Victorian ideology and the discourse of gender in Thomas Hardy's 
The Woodlanders and the Return Of The Native

Juliana Payne

Edith Cowan University

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Victorian Ideology and the Discourse of Gender in Thomas Hardy's The Woodlanders and The Return of the Native

by

JULIANA PAYNE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of Bachelor of Arts (English Studies) Honours Degree

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USE OF THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This analysis will focus on the perceived harmony or disjunction between Hardy's representation of women in his fiction, and the middle class ideologies of gender difference and sexuality during what is referred to as the Victorian period, roughly the 1840s to the 1880s. The parameters of the dominant middle class ideology are established, as certain ideas will be held to be predominant or widely accepted at a given time. The cultural generation of assumptions and beliefs, erroneous or factual is also considered as an important dimension of the development of an ideology which guides the behaviour of and influences the members of the society. The aim of this thesis is to ascertain to what extent Hardy subverts the dominant ideology, and how he is involved in contesting the conventional contemporary representations of women. Part of this analysis will also describe the ways in which Hardy succumbs to the demands of the ideology and is unable to break free from the circumscribed artistic limits of the nineteenth-century novel.

One of the thesis' tasks is to examine how Hardy traverses the enormous gap between Victorian domestic ideology and the realities of everyday life. The ideals and contradictions of the sexual and social ideologies of the time will be examined as they influence both the
presentation and the contesting of stereotypical images of women in the two novels. A significant part of the thesis concentrates on the results of the Victorian polarisation of male and female spheres of life into binary opposites, and how these ideas are manifested in Hardy’s works.

The thesis examines Hardy’s treatment of the emotional, sexual and intellectual conflicts within the institution of marriage, and his concentration on marital breakdown and sexual discord. It shows how Hardy is opposed to the mythic idealisation of marriage. Stemming from this, some analysis of Victorian commercialism and class concerns occurs, along with an examination of the important role that clothing, especially women’s, plays as a vehicle for both subverting and perpetuating the ideology.

Hardy’s portrayal of the physical nature of women is a significant part of the thesis. An analysis of Victorian middle and upper class perceptions of female physiology is undertaken to outline the contemporary gender differentiation and attitudes to sexuality of the period. It examines his attitudes to beauty and female sexuality, and the underlying ‘medicalisation’ of women’s sexuality by the institutions of the time. It notes Hardy’s often contradictory portrayal of female physique, strong and weak aspects being simultaneously present in his female characters. Many of the often erroneous assumptions about and stereotypes of women of the time will be noted, as they influence
Hardy's portrayals as well as his rebuttals of the contemporary ideals.

As products of the ideology, Hardy's works naturally embody many of the ineluctable features of that ideology. The sociological division between male and female and the confinement of women to domestic and personal spheres of life are both aspects of Hardy's novels, which he simultaneously deplores and supports. The thesis examines how Hardy deals with the conflict that often arose between women's prescribed roles and their desire for freedom and selfhood.

It also analyses Hardy's rejection of the stereotypes of sexuality and the 'double standard' of the time. His presentation of sexually exciting women and his condemnation of the ideology that denies autonomy and independence to women is examined to determine the extent of his commitment to these ideas. The thesis considers Hardy's level of acceptance of the dominant ideology, and highlights the ways in which he is able to expose the artificiality of the separate spheres whilst simultaneously perpetuating many of the assumptions, stereotypes and ideals of the ideology. It looks at the effects of the unresolvable dilemmas in his novels, the ways in which he attempts to provide alternative solutions to those prescribed by the ideology.
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate, without acknowledgement, any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature...........................................................................

Date.......................................................................................

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INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hardy's plots and characters rarely fulfilled Victorian ideological expectations. The unorthodoxy of his women characters, especially, often aroused vigorous critical and popular dissatisfaction with his novels at the time of their serialisation and publication. The aim of this thesis is to determine exactly how he subverted the dominant sexual ideology, and to what extent he was involved in what Poovey terms a 'cultural contestation' (1988, p.9) of the conventional representation of women.

This analysis will focus on the perceived harmony or disjunction between Hardy's representation of women in The Return of the Native (published 1878) and The Woodlanders (published 1887), and the middle class ideologies of gender difference and sexuality during what is referred to as the Victorian period, roughly the 1840s to the 1880s. The examination of Hardy's novels will entail a Foucauldian analysis of the unspoken 'archive' of constraints which govern writing and thinking by regulation and exclusion, an analysis only able to be achieved with the hindsight of historical perspective.

