norms, and tension caused by gendered roles shifting all become apparent in a study of Victorian England's social atmosphere, and all these events occur during a vast change to the country's natural environment and mankind's necessary interactions with nature. The web of interconnections required by virtually all cultural theory becomes clearly visible, as did Thomas Hardy's cultural experiences and personal beliefs. Indeed, Hardy was concerned with the plights of women, nature, and other non-dominant portions of his world; just as ecofeminism asserts, Hardy portrays a world in which oppression by a male-dominated society is at the root of countless problems and inequities.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

England's economic system underwent a jarring progression of changes during the country's most recent industrial revolution, a period beginning during the second half of the eighteenth century and continuing throughout the nineteenth and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As a vital time of critical cultural evolution toward modernism and a great catalyst for change, the Victorian era and its Industrial Revolution have proven intriguing for many historians and social theorists. However, despite the period's overwhelming influence upon contemporary society and creation of deep social upheaval, the era and its major feature have received surprisingly little attention thus far from those practitioners of ecofeminism, a school of cultural theory patently well-suited to an exploration of England's transition to modernism from its agricultural roots. Ecofeminism, essentially a form of social theory combining feminist beliefs with environmentalist ideals—most often by aligning women and nature due to their shared oppression at the hands of patriarchy—simply fits the nature of Victorian England's sweeping physical and social changes. Specifically, England's transition from a primarily agrarian-based society to a nearly homogenously urbanized social system, must not be overlooked by ecofeminist theorists. Urbanization's impact upon English society (especially its effects upon women, nature, and the social minority groups comprised of rural-dwelling, agriculturally-employed people) embodies the most basic theories at the very heart of ecofeminism. Among the numerous individuals writing publicly during the Victorian era, few authors or contributors offer a more intriguing or controversial body of work than Thomas Hardy, renowned tragedian, poet, and social commentator, a man whose works never failed to elicit powerful responses from his contemporaries. Hardy's depictions of society as a system of power relationships and hierarchies

that tend to destructively position the human before the non-human and the male before the female virtually demand an ecofeminist reading.

As a form of literary criticism, ecofeminism is exceptionally valuable in its ability to support highly individualized critical approaches from numerous perspectives while allowing resulting instances of literary analysis to represent the experiences of social minorities whose perspectives were previously excluded by oppressive social inequalities. Ecofeminist literary criticism combines principles from feminist schools of thought with theories stemming from ecocriticism, also referred to as environmental criticism or green studies, in a joint effort to overcome patriarchal dominance in society, a compelling, if lofty, goal serving as a driving force behind both of these theories separately and the criticism they generate. Ecofeminism often cites the outdated, oppressive attitudes and behaviors of a patriarchal society as damaging to both women and nature. According to most ecofeminist theorists, society's further positive advancement and mankind's journey toward both human and environmental equality is hampered by the inequality faced by women living in a male-dominated society and the devastation visited upon nature by humans, along with those features of patriarchy that work to protract the existence of such inequities:

The emerging discourse of ecofeminism attempts to take up the slack left by those who focus on various symptoms rather than the causes of oppression. In doing this, an often heterogeneous group of theorists have begun analyzing the connections between woman and nature and offering alternative conceptions of how we should live in the world. Whether theoretical, practical, or spiritual, ecofeminists call for a major shift in values. Ecofeminists of whatever variety (and there are many) are united in believing that it is immediately important that we

each change our own perspectives and those of society from death-oriented to life-oriented—from a linear, fragmented, and detached mindset to a more direct, holistic appreciation of subjective knowing. (Gruen 60-1)

One must also offer as a context for ecofeminist literary theory an individualized definition of patriarchy, while identifying relevant features of patriarchal dominance and patriarchal society, as a whole. In the case of an ecofeminist reading of Thomas Hardy, patriarchy is a form of social inequality that oppressively assigns greater value to any being, object, or concept considered male than that which is assigned to non-male counterparts; additionally, patriarchal society selfishly places the interests of humans above those of all other parts of nature. These two main hallmarks of male-domination in society make their presence in patriarchy's definition especially suited to Hardy's thematic portrayals of the struggles between rural and urban societies, the conflicts between agricultural and industrial systems of commerce, and patriarchy's clash with efforts seeking to end oppression of women and destruction of nature in his tragic fiction.

### **1.1 Applicability of Ecofeminist Theory to Thomas Hardy's Fiction**

An ecofeminist reading of Hardy's major works of tragic fiction will certainly reveal Hardy's concern regarding the division between rural and urban lifestyles, the unfair duplicity of Victorian society's sexual norms (a factor closely tied to the period's social upheaval in response to urbanization), and the sheer devastation that stems from patriarchal society's subjective rules of conduct. Notably, nearly all of the human suffering and tragedy (along with most instances of nature's misuse or abuse by humans) Hardy's fiction depicts are the direct results of patriarchal society's antiquated, biased, illogical, or condemnatory social norms. These injurious social

practices represent aspects of life Hardy himself experienced and found to be constraining to both human lives and the natural world as a whole.

The unique authorial methods by which Hardy crafts his tragic fiction often involve narration centering upon depictions of the destruction of nature and/or the oppression of women (in addition to the manipulation of other minority groups such as the working poor, children, and people engaged in agriculture) by a male-dominated society and its inflexible, often tyrannical moral codes. Due to the thematic prevalence of these events in the author's writing, Hardy's last four novels: *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure*, lend themselves to an ecofeminist reading. Whether considered individually or as a group, these novels illustrate perspectives in Hardy's work applicable to both contemporary green studies and a variety of feminist concerns, making his fiction the perfect juncture for the practice of ecofeminism.

In the introduction to *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, editors Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy, both well-known critics addressing the application of ecofeminist theory to literature, define ecofeminism by its goals and practices:

Ecofeminism is a practical movement for social change arising out of the struggle of women to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities. These struggles are waged against the "maldevelopment" and environmental degradation caused by patriarchal societies, multinational corporations, and global capitalism. They are waged for environmental balance, heterarchical and matrifocal societies, the continuance of indigenous cultures, and economic values and programs based on subsistence and sustainability. (2)

Hardy's major tragic novels all reveal an extraordinary level of accord between the subject matter and prevailing attitudes of his fiction and many of ecofeminist theory's most regularly avowed tenets. Ecofeminism relates the oppression of women to the destruction of nature by identifying patriarchal society as the root of both problems and considering women (and all other humans) as an integral part of the natural world from which mankind so frequently seeks to differentiate itself.

Women and nature are often injured concurrently by patriarchal dominance in Hardy's fiction, accurately depicting the real experiences of virtually all humans in their dealings with patriarchy. These shared, negative incidents are so common in Hardy's fiction that women and nature become essentially indivisible in terms of the unjust events they experience and the damage they both sustain. A sort of unavoidable symbiosis is formed between the natural world and its female inhabitants in Hardy's fiction. This powerful association creates considerable textual support for the fundamental ecofeminist principle that asserts any attempt to analyze the effects of patriarchal social control focusing either solely upon female oppression, or only addressing environmental destruction, will inevitably fail to address the whole problem of patriarchal dominance as it exists in reality:

[T]he specifics that both environmentalism and feminism separately oppose stem from the same source: the patriarchal construction of modern Western civilization. Thus, to be a feminist one must also be an ecologist, because the domination and oppression of women and nature are inextricably intertwined. To be an ecologist, one must also be a feminist, since without addressing gender oppression and the patriarchal ideology that generates sexual metaphors of male domination of nature, one cannot effectively challenge the world views that

threaten the stable evolution of the biosphere, in which human beings participate or perish. (Patrick Murphy 48)

Hardy's writing consistently illustrates the interconnectedness of women and nature, but among the clearest and most powerful of numerous examples are Hardy's characterizations and his narration of the main character's life experiences in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. In the *Oxford Reader's Companion to Hardy*, editor Norman Page notes, "For Hardy the relationship between humanity and nature is always close, at least for the characters who are presented sympathetically. It is only morally suspect outsiders like Sergeant Troy and Alec d'Urberville who seem indifferent to the natural world and untouched by it" (60). Indeed, Hardy portrays nature as sympathetic to Tess's plight, and the end result is that nature and women become linked in the reader's mind. At the same time, Hardy's female characters are assigned no less importance than their male counterparts, and his version of the natural world is depicted as an actual character rather than a mere backdrop. By writing about the natural world as he does, Hardy gives nature's status the same boost to equality with dominant male culture he has granted women through his treatment of female characters. These occurrences correspond strikingly to ecofeminist theory and its basic goals as a theory, and Hardy's liberation via writing would likely find approval with many of the theory's practitioners.

## **1.2 Relevance of Ecofeminist Theory to Thomas Hardy's Fiction**

Hardy's boldly modern treatment of patriarchal society and its conventions as unnecessarily detrimental to human life and nature, though subtle to the point of ambiguity at times, is consistent and driven by his obvious concern for the plight of nature and the lives of those individual humans who fall victim to patriarchy's mistreatment. The author's concern for the natural world is made apparent by his naturalist writing style and his highly-involved

contributions to various animal rights groups. At the same time, Hardy addresses the social status of women via his ground-breaking characterizations of strong women engaged in direct conflict with a male-dominated society not yet able to accept their presence. The difficulties these women experience in their endeavors to overcome patriarchal oppression actually create much of the conflict and action that drive the plots of Hardy's tragic novels. Within patriarchal society's stratification of humans, discriminatory practices go far beyond simply valuing males more highly than females as similar intolerance is shown toward those from non-dominant racial, religious, or socioeconomic backgrounds. In light of the time during which it was written, the social criticism present in Hardy's novels represents an astoundingly accurate and complete portrayal of the many bigoted acts of patriarchal society. Consequently, these novels also serve the vital purpose of facilitating ecofeminist literary criticism that may be supported textually without any significant adjustments being made to the author's intended context for his novels.

Many critics have identified and addressed the strength of Hardy's connection to nature, so an ecofeminist reading of his work would be remiss to ignore these aspects of Hardy's character and their influence upon his work. In fact, this connection to nature certainly informs Hardy's frequent treatment of nature as a viable, vital character rather than a largely inert backdrop to the actions of human beings. Virginia Woolf, a notable naturalist herself and a practiced, influential literary critic of her time, notes in her essay "The Novels of Thomas Hardy" the ways in which Hardy's powerful, personal relationship with nature informed his ability to write fiction with an aesthetically pleasing and strikingly accurate sort of poetic realism especially prevalent in Hardy's descriptions of the natural world:

He already proves himself a minute and skilled observer of Nature; the rain, he knows, falls differently as it falls upon roots or arable land; he knows that the

wind sounds differently as it passes through the branches of different trees. But he is aware in a larger sense of Nature as a force; he feels in it a spirit that can sympathize or mock or remain the indifferent spectator of human fortunes. (267)

Hardy's characterization of nature highlights his extraordinary level of respect for nature and reveals an unusually high level of importance being assigned to the natural world in Hardy's mind. Most fiction writers of Hardy's time wrote about nature as a setting, the mere shell in which human lives take place. Such an attitude creates for nature an undeniably objectifying state of being, particularly when analyzed with commonly-accepted ecofeminist theory in mind. In opposition, Hardy's approach elevates the level of nature's importance in his novels to a position very nearly equal to that of his human characters, a fact that positively links Hardy's perspective to contemporary ecofeminist goals and theory.

In many cases, Hardy's references to the environment may be considered liberating due to the author's extensive personification of nature, yet the author's words remain respectfully free from overpowering fancy or fantasy (although some might prefer to avoid the connotation of humanity inherent in the word personify and choose to avoid its use). Similarly, Hardy's treatment of the natural world as being both concrete and influential gives added credence to the belief that his views on nature were surprisingly similar to those of modern ecofeminist critics in general. Hardy manages to address numerous aspects of the natural world in ways that make them concrete, believable, and unexpectedly meaningful. Fortunately, this powerfully honest approach does not end with nature as it is involved in the situations of all of Hardy's characters, both human and non-human.

Hardy's writing about nature allows the natural world existence beyond its ability to act upon people and things and opens this view of nature to Hardy's audience as his fiction elevates

nature's prominence in the reader's mind. For example, the author writes of "restful dead leaves" being "stirred to irritated resurrection" in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and Hardy states that the prominent "face of the heath" in *The Return of the Native* has a "complexion" able to "retard the dawn, sadden noon, anticipate the frowning of storms" (Hardy 250, 11). Many texts refer to landscape as having a face, but few authors give the face of nature a skin tone with such believably human influence, expression, or feeling. Even fewer writers use personification to highlight dead leaves in the wind as Hardy does when he reveals the palpable rancor these leaves might feel at being physically roused from their slumber. The effect of Hardy's personification of nature is to give the natural world a shape other than that of an empty word representing an abstraction of a thing most people fail to consider in any depth. Hardy's nature is made of many real entities capable of sharing in the experience of the novel's action rather than a backdrop made of non-human "absent referents" (Donovan 74). In other words, the author's language is "helping to reconstitute the „objects“ of discourse as „subjects.“ Such a re-conception will restore the absent referent as a „thou“ to the text" (Donovan 74). By acknowledging in nature meaning beyond the limited scope of human experience or knowledge and activities or processes independent of human life, Hardy creates a refreshingly accurate depiction of the natural world as a subject and constructs for the reader a different point of view, one free from nature's subjugation by patriarchal society. The potential of Hardy's fiction to further ecofeminist goals is astounding. Perhaps if humans become able to regard nature as an equal rather than a much lower inanimate set of objects to be consumed by mankind, society's treatment of the natural world in general may become significantly less destructive and infinitely more productive in terms of equality among all individuals and the world they inhabit. Thomas Hardy's fiction gives

readers a new angle from which to view nature and women in society, potentially opening eyes to the damaging effects of patriarchal dominance in society.

### **1.3 Victorian Social History Related to Hardy's Work**

Of even greater consequence to humanity during the Victorian era than the rapidly-enacted mechanization of factories, or even the ground-breaking technological advances in agriculture, were the microcosmic changes these developments generated in the lifestyles of virtually all English citizens. For instance, societal alterations related to the loss of agriculture as the primary industry of employment for the country's workforce, coupled with "a large and sustained rise in real incomes per head" that allowed members of the lower socioeconomic classes to purchase convenience-purposed and/or desired goods in addition to purely basic, essential items necessary for survival, an opportunity English citizens eagerly endorsed by purchasing and creating demand for amenity goods at previously unthinkable levels (Wrigley 9). Minor though this economic step toward modernism may appear, it grew to cause a societal shift that eventually alienated English citizens from nature as consumer-based society created a much more urbanized, fast-paced culture in which humans had significantly less contact with the natural world. Due to the sheer magnitude of the eventual changes created by even minor societal alterations, the lives of virtually all English citizens were transformed to such a degree that social commentary became an integral part of the literature produced in the country during this time. Numerous historical events that contributed significantly to the modern ecofeminist perspective took place during the Victorian era.

The experiences of the English people as they either adapted or found themselves left behind by society, made obsolete and socially isolated by civilization's rapid transformation during this period, naturally found expression in the various forms of art created by their society

in flux. The literature of the period was no exception, and the themes addressed by many Victorian authors unmistakably reveal both the problems and the triumphs of society's development toward modernism. Among the positive effects of the Industrial Revolution were rising levels of awareness regarding the sets of problems most commonly faced by certain demographic groups in English society, including those citizens belonging to lower socioeconomic classes, women (both as individuals and as an entire social group), and many other social minority groups including the newly-visible rural populations. Localized culture was often the determining factor in whether a group was considered part of the majority or a divergent minority group. For example, residents of cities in which the economy was closely tied to agriculture (such as hubs of livestock or grain trade) were collectively much more aware of and able to comprehend agrarian lifestyles and populations than those from industrialized cities in which commerce depended primarily upon manufacturing or higher education. However, urbanization's progressive growth toward predominance also had a homogenizing effect upon English social norms, not only wiping out valuable cultural diversity but also making remaining minority groups, such as people living in rural areas and speakers of non-standard English dialects, even more susceptible to oppression than they would have been in previous social climates. Specific authors addressing the countless social problems created by mankind's evolution toward the self-aware, near uniformity of modernism are far too numerous to be listed usefully in their entirety; however, a few representative examples may serve as necessary illustrations of the deep turmoil present in Victorian England. Writers of the Victorian era naturally vary widely in their social philosophies and subjects, ranging from Charles Dickens, who protested socio-economic class inequality and overwhelming poverty among the lower classes in *Oliver Twist* (1838), to John Stuart Mill, creator of the early feminist work *The*

*Subjection of Women* (1869), which advocated awarding individual humans respect and professional compensation according to each person's abilities, rather than according to a discriminatory, gender-based hierarchy as has been society's practice throughout history.

In England's case, many of the most clearly identifiable social changes were largely material in nature and closely related to urbanization; the British Industrial Revolution essentially created the conditions necessary to support the existence of the country's consumer-driven market as it exists today, and the effects upon the country's society, economy, and natural world have proven prolific and lasting. As one critic, E. A. Wrigley, notes:

Only in the wake of rising output per head, the twin of increasing real incomes, were major shifts in the structure of demand conceivable and in sympathy with such shifts, matching changes in occupation structure; progressive urbanization; and the host of associated changes comprising the industrial revolution. (9-10)

As society evolved in response to changing conditions during the Industrial Revolution, interconnected revisions to the foundations of the English economy and material functions affected even the most basic, personal features of daily human life.

#### **1.4 Hardy's Preservation of Rural Culture**

Hardy's formative years were spent primarily in a rural district of England where human lives were governed by interactions with the natural world, creating in these people heightened awareness and knowledge of nature, rather than humanity, a condition contributing to the existence of a slower-paced, recognizably rural culture. Hardy's upbringing had an especial impact upon his work as a writer because the author had a rare opportunity to view English culture as it existed for centuries prior to the industrial revolution, a relatively homeostatic state of existence in which humans utilized nature for survival but did not alter the natural world in a

way that even approached the changes imposed by the Industrial Revolution and the accompanying trend toward human disregard for nature's intrinsic value. Humans came to view the natural world as something of little worth beyond its capacity to produce monetary income or act as a brief reprieve from the frenzy of urban life. In a revealing discussion of Hardy's fictional depictions of the natural world and those humans who had inhabited it before the Industrial Revolution's shocking transformation of mankind's relationship to nature, the author's contemporaries offered rare praise for Hardy's writing because of the insight he offered urbanites into the mysteriously removed lives of rural citizens of England. As critic Raymond Forsyth notes, "We find Hardy being praised, not for re-creating in durable form an idealized existence in the countryside, but rather for interpreting nature, the countryman, country dialects and country ways to the townsman who knew so little of these things" (24).

The implications of such a response to Hardy's fiction are significant for any reader and his or her overall outlook on typical ecofeminist points of analysis; one may assume that much of rural culture has been lost already to urbanization and rapid commercial change. From a distinctly ecofeminist perspective, this loss of culture is a negative effect of patriarchal society's advancement toward its modern form. Additionally, a separation is apparent between the urban dwellers and those who live in rural areas; at this time, the urban centers of England were growing rapidly in population, while rural areas experienced a significant decline in the number of people living there. In light of such population trends, the reader would be correct to infer that the urban population achieved political and social dominance over the rural population. This population shift created stratification that contributed to an unjust, unbalanced social situation. Ecofeminist theorists frequently observe and analyze precisely these kinds of social conditions in terms of specific and generalized human interactions and power relationships. This analysis is

essential to ecofeminists' constant search for social conditions posing potential or proven threats to equality and mutual respect for all humans and for each part of the natural world. Specifically, patriarchy oppresses and injures through activities as obvious as the oppression of minorities and as covert as the creeping, widespread damage done to the natural world by rapid population growth and increasing urban density. Even those consequences that remain invisible to the generations who have actively contributed to their development and severity must not be overlooked because ecofeminism is a school of thought dedicated to remaining equally useful to all in the fight against patriarchal dominance.

Briskly-paced, all-encompassing changes to the form and function of English agriculture were hallmarks of the Industrial Revolution, and many of the specific, historical events surrounding agriculture's evolution are clearly connected to the subject matter, themes, and narrative techniques found in Hardy's tragic novels. The author's recurring depictions of rural society, its inhabitants, and the customs of this culture serve as both a historical record and an illustration of Hardy's concerns regarding changes to both the human and non-human world during his time. According to Duncan Bythell's work, a chapter titled "Women in the Workforce" in the historical book *The Industrial Revolution and British Society*, the Industrial Revolution essentially transformed agriculture by altering its importance to the overall economy of England, methods of internal organization, and production techniques (39). Small, family-operated farms that produced goods mostly for the purpose of individual or community-level human subsistence were replaced by larger, openly profit-driven farming operations that engaged in the production of goods for gainful sale and relied upon paid labor to increase profit and production (Bythell 40). Hardy grew up in the distinctly rural environment of Dorset County, a location to which he would eventually return, building his permanent residence here and

essentially spending the remainder of his life in this native setting (Diniejk). As a lifelong resident of an agrarian locale, Hardy experienced firsthand the array of changes brought on by the Industrial Revolution and the loss of local, rural culture it invariably caused:

Hardy, in fact, was born just in time to catch a last glimpse of that English rural life which, especially in so conservative a county, had existed largely undisturbed from medieval times until the onset of the new forces—population expansion, urbanization, railways, cheap printing, cheap food imports, enclosures, agricultural mechanization and depression, pressures and opportunities for migration and emigration—which so swiftly and so radically impinged upon it in the middle of the nineteenth century. (Millgate, *T.H. Bio.* 35)

Fortunately, Hardy would not allow the culture of his childhood, essentially the social legacy of so many generations before him (now transformed into a minority culture by modernism), to perish without a fight. The rural lifestyle, customs, and culture play an enormous part in many of Hardy's works, especially those centering upon the fictional community of Wessex, a conservative, agricultural, and closely-knit community serving as the setting in Hardy's most popular novels and modeled closely after the Dorset of Hardy's youth (H. Williams 122). Hardy's choice of setting allowed him to simultaneously address many of the "highly controversial moral and social issues" of the Victorian era and include in his novels a meticulously accurate historical record of a rural culture that otherwise would likely have been lost to modernism within a short period of time (Bloom 19).