Jekel's critique (1986) of Hardy's female characters accepts them unequivocally as 'heroines', described with complexity as women who are independent, with obvious and developing sexual feelings.
She states that Hardy both admires his women and stresses their mental and physical equality with men. However, this is a sweeping claim, and does not always hold true. It is rather something that Hardy attempts, but the ideology’s unspoken archive of constraints prevents it. Similarly, Rosemarie Morgan (1988) enthusiastically lists his works which depict women with independence, power, vigour, strong sexuality, and intelligence. She outlines Hardy’s infringement of the social and literary conventions, and his cynicism towards marriage, but stops short of acknowledging the limits on his subversion. Susan Morgan (1989) also highlights Hardy’s placement of women at the centre of his novels’ consciousness, and his ability to describe strong, positive heroines. In both these cases, closer perusal enables one to distil from this material how Hardy’s radicalism is undermined by reactionary ideas and succumbs to the dictates of the dominant ideology.

Dyhouse (1978) notes that protesting heroines were scarce up until the 1860s, and that many novelists were unconcerned with life after the heroine was safely married off in the conclusion. This is one of the reasons why Hardy’s focus on married life as the pivotal subjects of his novels is outstanding, and why it therefore deserves closer attention to determine its relation to the ideology’s expectations and ideals of matrimony. His novels also contain a great number of ‘protesting’ heroines, and these two reasons make his works
sufficiently remarkable to warrant more detailed exegesis in the light of the dominant ideology and its demands, and what Hardy subsequently offers in his fiction.

Poole (1981) analyses how Hardy is particularly sensitive to the circumscribing effect of ‘men’s words’ in confining and enclosing women’s consciousness and bodies. His essay stresses how Hardy’s women are not as a rule obviously rebellious, and that the outsiders are not voluntarily outcast but are alienated by the society’s ideological demands. This thesis will attempt to define exactly how Hardy’s work fails to break free from the confining ideology, by exploring these concepts in closer detail.

Goode’s book (1988) deals more specifically with the manifestation of sexual politics in Hardy’s works, the depiction of blatant and covert exploitation and oppression of women at the time, including the ideas of woman as both victim and commodity. The extent to which a commercial discourse is apparent in *The Woodlanders* and *The Return of the Native* is examined in this thesis, along with the portrayals of women as commodities in the marriage market.

Humm (1984) raises the question of Hardy’s uncertainty towards his heroines and their place in society. She examines his use of the realist novel, authorial intervention and narrative disjunction to circumvent the conventional ‘comforting’ ending. She focuses on how
the identities of Hardy's women characters grow throughout the novels, rather than existing as given beings who do not change or develop, and his radical fusion of sensuality with intellect in women. Ultimately, she finds that men's expectations corrupt and eventually destroy the women at whom they are directed. Part of my task will be to explain exactly how this destruction comes about and what ideological conditions lead Hardy to these conclusions.

Stubbs (1981) sees in Hardy's works a fundamental contradiction: acknowledging the simultaneous existence of his modern consciousness with conventional archetypal characters provides a vital initiation to a study of his position with regard to the ideology. She states that the "Cultural and fictional stereotypes of women are certainly remodelled, but are unable to be fully transformed by male writers existing in the patriarchal Victorian society" (p.59). This thesis will examine exactly how the stereotypes are remodelled, and also the extent of any transformation, if any, of the contemporary ideals of womanhood. I will be plotting the persistence of the stereotypes of femininity, and eventually determining the extent of Hardy's ideological subversion of them.

Boumelha's analysis (1982) engages the relation of Hardy's fiction to contemporary ideologies of sexual difference and women's 'nature'. She too highlights the contradictions inherent in his works: the concurrent re-production and transformation of elements of the
ideology which shows Hardy both subverting and reasserting the discourse of sexuality. She reaffirms the importance of the historical context, a text being both a product and determinant of the time in which it is written.

Both Stubbs (1981) and Boumelha (1982) believe that it is the genre and form of the realist novel that limits Hardy's iconoclasm, but a more detailed examination of the discourse of sexuality will reveal whether or not the limitations pervade other elements of his novels: language, topoi, narrative voice.

I will undertake an analysis of the extent to which the ideology permeates the text in incidental and unconscious, as well as covert ways. Not only will Hardy's obvious struggles with the genre and his narrative be examined, but I will also attempt to explain how the covert fetters of which he may or may not have been aware operate to limit his subversion. It is worth reiterating that this sort of analysis is only possible with the benefit of historical distance with which one is able to perceive the work of the regulatory and excluding functions of the dominant ideology's discourse of gender. This thesis also looks at the ideology's exercise of power through its discursive practices, primarily in the discourse of sexuality and gender difference.