Hardy took particular interest in the unique variations of language present in rural communities, something he replicated in several of his novels and poems. Hardy's contact with the "dialectic poet" William Barnes, a man many have considered an early mentor to Hardy,

and the novelist's childhood experiences as part of a "culture with a strong oral tradition" certainly indoctrinated him to the local language as only someone from a rural background can be taught (Bloom 14; Page 4). Hardy's attraction to Barnes and his work makes known something of the historian in Hardy, along with a great wisdom regarding cultural meaning of language and history:

As Hardy observed, he [Barnes] held "a unique position [as] probably the most interesting link between past and present forms of rural life that England possessed," and that position constituted the "world of circumstance," to use Keats's formulation of the spiritual struggle of man, in which Barnes discovered his "sense of identity." For, as Hardy continues, the uniqueness of his position resulted not only from the great span of his life...but also from the "remoteness even from contemporary provincial civilization, of the pastoral recesses in which his earlier years were passed—places with whose now obsolete customs and beliefs his mind was naturally imbued." (Forsyth 114)

In fact, Hardy's parents spoke with heavy local accents, although they abstained from speaking the rural dialect of the area in their home, perhaps due to the stigma of ignorance so often associated with rural dialect. As adults, Hardy and his sister Mary even found their parents' dialectic speech and heavy accents "a source of affectionate humour," but they obviously did not subscribe to the common contention that rural dialects were symptomatic of ignorance or even a reduced vocabulary (Millgate, *T.H. Bio.* 26). Hardy appreciated the fact that rural dialects had no bearing upon individual intelligence and identified these variations in language as indicators of diversity worth preserving, a point of view illustrated by the novelist's inclusion (or partial inclusion, presumably for the sake of reader comprehension) of rural dialects in numerous works.

Hardy's knowledge of certain specialized, rural occupations involving close communion with the land also allowed him to make a significant cultural contribution to society as he saved much of this knowledge from extinction, an activity serving the ecofeminist ideal of preserving minority cultures. In this case, the culture of those rural-dwelling citizens who are part of agricultural production must be considered a minority social group (and thereby a population at risk from the crushing oppression meted out by patriarchal society) after the events of the Industrial Revolution (Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: His Career as a Novelist* 37). In an effort to preserve this history and its distinct ways of life from extinction, Hardy deliberately included many fast-fading or already forgotten rural cultural practices in his novels, thereby creating in Wessex a region deeply rooted in the natural world by proximity and economy. Hardy's concern with his country's loss of rural history and culture is apparent as he effectively ensures the historical preservation of a unique feature of rural occupational tradition and English agricultural tradition, the "servant of husbandry" form of employment practiced by Tess Durbeyfield and her co-workers at Talbothays Dairy in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Tess is employed as a dairymaid through this exact system, and Hardy offers his reader great insight into both the rural culture's animal husbandry tradition and the social implications of such an institution through his revealing depiction of this type of labor. For example, positions requiring greater skill and knowledge were generally assigned to men, enforcing male dominance in the social and vocational hierarchies present here. Hardy reveals this inequity while offering his readers an unobstructed view of this type of employment, a historical and cultural phenomenon many would surely have never known existed. Hardy's most exceptional achievement in this narration is the opportunity he creates for his readers to achieve a depth of understanding in the situation few would believe possible.

## 1.5 Historical Context of Urbanization, Social Impact

During the Industrial Revolution, the shift in England's primary mode of production from the organic production of goods and materials of an agrarian-based society to an urbanized, industrial economic system geared toward producing goods for sale rather than subsistence had great consequences for laborers. Such a dramatic change forever altered the country's agricultural and industrial workforces, in some cases, much to the detriment of gender equality and the plight of female workers. In *The Industrial Revolution and British Society*, Duncan Bythell reveals a surprising instance of gender diversity (if not true gender equality) found in one sect of the agricultural labor pool prior to the Industrial Revolution: "Between one-third and one-half of...hired labour consisted of „servants in husbandry“: young, unmarried people of both sexes engaged on annual contracts to work as resident servants in farmers" households....Remarkably, the ratio of male to female servants was 121:100—in other words, about 45 per cent of farm-servants were young women" (39).

While the actual work performed by female laborers was not identical to that carried out by their male counterparts, such statistics accurately represent a relatively equitable employment rate for women and men in the same field, a surprisingly progressive state of affairs for the setting. Such equality, however, was soon erased by a "gradually developing sexual specialization of farm work" (Bythell 40). According to Bythell, female agricultural laborers came to be employed largely in unskilled, poorly-paid tasks of manual labor such as planting, weeding, and thinning crops, while male workers were much more frequently assigned to the harvesting of crops, "particularly with the increasing use of such heavier tools as the scythe" (40). A portion of this oppressive division of labor between the sexes may also be blamed upon population growth among the lower social classes, yet another effect of the industrial revolution.

The population boom among the working-class, rural demographic contributed to poverty, making labor less expensive and giving the employer a decided advantage over the “number of poor, landless adult male labourers who had little choice but to take whatever work and wages the farmers offered” (Bythell 40). Economic circumstances, such as these, in which conditions strongly favor the interests of the employer over those of the laborer generally lead to lower wages, in turn causing an increase in poverty levels and generating a plethora of social problems symptomatic of widespread material need.

As poorly as the entirety of the lower rural social classes fared in the transition from an agrarian society to an industrial one, women generally suffered even more than men for several reasons, including a particularly disturbing devaluation of women’s labor by England’s patriarchal society. When a much larger number of women were employed in agriculture, even if female workers were not doing precisely the same tasks as their male counterparts, they were at least laboring at decidedly productive jobs because their work contributed to the satisfyingly concrete end results of all successful agricultural production, tangible crops, animals, or products. From this point of view, the female worker’s lot in agriculture seems a much more fulfilling (and much less depreciating) option than the positions of domestic servants most would be forced to accept after essentially being forced out of agricultural employment. As domestic servants, these young women were assigned to work at “„useless” labor which simply freed the wife and daughters of their employer from the need to soil their hands with menial tasks” (Bythell 42). Rather than discovering through agricultural employment a potential source of pride, a sense of achievement, or a form of liberation from women’s long-standing confinement to the realm of the home through agricultural employment, females who worked outside their own homes were simply pushed back into the homes of those citizens belonging to higher social

classes and then paid to stay occupied, largely for the sake of appearances (a clear symptom of patriarchal dominance in society) with the duties of household maintenance, confined once again to the microcosm assigned them by an oppressive social system.

As female workers were forced to return to their traditional roles as household servants (bound by either wage or marriage) or take their chances at finding menial factory work in the city, a place where life was seldom better than what they had experienced in rural settings. Furthering the scope of the detrimental impact this trend had upon women's progress toward social equality with men was the way in which the exclusion of women from agricultural employment hurried the exodus of the entire English working population from rural living. Since women could no longer find stable employment in agricultural fields, those families in which necessity dictated that female members work outside the home, the choices were stark. Choosing between continuing a rural existence in which financial survival was now threatened by a new-found gender inequality in labor or moving to an urban center in the hope of filling the gap was not a difficult decision for many.

During the era immediately following the Industrial Revolution, many displaced agricultural workers mistakenly identified a potential route of escape from their dismal situations in moving to the city to find work in manufacturing rather than agriculture. Unfortunately, living conditions for working-class citizens in cities were often much worse than those typically experienced by members of the lower socio-economic classes living in rural areas. In England's cities, crime was a great problem, and overcrowding compounded the already-appalling sanitation problems many new urban-dwellers encountered. As a result, disease and violence threatened human lives directly while overall social conditions damaged human morale and negatively impacted the natural world beyond mankind. Adding to social discord and sharpening

the blows of material need was the fact that so many had given up their lives in rural settings that allowed ample opportunities for ensuring one's own survival (such as gardening for food or working at agricultural odd jobs) and replaced their previous existences with much more modern, constraining ones of near-certain poverty, crowding, and oppression in the cities. Hardy bore witness to these social problems in his lifetime and certainly drew upon them in his fiction. One critic utilizes Hardy's own words to describe the potential threats faced by the poor, making a powerful connection between social concern and Hardy's fiction: "[W]e can see that Hardy's fatalism is inseparable from his social attitudes...not about metaphysical forms of suffering but about the actual misery of the Victorian labourers—,starvation, disease, degradation, death'" (M. Williams 92). In fact, the quotation the critic has drawn from Hardy comes from *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, and these are the specific conditions Tess hoped to help her family avoid by her getting help from her distant cousin Alec, the man who ultimately rapes and impregnates her, an event that leads to her eventual execution for her rapist's murder after she has suffered a short life of great misery. So powerful was the fear of poverty and so real its unavoidable dangers, that Tess unwittingly contributes to her own demise in a desperate attempt to rescue her family from material need and social ruin in the setting of patriarchal society.

Increasing urban density, a significant contributor to social problems, also generated changes in English social norms and public concerns during the Victorian era; as society's norms changed, public concerns also shifted to include many previously overlooked (or ignored) areas such as gender, nature, and class. Most relevant to the field of ecofeminism are the ways in which these changes both ignited a collective realization that traditional gendered roles were no longer static and initiated concerns regarding highly visible changes in the natural world. Concerns regarding the treatment of both women and the natural environment inevitably

impacted thought and found their way into the literature of the Victorian era, essentially making social commentary a part (either obvious or implied) of nearly all Victorian literature. The writing produced during this period that specifically addressed the Industrial Revolution is especially fraught with social criticism regarding nature and women, perhaps because these were the areas of greatest impact for societal change during this time. In *Women, Writing, and the Industrial Revolution*, Susan Zlotnick notes the importance of gender issues to writing from the era, “[T]he centrality of gender to the literature of the industrial revolution... appears to be incontrovertible” (6). Certainly, gender was coming under a great deal of scrutiny at this time, and much of the focus on gender may be attributed to the marked increase in the number of female factory workers as these women were displaced by men and machinery in agriculture, forcing female laborers to seek work in industrialized cities throughout England. These women, in turn, began to take the factory and production jobs men had held in the past or became household employees to the wealthy; either option may be interpreted as harmful to women and their fight for equality in the workplace as male workers began to resent the competition for work provided by women. On the other hand, female household employees were forced into an oppressive employment environment, and their specific duties were based upon patriarchal ideals dictating gender roles that relegated women to the domestic realm regardless of individual skills or needs. This interrelated web of discriminatory activities and practices work together to form a clear instance of men receiving preferential treatment over women in the workplace, and one should not fail to note the fuel this newfound competition for jobs added to the metaphorical fire of antifeminism: “[C]ontemporary observers associated industrialism with female employment and male unemployment—a world „turned upside downwards“ indeed” (Zlotnick 16). The bitterness many male workers felt toward females who threatened the availability and nature of

work upon which their social status above that of women (and the inherent control it gave to men) was extremely harmful to social attitudes regarding the value and position of women in English society at this time.

## **1.6 Urbanization and Changing Social Norms**

Wessex, the fictional setting of choice for Hardy's tragic novels, is a rural locale very similar to the one in which Hardy resided throughout most of his life. The generally conservative citizens of the highly traditional, agrarian community of Wessex were frequently resentful of and/or resistant to the changes imposed by industrialization, both for the visible damage done to nature and the rapid decline of the area's agrarian cultural values, particularly the collapse of long-standing social controls via a slackening in the community's formerly strict moral code. Rigid social norms that public opinion asserts are the only morally correct, socially acceptable courses of personal action are a common feature of agricultural society. One social critic, John Osborne, offers a practical explanation of the development and ongoing usefulness of such stringent doctrines of morality in maintaining patriarchal dominance in non-urban areas, positing that such authoritarian social norms act as inherent social controls for the rural, non-industrialized social environment: "In an agricultural community where the margin of subsistence is small, a strict code of morality must be enforced; consequently the purpose of sex is reproduction. This attitude was written into the canons of behavior of the great religions, themselves products of an agrarian way of life" (Osborne 139-40). The clash between new and old social norms, fueled by the conflicting beliefs behind these customary patterns of behavior, liberated a few humans (mostly those belonging at least partially to a dominant social group, such as women who were married to men in positions of patriarchal authority) but also caused strife for many and even led to death in some cases. The country's social turmoil during this

period and the dramatic changes to (and/or the eradication of) numerous traditional aspects of rural English life had a discernible ripple effect beyond the lives of those directly affected by specific events, and this meant that even relatively minor, localized social problems would soon take their toll on virtually every group and individual in England. Such was the country's forced evolution to modernity.

### **1.7 Gendered Roles in Flux, Patriarchal Oppression**

The changes to English society's most widely accepted beliefs regarding gender roles, sexuality, socio-economic class, and the specific ways in which humans interact with the natural world understandably caused a great deal of conflict among England's citizens and the larger social groups to which these individuals belonged. The shifts in societal norms taking place in England during and immediately after the Industrial Revolution were so dramatic (and so deeply rooted in gendered roles and inequalities between the sexes) as to inspire one critic's reference to the period's social turbulence as a "crisis in gendered subjectivity occasioned by changes in the social formation and new sets of material relations between men and women brought about by feminism and the empowerment of the middle-class entrepreneurs at the height of the Industrial Revolution..." (Thomas 96-7). Indeed the ties between gender roles, material considerations, and standards governing morality are undeniably vital aspects of any analysis of patriarchal dominance at a particular point in English society's development. As a result, this complex web of interrelated social factors represent a crucial juncture for the application of ecofeminist theory as it relates to both history and literature.

Many canonized works of Victorian literature address issues related to English society's progressive deviation from virtually universal adherence to strict, localized laws of morality authorized and enforced by the well-established Christian religious denominations. Early

Victorian era social norms generally possess identifiable characteristics passed down from the dominant social structures developed in ancient times, beliefs that had remained shockingly static until the social upheaval of the period. In fact, the regimented, traditional dictation of morality and resulting codes of acceptable behavior, specifically when presented as social norms both justified and enforced by tenets of religious ideology, was soon to be replaced (via the authoritative means of social evolution and/or revolution) with an increasingly diversified, more individualized, and often agnostic code of conduct focusing on actual outcomes and free will. These normative modifications represented a shift in society's most basic moral foundations and indicated the beginning of England's transition to modernism; the evolution of society would not be painless nor even smooth in any sense as growing pains would find form in social strife for a people changing those beliefs closest to their individual senses of identity. Hardy was indeed among the many authors addressing the Victorian era's widespread discord, conflicting social norms, and bitter power struggles for cultural dominance.

Thomas Hardy spent much of his life writing about both his experiences as an individual and those of an entire culture, and his tragic novels manage to remain deeply personal representations of the lives of individual characters while also seeming to embody the desperate pangs of all English citizens as they collectively struggled futilely against the tumultuous current of revolutionary change. In her essay entitled "Notes on a Criticism of Thomas Hardy," Katherine Porter identifies the conflicted beings of many Victorians as she observes:

Hardy's characters are full of moral conflicts and of decisions arrived at by mental processes, certainly. Jude, Gabriel Oak, Clem Yeobright, above all, Henchard, are men who have decision to make, and if they do not make them entirely on the plane of reason, it is because Hardy was interested most in that

hairline dividing the rational from the instinctive, the opposition, we might call it, between nature and second nature; that is between instinct and the habits of thought fixed upon the individual by his education and his environment. Such characters of his as are led by their emotions leads to disaster. Romantic miscalculation of the possibilities of life, of love, of the situation; of refusing to reason their way out of their predicament; these are the causes of disaster in Hardy's novels. (399)

When viewed as a starting point for much of modernism, a large portion of Victorian literature not only offers its readers the opportunity to gain great historical insight, but it also exposes ongoing social issues relevant to contemporary thinking while contextually narrating humanity's attempts to resolve these problems. Such a comprehensive view of the collective themes, goals, and potential for tangible, positive social outcomes of the study of Victorian literature fits exceptionally well with the basic theories of ecofeminism and the diverse body of literary criticism that has evolved from ecofeminist cultural studies.

Patriarchy's false contention that by encouraging, or even discussing in a sympathetic manner, issues of female sexuality, gender equality, or any other deviation from women's conventionally restrictive roles as wives and mothers, one commits an act of immorality that will inevitably lead to the eventual breakdown of social controls (and ultimately the destruction of society itself) has proven one of the most effective tools of oppression in dominant culture's fight to maintain patriarchal dominance. For example, the representative image of the female factory worker, often called a "mill girl," was used during the Victorian era as a sort of antifeminist symbol rife with immorality due to her character's independence from patriarchal

society's material and idealistic control mechanisms designed to keep women subservient to men:

Tapping into this cultural configuration of the mill girl as a potent, frightening symbol of modernity, the great male critics of the nineteenth century deploy her to represent the social disorder of the present. In her perceived liberation from a patriarchal domestic economy, they saw a shadow of the larger breakdown of the paternalistic structures within Britain. From the first the vexed question of authority crossed both class and gender lines, so that improper authority which translated into any power in the hands of women or workers, often got configured simply as female authority. (Zlotnick 18-9)

Patriarchy's manipulative technique of preying upon humans' commonly-held existential fears regarding consciousness, death, and the search for an ideal code of conduct has not gone unnoticed by ecofeminist theory. In *Sexuality in Victorian Fiction*, Dennis Allen relates society's censorious attitudes regarding sexuality (especially the sexuality of females) to patriarchal society's use of an oppressive social doctrine to maintain male power over other factions of society and goes on to explain the mechanics of this form of fear-based social dominance. Allen discusses societal perceptions of human sexuality when he states, "Perceived as chaotic, the sexual is seen as a threat not only to particular instances of Victorian ideology such as belief in the opposition of culture and nature or in the class system) but also to the very conceptual structures—binary oppositions, taxonomy—on which such beliefs, and Victorian society itself are predicated" (5). Numerous critics have also linked female subjugation and nature's devastation by mankind to the patriarchal ideology at the root of capitalism, placing significant emphasis on society's ability to commodify virtually any being or facet of the tangible world,

living or inanimate, and with the overwhelming, desensitizing greed capitalism so often inspires in humans. In this view, marriage becomes a means of increasing profits for the dominant portions of patriarchal society at the expense of female agency:

[M]onogamous marriage in a capitalistic society depends upon the inferior status of women. In Engels' words, monogamous marriage decrees that the man be supreme in the family; his wealth be concentrated solely in his hands, and only his children inherit the wealth. This necessitates monogamy on the woman's part, but not on the man's. Engels concludes that monogamous marriage is the "first subjugation of one sex by the other" and marks "the first class oppression...of the female by the male sex." (Mickelson 86)

The ways in which the indoctrinated sanctions of conservative morality and religious factions have been used to justify the simultaneous destruction of nature and oppression of women is a social problem frequently addressed by both contemporary and Victorian literature; moreover, religious morality's role in supporting patriarchal dominance is point of particular interest to the ecofeminist critic's approach:

Among...gendered pairings, that of Christianity and paganism necessitates further comment here to inform my analysis in subsequent chapters. This dyad stems, to some extent from the perceived biblical justification for the marginalization of women that is both applauded and challenged in the fiction. In effect, Christianity becomes a marker of a character's participation in patriarchy, whereas paganism becomes a sign of one's Otherness to it. (Patrick Murphy 24)

Patrick Murphy specifically names Hardy in his discussion of authors addressing gender inequality and religious faith by identifying "an impermeable divide between male Christianity

and female paganism” (24). Indeed Hardy’s tragedy paints a literary portrait of a world characterized largely by the strikingly different lives, opportunities, and experiences of men and women. Unfortunately, the author’s depiction is quite accurate. The Victorian era brought with it great changes in gendered roles, shifts that created much of the societal instability characteristic of this time in England’s history and, due to patriarchy’s oppressive control of gender relations, contributed to the alarm with which many English citizens regarded this state of social flux.

### **1.8 Victorian England’s Changing Landscape**

Highly visible, and frequently disconcerting, changes in the natural world of England’s countryside were among the social concerns of the Victorian era, and the impact of the Industrial Revolution upon the environment is readily comprehensible in light of the period’s events. Agriculture cannot change significantly without causing some change to the natural world; population growth has wide-ranging effects upon the natural world because the environment must be altered to support new human lives; and massive growth in a society’s manufacturing sectors due to increased demand for the goods produced in these areas will inevitably place some degree of strain upon raw resources required for production while simultaneously creating additional waste to be put back into nature. An American visitor’s words, specifically addressing the effects of the railroad but applicable to many other situations of society’s progress at the expense of nature, serve as an excellent illustration of the magnitude of change the Industrial Revolution caused in England’s natural environment:

In 1879 an American visitor observed: “It is impossible not to see that railways...are gradually, and not very slowly, destroying rural England.” The changes effected by the invention of the locomotive were, however, not restricted to the transformation of the visible appearance of the countryside. For many mid-

Victorian its harnessed power, by which the limitations of time and space were increasingly overcome, became rather the image of man control over nature.

(Forsyth 25-6)

Hardy commented disapprovingly upon several instances of the natural world's destruction by humans; the problems he addressed were precisely the kind of negative environmental changes that would be vital in an ecofeminist analysis of this time period. For example, one of Hardy's most poignant responses to the environmental changes made by human society during and after the Industrial Revolution addressed England's Enclosure Acts, laws requiring that livestock be contained in specific, fenced areas for grazing and residency purposes while mandating the parceling and deeding of land. The Enclosure Acts are especially problematic from an ecofeminist standpoint both due to the fact that their mandatory fencing effectively modified the appearance of the land (and the parts of all ecosystems supported by the earth) for the convenience of humans and because the division of land into pieces of property, coupled with the arbitrary assignment of land ownership roles to humans, affects the human perspective regarding nature and objectifies the natural environment. Within the systematic set of human beliefs and actions informing the concept of land ownership and the enactment of the Enclosure Acts, social norms strongly favored members of the socially dominant culture, that male-oriented social structure headed by members of the middle to upper classes, demanding heterosexuality and non-minority status (racial, political, and/or theological homogenization) from those seeking success or personal freedom in mainstream society. Through the Enclosure Acts and its effects, patriarchal society effectively converted nature to a material possession for humans to control and define, rather than a sphere of life both including and beyond the human

self. Ownership makes nature into an object for people to possess in this instance and makes the destruction or manipulation of that portion of nature justifiable to most people.