Rogers' essay (1975) exposes some of the minutiae of Hardy's representation of strong and positive women, who are still intellectual and emotional victims of their sex. She provides two interesting bases
from which to articulate a theory of Hardy's ideological subversion: his belief in the innate weakness of women evidenced in his generalisations and observations, and his use of the concepts of 'womanly' and 'manly', in which womanly invariably connotes inferiority. The texts will be considered in this light, in order to gauge the success of Hardy's struggle against a society unfavourable to women.

The many aspects of the dominant middle class Victorian ideology pertaining to this struggle will be grouped under three headings: 'material concerns', 'physical conceptions', and 'social considerations'. Following an overview and discussion of the Victorian society and middle class ideology, the first section will incorporate discussions of marriage, commercialism, and the gender-based discourse of clothing in the novels. Stemming from this, physical perceptions in the novels will be examined, such as concepts of beauty and femininity, attitudes to female sexuality and reproductive functions, and the medicalisation of women's sexual nature. The section on social considerations will include an analysis of the development of gender roles and the socialisation of women and men into 'separate spheres', the injustice and damage inflicted by the double standard, and the idea of women's inferiority as an innate quality, as these issues are incorporated into works of fiction by Hardy.
Stubbs (1981, p.3) states succinctly that the “enormous gap between the domestic ideology of Victorian England and the realities of everyday life” was most precisely experienced by the middle class. The ideals and contradictions of the sexual and social ideologies of this particular class at that time will be examined as they influence both the presentation and contesting of stereotypical images of women in the two works. Hardy’s texts will not be considered “reflections” or a “doubling” of Victorian history, but will be viewed as Boumelha has analysed them (1982, p.6): as experiences of history from within the ideology, simultaneously reproducing and transforming elements of the ideology in their fiction (ibid).

Aspects of character, plot, and figurative technique will be examined to determine how far Hardy is able to break from the bonds of middle class ideology in these novels. Both are primarily about the state of marriage: Hardy portrays various couples, within and without wedlock, who experience emotional and intellectual conflicts with the exacting demands of a strict ideology. Their reactions often reveal, indirectly or overtly, his own defiance or acceptance of the dominant middle class culture. This analysis will examine Hardy’s presentation of men and women, the extent to which that ideology pervaded his fiction, and the extent to which he subscribed to the prevailing discourse of sexuality.

My method will superimpose a theoretical framework of literary
production onto the texts, in order to explain rather than attempt to 'interpret' or 'evaluate' them. The intention is to examine and explain the relationship between the realism of the text and notions of historical reality as outlined by various sources. Attention given to the language of sexual discourse is important in determining how the text can in turn transform and be transformed by the dominant ideology.

The task of the thesis is to describe and interrogate rather than evaluate the text according to a preconceived belief in its inherent 'unity'. As a post structural approach, I intend to ask questions rather than provide 'answers' to the text, focusing on the differences between what the text says and what it thinks it says: the gaps or contradictions which arise unconsciously. Specifically, the texts will be approached from the perspective of feminist as reader; Lieberman (1972) asserts that the feminist approach to literary criticism must work towards revealing the "misconceptions, distortions, malicious as well as benevolent prejudices which frequently govern the depiction of women in literature" (p.328). The many conflicting critical attitudes towards Hardy's works are an inducement to closely examine just two of his novels, and endeavour to clarify the extent to which he is enveloped by the dominant Victorian sexual ideology, and the ways in which his writing struggles to break away from this.
1. VICTORIAN MIDDLE CLASS IDEOLOGY

Before embarking on an examination of the extent to which Thomas Hardy’s novels *The Woodlanders* and *The Return of the Native* break free from the dominant ideology in which they were written, it will be necessary to establish the parameters of that ideology. Historical ‘fact’ is a relative concept, but certain ideas will be postulated as being predominantly held or widely accepted at a given time; also known collectively by the term ‘culture’, these various ideas will be aggregated into the abstract concept of ‘Victorian ideology’. Culture is defined sociologically as:

> the set of definitions of reality held in common by people who share a distinctive way of life... a pattern of expectations about what are appropriate behaviours and beliefs for the members of the society.  
> (Andersen, 1988, p.74)

Andersen expands her definition and points out that eventually certain patterns and concepts are learned "to the point where it is no longer questioned" (*ibid*). A culture generates assumptions and beliefs which guide the behaviour of and influence members of the society.

‘ Ideology’ is the term that will be used throughout this discussion to indicate

> the complex system of representations by which people are inserted as individual subjects into the social formation.  
> (Boumelha, 1982, p5)

As detailed in her work, this is not a view of ideology as ‘illusory’
because it consists of real experience, but its obscuring function is recognised in that ideology provides "false resolutions" (ibid) of actual social problems. Boumelha states that an ideology represents social constructions and apparent resolutions as "obvious and natural" (ibid).