Hardy seems to have viewed the problem of the Enclosure Acts in a fashion remarkably similar to many modern ecofeminist perspectives, insisting that the fencing of land and the loss of centuries-old practices of arable farming created a world serving “smoke and fire rather than frost and sun” (Hardy qtd. in Forsyth 209). Hardy’s statement addresses both changes to the natural world and, perhaps even more importantly, changes to widespread social attitudes regarding the nature of land and the natural world, noting that humans have moved from living according to nature’s seasons to living according to the movements of industrialism and capitalism; at the same time, society’s view of land has been altered from one that considers earth and nature a shared resource to a much more modern, sterile focus on ownership and monetary worth. These shifts in humans’ attitudes and beliefs regarding nature and land are surely one aspect of social change in the Victorian era represented by the “smoke and fire” of a newly-industrialized England, a change ecofeminist theory generally cites as having catastrophic effects upon the treatment of nature. Finally, one must also note the loss of balance implied by Hardy’s word choice in the statement. Frost is cold, making it somewhat the opposite of the sun and its warmth and implying that the two together form a balanced relationship; however, smoke and fire are both elements associated with heat and destruction, demonstrating a loss of nature’s critical balance between its possible extremes and turning one’s thoughts to the potential dangers humans might face as a result of their careless abuse of nature.

## CHAPTER 2

### *THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE*

England's rural culture, as it existed during the time in which most of Hardy's novels are set (the middle of the nineteenth century, or approximately one generation before Hardy's), is prominent in the earliest of the author's major novels. Published in 1878, *The Return of the Native* is set on Egdon heath, a fictional location that is unmistakably similar to the heath Hardy knew in his childhood. Immediately, Hardy presents his readers with the intrinsic conflict between two popular views of nature, one being the human-centric belief that nature is merely a resource for human life, made largely of layers of human history in which one may find remnants in the natural world. The second widespread point of view on nature's true composition finds a free-standing world, validated in existence regardless of humankind's impact. The novel begins its action in the midst of an exclusively rural tradition, the celebration of a harvest holiday by those who live the agricultural, rural lifestyle Hardy had experienced during his early years. This community-wide commemoration of nature's bounty and mankind's consequential profit is being marked by the ritual lighting of numerous bonfires across the heath, a practice incongruously labeled an "instinctive and resistant act of man" against nature's unadulterated form and the assumed hostility assigned to the natural world by patriarchal society (Hardy, *Return* 23). Hardy's labeling of mankind's actions here as both instinctual and indicative of the struggle between humans and nature may be used to support a reading of the burning as a means of eliminating the waste left over by plants after harvest and creating ashes that act as fertilizer for the soil. Such a reading would lean toward the human-centric approach to nature.

However, one may also argue that the aggression and destruction humans visit upon the natural world through practices such as these fires marking particularly festive days or the

pastime of picking and flowers and weaving them into temporary decorations frankly serve no vital purpose. Nature would eventually convert dead plant material into fertilizer without human intervention. Therefore, in the eyes of some ecofeminist critics, the bonfires would actually constitute little other than yet another example of humans needlessly damaging nature for their own pleasure or convenience. The free-standing view of nature is obviously better supported by this reading of Hardy's text than a view favoring humans' interests over those of nature.

While ecofeminism would generally favor the second view of nature over the first, a compromise between such polarized opposition may be found. A more realistic model of mankind's ideal relationship to the natural world is supported, and even advocated, by many ecofeminists: "[P]eople are a part of nature as they shape and are shaped by it," and the optimal, least damaging way for humans to approach the natural environment would be by "settling in, ... becoming a part of a specific, geographically, historically, and culturally situated place" (Patrick Murphy, *Lit., Nature, and Other* 50-1). Such a view of the relationship between humans and nature may yield great understanding, workable techniques for reducing conflict between mankind and the environment, and the indispensable human "experience of learning how to function productively and healthily in a living ecosystem" (Patrick Murphy, *Lit., Nature, and Other* 51).

*The Return of the Native* offers a plethora of examples of humans struggling to aid society's development by altering nature, making it a particularly fertile ground for ecocriticism to extend beyond the two common views of nature and explore the deeper conflict mankind appears to have with the natural world. The harshly uninviting setting of Egdon heath exemplifies the "belief in the opposition of culture and nature" as a frequently identified theme in Victorian fiction (Allen 5). One must also acknowledge the vital role the theme of society vs.

nature plays in highlighting the conflict between a substantial portion of Victorian existential ideology and ecofeminism's general goal of diminishing the conflict between humans and nature and encouraging gender equality among humans in order to allow society and the natural world to coexist as harmoniously as possible (Allen 5). In fact, the heath Hardy depicts in *The Return of the Native* often seems to be locked in battle with its human residents.

The damage nature sustains at the hands of those hoping to improve their lives by altering nature, much like the collective oppression of women by a society bent on maintaining male privilege, actually does great damage to society's overall well-being through the harm it inflicts upon the rights of individuals and the preservation of nature. The fact that the seemingly-hostile heath often appears virtually unchanged by civilization illustrates the importance of altering nature for human use to patriarchy's continued control of society. As Miller writes: "The heath men and women perform this action as they live there and change the landscape even further, bit by bit. The narrator, for example mentions quite recent and often unsuccessful attempts to clear and cultivate bits of the heath" (Miller 155).

Other valid interpretations of Hardy's novel may center upon the author's true-to-custom/history depictions of exclusively rural traditions, like the bonfires, forgotten by people living in urban centers within the time of only a single generation. Ecofeminist critics would surely support Hardy's choice to include the bonfires as an example of the preservation of a rural minority culture's customs and features. In support of such a reading, the celebratory arson of the bonfires is punctuated by traditional dancing, singing of ballads handed down through generations (without the benefit of a written record and as part of the oral tradition to which Hardy was exposed as a child), and other rural festival folkways. Each of these events serves to express human joy or provide social warnings against potential personal disasters, and they are

invaluable as both cultural capital and a historical record of the existence of a people whose lifestyle would soon be erased by time and changes brought on by the Industrial Revolution. Such hallmarks of traditional, rural society in England's agricultural areas had already grown unfamiliar to many people living in the urban centers of England (a growing majority in English society and the primary group from which Hardy's readership would have come) even as Hardy was writing this novel. Rural culture was becoming endangered even before the Victorians began to recognize and address the "smoke and fire" of modernity that darkened England's skies with its accompanying materialism and environmental impact (Hardy qtd. in Forsyth 209). Despite the obvious opposition between such diverse approaches to the bonfires' positive and negative effects and the possibility of considering them a cultural artifact, ecofeminist theory affords even conflicting viewpoints validity due to the highly personal nature of each critic's ecofeminist approach.

The *Return of the Native* also presents poignant examples of the oppression of women by a male-dominated society. The most recognizable case involves the interactions, especially those of a romantic nature, as seen in the relationship among Damon Wildevve, Eustacia Vye, and Thomasin Yeobright. All three members of this love triangle are wounded and oppressed as the male Wildevve carries on a simultaneous, harmful relationship with the two women, an activity made even more iniquitous by the repercussions the women face if patriarchal society discovers their situations. Society has a long history of disapproving of polygamous romantic relationships, and (regardless of the true sexual activities of the specific relationship in Hardy's novel) those involving sexual activity represent an especially devastating possibility for women, pregnancy. Reproduction is tightly controlled by patriarchal society, and new life is suppressed through the demonization of female sexuality and its effects. Additionally, women are much more likely than

men to be permanently condemned by society or socially ruined due to violations of the social norms of monogamy and female chastity. Domination at the hands of patriarchal society is clearly victimizing both nature and humans (women especially) as they are collectively oppressed by society's stringent rules mandating complete, lifelong monogamy. If one violates these norms society's vengeance is rapid and brutal, especially if the person having an extra-marital sexual relationship is female.

Francis Foster, the purported author of the deeply antifeminist 1797 work "Thoughts on the Times but chiefly on the Profligacy of our Women and It's Causes," exposes the common belief that social and moral transgressions involving sexual relationships deemed inappropriate are the worst act a woman can commit and constitute an unforgiveable sin: "A Man cannot sink to a Level with an Adultrous, till he has forsaken his Post in Battle. Courage is the male point of Honour—Chastity the female" (Foster qtd. in Smelser 268). Gender bias is manifest in this point of view, and the idea that the most valuable characteristic a particular living being could ever achieve might be the ability to abstain from sexual activity seems ridiculous from a modern perspective. However, this restrictively antifeminist perspective on female sexuality has been so prevalent in the recent past that it influences gender ideology considerably even today.

Ecofeminist theory contains an effective summary of the attitudes that enable patriarchal society to treat chastity as the single most important aspect of any woman's life or being:

[M]en tend to focus on rights, whereas women tend to focus on responsibilities....It is now common knowledge that rights-based ethics (most characteristic of dominant-culture men, although women may share this view as well) evolve from a sense of self as separate, existing within a society of

individuals who must be protected from each other in competing for scarce resources. (Gaard, *Ecofeminism 2*)

In addition to the negative effects of oppression on women's position in society and the continued demonization of female sexuality and desire, biased social conventions dictating female sexuality also serve to force undue restrictions upon nature as they restrict the natural processes of reproduction, inherently resulting in the destruction of nature.

Human and environmental examples of the oppression and devastation perpetrated by patriarchal dominance abound throughout the novel, particularly as the fear of being rejected by society leads to an immediate loss of the freedom to pursue one's own desires for humans whose wishes are not condoned by social norms. In a statement concurring with Gaard's contention that Victorian women were governed more by a socially-constructed sense of responsibility unnaturally imposed upon them than by their individual desires and natural rights as humans, Martha Vicinus writes of patriarchal society's oppression of women by forcing them to feel responsible for keeping up outward appearances and ensuring family values within the dictates of social norms. In *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women*, Vicinus describes the social pressures placed upon women in the Victorian era and the consequences of this oppression:

Respectability, that watchword of the Victorians, was the goal of outsiders from actresses to shopkeepers, and its possession the prized attribute of even the most militant. Demands for increased economic opportunities and freedom of action were subordinated to family responsibilities and personal respectability. Many single women who had been active in various women's organizations dropped out after marriage until their children were grown. (x)

Patriarchal dominance interferes with personal freedom and eventually results in death or ruination for several characters. In death, these characters serve as strong support for the connected fates of mankind and the natural world, and these tragic deaths are also illustrations of environmental destruction since humans are a part of nature. Beyond their status as individuals, characters that die as a result of patriarchal oppression reduce diversity within the human species, change the balance of the ecosystem by ceasing to participate in food chains and other cyclical natural processes, and eliminate any chance of future offspring.

The domestic realm of marriage, household management, and family rearing was likely the most oppressive sphere in which Victorian women found themselves, and society dictated that women participate in this world or face exclusion and rejection as social outcasts considered to be deviant and even evil or immoral in nature. *The Return of the Native* is the first novel (chronologically) in which Hardy explores marriage and its potential pitfalls with any depth, and a survey of his coverage of marriage in this and subsequent novels does not reveal a positive view of marriage. In fact, the two women Damon Wildeve injures through his dishonesty and manipulation regarding romantic relationships are also victimized by patriarchal society through marriage. Eustacia Vye has been identified by many as a non-conformist character, refusing to follow the dictates of society that she be submissive, sexually ignorant, and self-deprecating. However, Eustacia is not fortunate enough to succeed in her liberated ways and marries unhappily only to die before the conclusion of the novel: “Hardy’s dramatization of Eustacia reinforces the idea that Eustacia’s lack of opportunity and her dependence on man for economic security inevitably lead her into what he sees as the marriage trap” (Mickelson 68). Thomasin Yeobright, nearly the polar opposite of Eustacia in her desperate attempts to conform to patriarchal ideals, appears at a surface level to fit most of society’s ideals of the perfect woman,

even when faced with great difficulty as a direct result of patriarchal oppression. Like Eustacia, Thomasin is an unhappy victim of patriarchy and is represented as being much happier and in a better material position than before when she is widowed very near the end of *The Return of the Native*. Interestingly enough, Hardy depicts two very different ways women might view and act in regard to patriarchal dominance in the characters of Vye and Yeobright, yet both individuals are injured through oppressive treatment by a male-dominated world and its social ideals. By creating such dissimilar characters who suffer shockingly similar fates, Hardy appears to be highlighting the futility of conformity and the impotence of rebellion for women as long as society continues to favor the interests of men over those of women and material wealth over nature's well-being.

## CHAPTER 3

### *THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE*

At first reading, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) appears to require a feminist reading because within the first pages of the novel Michael Henchard, a man who eventually becomes the mayor of the novel's title, drunkenly sells his wife and child to another man. Henchard draws immediate distrust from Hardy's audience with his callous disposal of his young family, and he commits one of the most heinous acts of female mistreatment and oppression at the hands of a man found in literature. By treating his wife and daughter as pieces of his personal property available for sale at his discretion, Henchard absolutely objectifies them, forcing these two females into an unfamiliar, potentially deadly situation; moreover, he successfully removes a large portion of the sovereignty these characters would have otherwise possessed both as humans and simply as living, conscious beings. The fact that another man actually purchases these humans, coupled with the social implications of Henchard's wife, Susan, knowing no better solution at the time of her sale than to accept her plight of victimization and oppression by patriarchal society, reveal the level to which patriarchal dominance has permeated the society Hardy portrays. The oppression of women by individuals representing the dominant factions of patriarchal society and women's subjugation as a result of the collective mindset and normative beliefs characteristic of such an unbalanced social setting continue throughout *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. An ecofeminist reading of this text will identify many instances in which the mistreatment suffered by characters belonging to non-dominant social groups is accompanied by significant damage to the natural world. All of these incidents represent injuries caused by patriarchal civilization either in the form of specific acts committed by humans or as general

effects of patriarchy's unfair nature and commerce evolving into a system that values individual profit above all else.

Michael Henchard has risen to the station of a successful corn merchant and local governing figure when Susan and her daughter, Elizabeth Jane, return to his life after an absence of many years following their sale. Notably, both Henchard's political assignment and his position in agricultural commerce are ones of little or no real productivity. Instead, this publicly revered man holds a professional position dependent upon the exploitation of the lower classes of farmers and laborers and the destruction of nature through agriculture. Followers of green studies and ecofeminists alike frequently condemn large-scale agricultural operations, driven by capitalist greed and low-cost labor, for causing extensive damage to nature via practices such as the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides. In addition to agricultural methods contributing to pollution of the natural environment with chemicals, tilling the soil excessively and overwatering both lead to soil erosion. Additionally, cultivating crops that are not part of the plant life normally found in an area's natural environment frequently depletes certain minerals from the soil and leads to the uncontrolled growth of plants or animals that cause the extinction of native species. The numerous problems of commercial agriculture would have been apparent to those living during and shortly after the industrial revolution as they witnessed the symptoms of sudden instability in ecosystems that had been essentially balanced for as long as humans could remember. The impact upon nature was accompanied by equally radical economic changes, such as the reduction of trade among individuals due to an increase in centralized, large scale trading reliant upon mechanization and elevated levels of agricultural production. The loss of such local economic ties and transactions had serious negative effects upon their practitioners and the community as a whole, but once again, women generally felt the injury of this trend

more acutely than men as they were forced to face the open hostility and maddening gender discrimination typical of female employment outside the home during the Victorian era.

Many previously employed rural women (including the essentially self-employed women who took in sewing, made lace for women's gloves, or performed any of the myriad odd-jobs these women could perform to earn a small income for themselves and their families) found they no longer had the opportunity to trade their labor for needed goods or earn money using their skills. These women either had to sacrifice their gainful employment (along with its financial and personal benefits) or change their lifestyles even more drastically by seeking work in the cities. Women were finding the Victorian world of employment to be an unwelcoming, inequitable place ruled by men, much like the rest of the world in which they lived. Hardy recognized the difficulties working women in particular encountered in many aspects of their lives, and his candid portrayal of their collective battle against patriarchal oppression, a recurrent theme in the author's fiction, is unparalleled for the time period:

Women work outside the home in both conventional and unconventional occupations, from teaching to negotiating the price of corn, from serving as barmaids to inaugurating telegraphic systems, from working as milkmaids to organising public readings....In other words, they struggle to shape their own lives with a vigour and energy and resilience that is, to the reader, the more remarkable for the fact that theirs is a struggle against all odds, a struggle in a world that, as Hardy says in *The Return of the Native*, is not friendly to women.

(Morgan x)

Hardy's women are much more modern and free-thinking than virtually any other female characters created by his contemporaries because Hardy's women are humanly flawed,

sometimes defeated, frequently discontented, nearly always unwilling to fully submit to the dictates of patriarchal dominance, and invariably active participants in life. While the difficulties Hardy's women must overcome in order to live as they wish (or to live at all in some instances) are frequently heart-wrenching and generally require that the woman make some form of sacrifice, Hardy's female characters are strong-minded and habitually inspirational as well as tragic. Ecofeminist perspectives, while addressing the challenges and oppression these women confront in their battles for autonomy and selfhood, must certainly see such characters as a positive factor in the ongoing battle for equality regardless of gender and species differentiation. Hardy's fiction may also advance the fight for nature's freedom from human destruction, particularly those injuries nature suffers most frequently as a result of an unbalanced, male-dominated social structure.

One of the most dramatic examples of nature's ruination at the hands of a patriarchal civilization comes in the microcosmic form of a caged goldfinch. Henchard attempts to give the woman he believes to be his daughter, Elizabeth Jane, as a wedding present. Henchard grows so overcome by his own feelings of guilt and rejection that he simply forgets the helpless animal in the bushes where he has hidden it outside of Elizabeth Jane's home while attending to his own desire for acceptance. Henchard has purchased the bird, imprisoned in order to delight humans with its appearance and sounds, and the destruction of nature for human whim is completed when the bird dies in the cage inches from the natural world that would have given it life had man not intervened. Once again, a human's selfish actions, as sanctioned by patriarchal society, result in the destruction of a part of nature never meant to be caged, purchased, given as a gift, or forgotten and left to starve to death in a metal cell. In virtually all instances, a society

characterized by male domination, achieved through the injurious oppression of both humans and nature, causes great damage to individual people and portions of the natural world alike.

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## CHAPTER 4

### *TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES*

In addition to concrete, factual insights in England's rural traditions and examples of patriarchy's ability to damage humans and nature, Hardy's distinctive narrative style grants the reader access to specific characters and their experiences spanning far beyond the character insight proffered by most of his contemporaries. Hardy's fiction consistently features the layering of themes, piercingly relatable characterizations, and nature's overtly animate presence; these attributes of his fiction work together to form levels of realism to which few novelists can even aspire. For example, in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Hardy does much more than rescue many aspects of England's rural culture from obliteration by time and social change. He also portrays one young woman's negative experiences within this system, a move that reveals much of the gender inequality present in English culture at her time. Tess's character lives the life of an individual who is doomed both by patriarchal society's inflexibility and her own highly individualized experiences and actions in many ways. However, Tess's character may also provide great insight into the much broader plight of women in general, especially living in rural areas at the time. The moral censure Tess experiences when she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a child out of wedlock would have been very common for any woman in her situation during this time in England, but her experiences are amplified slightly, as if by the use of this narrative technique to construct tragic fiction Hardy wished to demonstrate the worst possible effects Victorian society's gender discrimination in moral standards and the treatment of individuals might have. Regardless of how one reads Tess's culpability in her own demise, the fact remains that Tess, along with essentially all her female contemporaries living in England,

experienced some form of oppression at the hands of a male-dominated social hierarchy. This theme remains visible throughout Hardy's fiction as one of the author's main focal points.

Specific examples of Hardy's fiction that accord with ecofeminist critical perspectives abound in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) as the main female character, Tess Durbeyfield, is repeatedly victimized (perhaps the word "oppressed" provides a better descriptor for those who do not wish to label Tess a victim due to the efforts she makes on her own behalf) by various men in her life. In the culmination of the novel, the downtrodden Tess eventually loses her life as a direct result of the violent actions she takes to free herself from the oppression she suffers from patriarchal dominance in the culture of the Victorian era. Tess's death stands out to the ecofeminist reader because the tragic event illustrates both the destruction of nature (because Tess is a part of the natural world) and the suppression of one young woman's life and freedom to a critical point at which she must cause destruction and subject herself to nearly certain death in order to escape.

An ecofeminist perspective is also likely to recognize the way in which Hardy's description of the natural world so often reflects the human tragedies found in his work, and Tess's story provides an excellent example of this model. When Tess is raped and becomes pregnant as a young woman, a situation for which she is condemned by patriarchal society's inflexible values while her rapist goes on with his life in the same state as it was before he raped her, nature itself reflects the darkness and confusion of this moment in her life. For instance, as Tess suffers through the social exclusion and resulting sense of shame that accompany her pregnancy, she takes frequent walks after dark. During these walks, Tess often feels that nature itself is judging and reprimanding her: "Walking among the sleeping birds in the hedge, 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” (Hardy, *Tess* 103). Hardy’s description of Tess’s thoughts and the nature that surrounds her, while seeming to be entirely separate from her, actually cements the author’s tendency to link women to nature because his next statement indicates clearly that Tess is not truly an entity divided from nature in any way: “But all the while she was making a distinction where there was no difference. Feeling herself in antagonism she was quite in accord. She had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law know to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly” (Hardy, *Tess* 103). Hardy clarifies that Tess has merely broken a rule invented by humans, one that does not apply to the natural world in any real way, and his assertion of unity between mankind and nature implies that patriarchal society’s moral code, not Tess or nature itself, is wrong and damaging.

Hardy’s descriptions of overworked animals and other such features of the natural world permanently altered from its original form for the sake of human convenience also support an ecofeminist reading. Each of these depictions is a clear example of nature being destroyed by patriarchal society, and when a domesticated animal dies or natural processes fail due to environmental alterations made for human benefit, the destruction takes on a particularly literal form. *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* contains several powerful examples of such casualties of patriarchal society’s ongoing attempts to improve the situation of humans through the manipulation of the natural world, but one of the most powerful is the death of the Durbeyfield family’s horse. Prince, an overworked beast of burden, is killed in an accident with a speeding mail cart while Tess and her brother, both mere children, drowsily attempt to assure their family’s financial survival by driving bee hives to market before dawn (Hardy, *Tess* 37-41). Prince’s is a life that ecofeminist theory would consider a clear case of nature being ravaged and

destroyed by patriarchy. Additionally, the fact that Tess is forced to perform the roles of driver and instigator in the horse's death create in her an unwilling accomplice, and her actions are inherently destructive to nature because they commodify the beehives and bees and alter the insects' existence in a negative manner to satisfy mankind's selfish purposes. Tess's tragically coerced transgressions occur due to both her father's irresponsible drunkenness the previous evening and the generally oppressed states of nature and women in patriarchal society. Tess is bound by the patriarchal conventions of duty and obedience to her father, so she is also oppressed into assisting in the destruction of nature through her involuntary contribution to the horse's demise.