Poovey (1988) discusses what is probably the aspect of Victorian life which had the most far reaching ramifications: the distinct polarisation between the spheres of commercial and public life and their cultural opposites, the domestic and private spheres. Figes (1978, p.75) discusses at length the "growing division between the sphere of work and that of home" which evolved during the nineteenth century, and describes the increasing distance between the sequestered woman at leisure in the home and the social and commercial authority of the father/husband. According to Houghton (1957, p.343), the house was seen as the source of morality and virtue, a haven from the harshness of business and worldly demands, "a walled garden... a sacred place". In an examination of John Ruskin's "Of Queen's Gardens", Millet (1969) analyses the gender-based separate spheres which characterised the period. She finds Ruskin's work to be the "definitive expression" (1969, p.89) of the contemporary attitudes, and Houghton also calls it a "characteristic idealisation of love, women and the home in Victorian thought" (1957, p.343). Poovey (1988, p.4-6) discusses the "uneven construction" of contemporary representations of gender, and the phenomena of institutionalised social roles and
stereotypes based purely on a "binary model of difference articulated upon sex". This 'domestic ideal' was a vital part of the ideology which preserved male middle class economic power and the legitimacy of male primogeniture; the image of "feminised morality" sustained the appearance of middle class moral rectitude "without inhibiting production" (ibid, p.10).

Inherent in this is the remarkable, but in no way unique, division engendered between the sexes. The Victorian society was based on maintaining differences between men and women, and on ensuring their separation, purely on the grounds of gender and intrinsic notions of superiority and inferiority, and has been detailed in sociological and critical texts by such writers and critics as Houghton (1957), Vicinus (1972), Figes (1978), Stubbs (1981), Andersen (1988) and Poovey (1988). Although complex, it is possible to distil a number of discrete ideas and concepts out of the ideological morass of sexual and social segregation which governed middle class Victorian culture. The scope of this discussion is defined by these boundaries of perceived gender differences; however, economic and political issues are interwoven with socio-sexual ideas. Figes finds that the material dominance of the Victorian male was totally reliant on maintaining control of commercial and political aspects of society (1978, Ch 3). Male dominance perpetuated the culture and ideology which placed women in an untenable and contradictory position of intellectual and
physical inferiority, but which simultaneously idealised them in the abstract as morally superior. Millet's analysis of Ruskin's 'characteristic' viewpoint highlights these contradictions through her comparison of it with John Stuart Mill's "On the Subjection of Women" (1969, p.p88-127). Poovey undertakes a similar juxtaposition of ideas in her discussion of the paradoxical and irreconcilable images of woman as simultaneously the sinning Eve and the morally superior angel: she illustrates how frigidity and passivity are balanced against sexual aggression within the ideology which attempted to "smooth over" any graduations of difference through reductionism (1988, p.10, p.15).

The Victorian middle class exaltation of family life and domesticity, and its need to relegate women solely to this sphere of life, was the central pivot of the ideology. The dissemination and acceptance of the ideal of a "haven" away from the ravages of commercial life, described by both Houghton (1957, p.342-51) and Stubbs (1981, p.6-7), was used to justify many deprivations and limitations in women's lives. Figes (1978), Stubbs (1981) and Poovey (1988) assert that middle class women were removed and excluded from practical education and valued employment, and socially constructed into an ideal of genteel, ordered, idle, and overall, confined life. In this life centred around the home, their tasks were clearly delineated. Millet's summary (1969) of these tasks is apposite:
raise children and perpetuate the culture, cultivate a high standard of
morality and purity, refine qualities of self-abnegation and
self-sacrifice, concern oneself only with emotional and
relationship-based aspects of life, and support the husband in all
ventures willingly and submissively. Vicinus (1972) relates how these
women's dependence on their husbands or other male relatives was
encouraged and ensured through their exclusion from useful education
and the workforce; female inferiority and weakness was axiomatic, as
Figes (1978, p.92-134), Duffin (1978, p.26-57) and Delamont (1978,
p.134) have identified. Marriage was considered a sacred state: all
women were to aim for this as their most noble and admirable
aspiration. Remaining unmarried purposely was seen as a sin against
nature, and spinsterhood was a regrettable misfortune according to
Boone (1988, p.68), whose affirmation is echoed by Roberts (1972,
p.45-76) and Stubbs (1981, p.5). The nucleus of Victorian culture was
that family life be based on a married heterosexual couple, in which
the woman was dependent and contingent upon the husband.