Patriarchal oppression forces Tess to carry out the destruction of nature when she transports the beehives and takes part in the accident that kills Prince, and her situation in fact accords perfectly with Greta Gaard's assertion that men are encouraged by society to focus on their rights, while women are tied to responsibilities. Universal privileges including the freedom to exist independently (or the freedom from misuse and/or destruction for many non-living, natural parts of reality) and the right to existential recognition from the rest of the world ecofeminism asserts all people and every portion of nature should receive are not afforded to Tess (as a woman), to her brother (as a child), and to Prince (as an animal). These rights are unjustly withheld from Tess, her younger sibling, and the horse they depend upon so greatly as Tess's father's identical rights are allowed to take precedence solely because he is a male member of an oppressively patriarchal society. This simultaneous suppression of the inherent rights and respect due two non-dominant citizens and the concurrent destruction of a portion of the natural world provides justification for ecofeminist theory's linking of the women's negative treatment to the destruction and misuse of nature. The relationship between women and nature

hinges upon analysis identifying patriarchal dominance as the cause of both problems, as Gaard states:

Drawing on the insights of ecology, feminism, and socialism, ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature. (Gaard, *Ecofeminism* 1)

The interdisciplinary nature of ecofeminist criticism is one of its greatest strengths because its theories tend to acknowledge and analyze many different sides of the issues it addresses, allowing the practitioners of ecofeminist studies and their audience a more comprehensive, realistic view of whatever subject may be addressed.

Hardy's narration of Prince's death is also notable as the author provides his reader many bloody details regarding the deplorable event while maintaining a tone of exceptional respect for Prince; however, his words also accentuate the horse's inability to defend himself against misuse and eventual slaughter at the hands of patriarchal society, and the tragic fall of a natural creature from the assumed natural autonomy of the undomesticated horse to servitude and eventual sacrifice at the altar of mankind's self-worship, is a requisite part of patriarchal society's oppression. Hardy's sense of loss and the tragic pain Tess feels at her own helplessness and the loss of a tool vital to her family's survival stand out in the precise, evocative words Hardy chooses to describe the horse's gory death: "The pointed shaft of the cart had entered the breast of the unhappy Prince like a sword, and from the wound his life's blood was spouting in a

stream, and falling with a hiss into the road....Prince lay alongside still and stark, his eyes half open, the hole in his chest looking scarcely large enough to have let out all that had animated him” (Hardy, *Tess* 40).

Hardy’s use of sound in his description of Prince’s hemorrhagic demise, along with the sympathetic way in which the author describes Prince’s eyes and his wound, create an unavoidably grotesque, heart-wrenching mental image for the reader. Hardy’s efforts to make this event as realistic as possible for his reader reveal the writer’s intention to make his readers remember Prince’s death with sadness and horror, a conclusion most ecofeminist critics would likely endorse, or at least decline to protest. Hardy’s well-documented love of animals has been noted by many, and this aspect of Hardy’s character appeals to many ecocritics and ecofeminist critics alike: “Hardy’s love of, concern for and affinity with animals permeate his fiction.... [F]arm animals, in particular, abound in his novels. They are invariably treated sympathetically and frequently anthropomorphically” (Page, *Oxford* 8).

Hardy continues to highlight the unnecessary brutality of Prince’s death as he describes the horse’s removal plainly enough, yet he uses powerful imagery to ensure his readers’ emotions will be stirred by this travesty: “All that was left of Prince was now hoisted into the wagon he had formerly hauled, and with his hoofs in the air, and his shoes shining in the setting sunlight he retraced the eight or nine miles to Marlott” (Hardy, *Tess* 41). The removal of Prince’s lifeless body is unceremonious at best, and many readers may be shocked by the callousness represented by such treatment of a dead animal as the horse is simply carted away like a heap of trash rather than a living being recently deceased. An ecofeminist perspective might cite this demonstration of disrespect for a non-human life as a symptom of mankind’s lack of respect for nature, an attitude which allows humans to destroy much of the natural world with virtually no

remorse. Such an attitude is explicit in several other portions of the novel narrating nature's destruction.

Hardy writes evocatively of the carnage left behind by male hunters, and Tess encounters their tormented prey, a relatively large number of mortally wounded pheasants that the compassionate young woman begins euthanizing one by one to end their inhumane suffering (Hardy, *Tess* 315). Hunting would have been widely condoned by society during the Victorian era, and despite the obvious destruction of nature and the brutality represented by the act of killing animals for food or sport, patriarchal society continued to advocate hunting as a noble pastime for men, especially those from the upper socioeconomic classes. Disparity is manifest in the differences between Tess's point of view and place in society as a working class female and the social positions of the men who have so brutally wounded the birds and left them to die of blood loss or another equally cruel consequence of the gunfire's catastrophic effects:

She had occasionally caught glimpses of these men in girlhood, looking over hedges, or peering through bushes, and pointing their guns, strangely accoutered, a bloodthirsty light in their eyes. She had been told that, rough and brutal as they seemed just then, they were not like this all year round, but were, in fact, quite civil persons during certain weeks of autumn and winter, when, like the inhabitants of the Malay Peninsula, they ran amuck, and made it their purpose to destroy life—in this case harmless feathered creatures, brought into being by artificial means solely to gratify these propensities—at once so unmannerly and so unchivalrous towards their weaker fellows in Nature's teeming family. (Hardy, *Tess* 315)

The insight the narrator offers into Tess's experiences with hunters reveals a great sense of alienation; the hunters are so different from Tess that she barely recognizes them as human, viewing them as foreign and dangerous. This passage also reveals a sense of unity in nature, viewing the environment and its inhabitants as a single, complex system made up of many life forms, including humans. Such a cooperative, comprehensive interpretation of reality and the acceptable parameters for humans' relationships with the natural world are frequently advocated by ecofeminist theorists, especially in regard to self vs. other issues, such as those discussed by Patrick Murphy in *Literature, Nature, and Other* and Jane Thomas's work *Thomas Hardy, Femininity and Dissent: Reassessing the 'Minor' Novels*, along with many other critical works.

Hardy himself likely looked at the world from much the same perspective as that shared by his narrator and Tess, seeing all living beings interconnected to the larger natural world but with a delicate balance requiring propriety of action on the part of humans if nature is not to be damaged severely or destroyed. Unfortunately for Tess's character, the world she inhabits is far from this ideal, and in addition to her personal miseries suffered due to patriarchal oppression, she must repeatedly witness the misuse and destruction of the very parts of nature she thinks of as composing a massive family to which she belongs. Hardy lived in a world very similar to that of Tess, and he also struggled with the damage done to women and nature by patriarchy. He appears to have especially despised the destruction of nature for human entertainment rather than actual human needs. Hardy spoke out against those sports and pastimes resulting in injury or ruin for any part of the natural environment (especially those constituting animal cruelty), asserting that such activities were purely unnecessary, barbaric, and destructive: "His press correspondence included opposition to circuses and, above all, hunting, (both in Britain and of big game), an activity he regarded as being in a class of its own" (Page, *Oxford* 9). Hardy's own

aversion to the butchery of hunting is reflected in Tess's character, and her fear of the men who hunt forms a discernible link between social phenomenon hazardous to nature and those that may also result in harm for women.

Precisely the same unremorseful sense of entitlement that enables patriarchal society's destruction of nature is almost always present in the minds of those who contribute to the subjugation of women, and Angel Clare provides a startling example of patriarchy's basis in such a mindset. Tess is obviously injured by Alec when he rapes her and simultaneously by her father because he is the man responsible for much of her family's crisis situation, a disastrous series of events that force Tess to her tormented existence and eventual tragic end. However, Tess actually receives the severest blows of patriarchal oppression from Angel Clare, a man readers might not readily identify as the novel's villain or most oppressive, injurious character.

However, most readers can agree with the statement that Hardy is quite critical and unsupportive of marriage, a theme that runs throughout the author's Wessex novels. The critique of marriage in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is so scathing as to earn the novel recognition as "Hardy's most damning indictment of feminine sexual subjection" (Thomas 113). Tess's marriage to Angel and his intolerant, hypocritical treatment of his wife eventually lead to her death, and in this way, Angel is more villainous than Alec. Alec is openly oppressive, but Angel covers his patriarchal dominance of Tess with hypocrisy, religious ideologies, misleading behavior, and promises of a love he simply cannot provide her. Several readings of this novel actually place the greatest blame for Tess's death (an obviously negative outcome of patriarchal dominance in the eyes of virtually all ecofeminist critics) on Angel Clare and consider him the person most culpable in Tess's failure to move beyond the tragedies she had suffered in the form of victimization through rape, unfair social treatment, and the loss of her child: "In fact she does

recover when she goes to Talbothays, but this recovery cannot be permanent, because there she meets Angel Clare, who becomes her second betrayer—„the one man on earth who had loved her purely, and who had believed in her as pure“” (M. Williams 93).

A shockingly large amount of Tess’s struggle is caused by marriage, and the problem her lack of virginity creates only in the eyes of an overly-critical society. Through this novel, Hardy attacks the unfair social values that are so frequently applied to women but not men. Hardy creates in Tess, through her openness and unbreakable spirit. His is a committed portrayal of the strength of female sexual desire and his determined onslaught on the unnecessary tyranny of Victorian conventions and morality. Such was Hardy’s liberating power to make a difference in the social situations he addressed, and his final novel was no exception as it created a great deal of discomfort for many readers: however, the powerful reaction so many had to *Jude the Obscure* is precisely the kind of unrest required to create changes to society that may eventually become social evolution in a positive direction toward equality.

## CHAPTER 5

### *JUDE THE OBSCURE*

*Jude the Obscure* (1895), Hardy's final novel, has proven to be his most controversial, and the novel least well-received at the time of publication. Hardy's honest, non-judgmental portrayal of female sexuality and his depiction of marriage as an almost invariably harmful institution capable of ruining many lives and creating misery that frequently results in terrible events, such as a child killing his or her siblings in an effort to bring relief to his unmarried, socially outcast parents, were among the aspects of the novel with which the Victorian public took issue. One of Hardy's most vehement denigrators, Margaret Oliphant was a well-known novelist and a highly respected literary commentator during the Victorian era, and her condemnation of *Jude the Obscure* was a scathing series of insults as she picked apart the novel for its straightforward treatment of sexuality and its unabashed representation of human existence, both subjects she felt better left untouched by open discussion. Oliphant was so openly hostile toward Hardy and his work that today her criticism of *Jude the Obscure* has become her most widely-recognized piece of writing: "She decried the novel's depiction of marriage as „shameful," reviled the creation of the openly sexual Arabella („a human pig"), and characterized the whole enterprise as a product of „grossness, indecency, and horror" (O'Nealy 66-7). Indeed, Oliphant had nothing positive to say regarding Hardy's work, and her indignation provides an excellent historical reference for anyone wishing for a first-hand example of the Victorian era's customarily strict social norms prohibiting the open discussion of sexual matters, especially in a way that might seem sympathetic to the sexual, or even non-sexual, liberation of women from patriarchal dominance. Notably, Oliphant's firm stance on the side of allowing patriarchal dominance to continue subjugating women to men actually serves as an example of the negative

effects of such dominance on the social attitudes of even women who have experienced oppression first-hand, also making patriarchy's stranglehold on society virtually unbreakable.

Many Hardy biographers and literary critics blame the initial negative critical responses to the author's work for his decision to write poetry rather than fiction after the publication of *Jude the Obscure*: "It has been the hostile reception accorded to his last novel *Jude the Obscure* (1896) that induced Hardy to abandon fiction...and to devote his full time to writing poetry" (Whitehead 3). For the same reasons so many of Hardy's contemporaries criticized this novel so ruthlessly, it also affords a richer, more complex situation for analysis from an ecofeminist perspective than any of his earlier novels. The novel has received a great deal of attention from feminist perspectives because it highlights Hardy's "committed portrayal of the strength of female sexual desire and his determined onslaught on the unnecessary tyranny of Victorian conventions and morality" (Thomas 114).

Hardy uses individual characterization in his portrayal of women's struggles for sovereignty in the face of a society dominated by male power structures, and he manages to do so effectively and without over generalization or the use of any hindering stereotypes. The main female character, Sue Bridehead, embodies much of the novel's conflict as she struggles to determine who, if anyone, she wants to marry, while attempting to define her position and capabilities within patriarchal society. Sue's unwillingness either to marry Jude Fawley, a man with whom she has children, or to remain with her first husband appears to be the root of most of the problems she and her family experience; however, the real cause of her grief is patriarchal society's attempt to control her life by using her gender against her. Society tries to force her to choose only one man, marry him, and raise children in a traditional household. The pressure society is able to exert upon her is astounding and noticeably tyrannical: "Hardy also recognised

the almost inescapable coercive pressure to conform to the social idea, and *Jude the Obscure* is his most poignant critique of this pressure” (Thomas 104).

Sue manages to resist “the insurmountable difficulties that beset the pioneer spirit and the „comforting,“ at times irresistible pull of tradition and the urge to conform,” and both she and her unusually modern family suffer greatly at the hands of patriarchal society and its dictated codes of conduct as a result of her nonconformist life choices (Thomas 104). In fact, Sue’s powerful sense of her own sexual and personal sovereignty, as illustrated by her many non-traditional lifestyle choices, is disconcerting to much of patriarchal society, eventually managing to perturb even Fawley, a fellow social outcast and a man with relatively relaxed ties to tradition and patriarchal ideals.

Those features of *Jude the Obscure* that support feminist perspectives are often most apparent to readers, but the novel also contains numerous instances of patriarchal society causing the destruction of nature. The majority of these episodes may be related to the oppression of women or other minorities in some way, making an ecofeminist reading of the text plausible and logical. Some easily discernible examples include Hardy’s depictions of overworked horses pulling a load of coal and Jude’s youthful unwillingness to chase birds away from food intended for human use near the beginning of the novel. The young Jude shows an early inclination toward conservation and a relatively equitable mindset that assumes birds have the same right to thrive on nature’s bounty that humans so often cite: “He sounded the clacker till his arm ached, and at length his heart grew sympathetic with the birds” thwarted desires. . . . He ceased his rattling, and they alighted anew” (Hardy, *Jude* 15). Jude goes on to address the birds directly: “You shall have some dinner—you shall. There is enough for us all. Farmer Troutham can afford to let you have some” (Hardy, *Jude* 15). In a further showing of his regard for nature as

humanity's equal, Jude "could scarcely bear to see trees cut down or lopped, from a fancy that it hurt them; and late pruning, when the sap was up and the tree bled profusely, had been a positive grief to him in infancy" (Hardy, *Jude* 17).

Unfortunately for Jude, his consideration and sympathy for the plight of nature are not states of mind that patriarchal society approves, and his sensitivity is labeled a flaw: "This weakness of character, as it may be called, suggested that he was the sort of man who was born to ache a good deal before the fall of the curtain upon his unnecessary life should signify that all was well with him again" (Hardy, *Jude* 17).

Surely the most tragic and shocking example of patriarchy's potential to cause great harm, the deaths of Jude and Sue's children, must be viewed as destruction of the natural world at its worst because the people affected are all integral parts of nature as living beings. Additionally, these innocents are essentially forced into complicity in their own demise by society's malice toward those who violate social norms through no choice of their own; the children have no control over the actions of their parents and are blameless in their births to their unwed parents. However, one must avoid placing any real blame upon Jude and Sue because the direct cause of this family's strife and eventual loss of life are the closed-minded, negative judgments forced upon the family by a male-dominated society incapable of accepting such a non-traditional family. The eldest child from Jude's first marriage, a boy referred to as "Little Father Time" due to his appearance of old age both in body and spirit, surely would not have felt his own existence and that of his half-siblings so cumbersome as to necessitate ending all their lives if society had not created so many hurdles for the family through unfairly harsh judgment and corresponding mistreatment.

The basic situation leading up to the shocking scene in which the reader learns of Little Father Time's murder of his siblings, followed by his own suicide, is one of disheartening discrimination as the family searches in vain for rental housing in which they may all live under one roof as a family. Sue and Jude are not married, a condition that causes potential lessors to shun the family out of fear of society's judgment against them for endorsing such supposed immorality. Sue is also visibly pregnant at the time of this quest for a place in society, making the family even less desirable as tenants (Hardy, *Jude* 331-42). This section of the novel also contains a brilliant example of multiple ways in which marriage is detrimental to women. Sue does actually manage to secure lodging for herself and her children, but their reprieve is short-lived as the group is forced into the street after only one day of shelter due to objections made against their tenancy by the husband of the woman who rented to them the day before (Hardy, *Jude* 340). Sue gives in to the woman's request for a rather odd reason, considering her personal dislike for the institution of marriage: "Though she knew she was entitled to the lodging for a week, Sue did not wish to create a disturbance between the wife and husband, and she said she would leave as requested" (Hardy, *Jude* 340). In this instance, Sue defers to the married woman to avoid causing conflict in the landlord's marriage, but the married woman only objects to the family's presence because of control exerted over her by her husband. Patriarchal dominance is two-fold in this event, exerting control over the unmarried Sue by the married landlady and allowing the landlady's husband to dominate her (the landlady's) will with his own. Sue's submission to patriarchal dominance in this incident may foreshadow her inability to control the oppressive actions of a male-dominated society or prevent the tragic deaths of her children due to unfair social norms. However, these events do not entirely destroy Sue, and their eventual

outcomes may be analytically useful in determining Hardy's motives in writing this work of tragic fiction as he did.

Hardy's representation of such an extreme event as a child murder/suicide in response to the relatively common situation of patriarchal society dictating the forms in which a family may exist and be respected as such, coupled with the accompanying negative reception of and discriminatory action against any family that fails to fit social norms, is telling in itself. Hardy must have felt strongly that society's patriarchal dominance over female sexuality and family structure caused a great deal more harm than good for humans in order to have crafted such a sensational tale in response to the issue. Indeed, many critics include *Jude the Obscure* in a group of ground-breaking feminist novels written near the end of the nineteenth century that collectively "address issues of marriage reform, free love, and women's right to sexual consent within marriage" and "ask the question that most liberal reformers of the earlier and mid-nineteenth century had very conspicuously not posed: Was marriage by its very nature violent to women?" (SurrIDGE 189). The implications of this question for modern feminist theory are apparently vital.

Biographical information and much of Hardy's personal writing support an analysis identifying the author's point of view as very critical of the institution of marriage and its negative effects upon the sovereignty of the individual, and this theme in Hardy's work extends to include sound disapproval of many aspects of the Victorian era's signature inflexible sense of morality regarding the position of women in society. *Jude the Obscure* is often cited as Hardy's most open protest against restrictive Victorian social norms relating to women's sexuality and marriage:

The difference in *Jude*, Hardy's last polemical novel, is, fundamentally, one of emphasis. Sue's resistance to the notion that marriage should be the expressed goal of her sexuality is of central importance to the novel, and Hardy, now adopting a more openly heterodox stance than he had felt permissible in earlier works, stands openly and defiantly behind her...Sue's crushing defeat as the unhappy Mrs. Phillotson does not eclipse either her rebellious voice or her heartfelt principles: her ineluctable truths alone outlive her tergiversation.

(Morgan 110-1)

As apparent as Hardy's characterization of Sue makes his stance against marriage as a required social sanction authorizing human love, perhaps an even more comprehensive illustration of Hardy's take on the broader set of Victorian morality as a whole and its constraining effects upon human relationships comes in his response to Oliphant's harsh criticism of *Jude the Obscure* as immoral and offensive. Hardy's response places his own position in the realm of modernism and renounces the opinions of his critic, opinions typical of social norms during the Victorian era, as outdated and overly restrictive: "His contemptuous dismissal of her as „propriety and primness incarnate“ summed up the way many modernists saw her: an Eminent Victorian relic whose very name—MRS. Oliphant—reeked of the respectability of antimacassars, horsehair sofas, and whale-bone corsets" (O'Nealy 67). In either a poignant coincidence or a representative example of the Victorian culture's penchant for destroying nature, two of the three Victorian hallmarks of antiquity constitute examples of humans altering nature for their own devices.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Labeling Hardy a true ecofeminist theorist or author, either conscious or unconscious in his beliefs, potentially risks overstepping the factual support available biographically and from varying analyses of those aspects of Hardy's character evident in his tragic fiction. However, an ecofeminist reading of these novels and a survey of Hardy's biographical experiences with female oppression and loss of rural culture to urbanization provides greater insight into the personal and social conflicts that led Hardy to create such realistic, heart-wrenchingly tragic novels, enacted by characters one virtually cannot avoid thinking of as more than fictional beings, but actual people who collectively refuse to conform to their era's overly constraining social norms. In other words, by looking through an ecofeminist lens, one may learn which factors contributed most to Hardy's visionary, modern style and his penchant for paining readers, regardless of time or human condition, with an inescapable sense of utter sorrow and something very near individual hopelessness. What made Hardy the tragedian tick? Should readers respond (as so many have and still do) with an urgent attempt to seek cover by any available means, as if the ticking of Hardy's tragic, literary soul was in reality that of a bomb set to explode imminently, an annihilation triggered by society's inescapable evolution and growth locked in painful conflict with a stubborn refusal to relinquish its increasingly outdated, hypocritical sense of morality?

Despite the temporal distance separating Hardy's fiction from today's critic, an ecofeminist reading of his work is relevant both from a revisionist standpoint and for possible historical insight one may gain if considering Hardy's writing an early instance of the plight of women and nature intersecting. Additionally, a slightly more sentimental point in favor of

reading Hardy through an ecofeminist lens also presents itself: Such a reading may add to existing Hardy criticism another set of long-awaited, supportive conclusions, ones potentially forming a chorus of voices defending Hardy's work (posthumously of course) against the scathing criticism the author endured during his lifetime. Hardy's startlingly open discussion of such issues as the vitality of un-spoiled nature and the sovereign rights of women to control their own lives (especially those aspects of life related to sexuality) caused some of Hardy's contemporaries to condemn his writing, even labeling it pornographic, and dismiss his work as needlessly graphic or inflammatory. However, an ecofeminist reading clearly reveals in Hardy's tragic fiction both instances of useful social criticism and commendable representations of the beauty and intrinsic value of the natural world and its inhabitants as they struggle against a male-dominated social structure in the hopes of eventually overcoming patriarchal dominance and its destructive material outcomes.

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