Stubbs (1981, p.7) describes the expectations of the ideology
for middle class women: their lives were to be fulfilled and enriched
by an existence revolving around their husbands and children. The
ideology scourged dissension and tried to obliterate, through systematic
censorship and expurgation, any evidence or suggestions which
contradicted the dominant middle class ideology. Houghton (1957,
p.356) reveals the demands for censorship of the 'classics' and Stubbs includes a detailed examination of "the evasion and dishonesty" which arose in popular literature from the pressures of ideological censorship (1981, p.14-25). Roberts (1972) discusses and illustrates the ideological restrictions on Victorian art and the mass media of the day, elucidating how the interests of middle and upper class men were supported by the popular artists and writers eager to attain monetary reward for such reassurance of the ideology.

A woman's ideological role was to provide a restful and uncorrupted cushion for her husband's head on his return home from the harsh world of business and economic reality each night. Men, in turn, would respond appropriately with a form of idealisation of wife, mother and sister, according to both Houghton's (1957, p.346) and Stubbs' (1981 p7) descriptions of the society. A hybrid version of chivalry, Romanticism and goddess-worship was engendered, which Houghton shows divided middle class 'respectable' women from both their working class and their "fallen" sisters (1957, p.375); Stubbs pointedly notes that prostitutes were further denigrated and segregated from the realm of worshipped women (1981, p.10). The ideological stereotypes of the 'Angel in the House' and the dissipated and ruined prostitute dying in the street were oppressive and limiting for the women who laboured beneath them. It is pertinent that women were divided in this manner purely in terms of their perceived sexual status:
pure/corrupt, virginal daughter/faithful wife or fallen woman/prostitute. Woman’s sexuality was at once denied an existence by the dominant ideology, and was concurrently the determinant of her identity as either virgin, wife, mother or prostitute. Women were ultimately dependent on men for their status and condition, and the dichotomy was structured according to their sexual experience of men. Figes (1978) discusses at length the relativisation and denigration of women’s experience, as it was considered a lesser concept which was simply a flawed and incomplete version of men’s experiences, and her discussion is supported by Poovey (1988, p.7); women were simply seen as the unfortunate products of their ‘sex’, or as Jude Fawley puzzles in Jude the Obscure, "a fraction always wanting its integer". Duffin (1978) examines the numerous medical theories which described the enervating effects of the uterus and reproductive functions in determining a woman’s character and shortcomings, and Conway (1972, p.140) describes the contemporary attempts to connect sociology and biology to construct "principles of social organisation from biological models". Poovey (1988) affirms that the outcome of these ‘scientific’ approaches was unfailingly to discover women to be physically and intellectually inferior, significantly, because they were women.

Such rigid ideological demands had the result of developing a culture which was inherently at odds with itself. The women, who
were precariously balanced on the pedestals constructed by men, could not live up to the impossibly harsh ideals of femininity and womanhood being imposed on them (Stubbs, 1981, p.11). Sigsworth (1972, p.77) and Boumelha (1982, p.11) both concur with Stubbs' (1981, p.9) description of the effects of the sexual ideology on men. They distanced themselves from women, since it was difficult for them to relate to the stereotypes of purity and high morality which they had created, and took 'refuge' in fantasies and prostitutes. Emotional and sexual hypocrisy were the result, as documented in detail by Pearsall (1969). Stubbs outlines how the infamous 'double standard' grew and strengthened its hold as the ideology continued to disfigure and crush women's normal emotional and physical development (1981, p.7-9), and Houghton (1957, p.353) concurs in his acknowledgement that middle class women and girls were over-sheltered in a haze of sexual ignorance, half-truths and outright lies (Stubbs, 1981, p.12). Stone (1977, p.315-6) relates how boys and young men were hardly better educated, but were nevertheless encouraged to experiment and explore their physical desires and needs. The grossly incompatible aims of keeping 'respectable' women ignorant of sexuality whilst allowing men to have a relatively free rein in gratifying their physical desires were partly responsible for the ever-growing numbers of prostitutes, the phenomenon analysed by Sigsworth (1972), who were ostracised and disgraced by the very society which supported their existence. Millet's
work (1969) reveals how the authoritarian and censorial patriarchy continued to expound the glory of the flower of English womanhood, whilst blighting any potential it may have had to blossom, through hypocrisy, evasion and dishonesty.

Submissiveness, purity, fidelity, silence, sympathy and supportiveness were the desirable and necessary qualities of woman, according to Victorian ideology. Models of perfect womanhood were disseminated and promulgated throughout the culture and its art forms, as revealed by Millet (1969) and Roberts (1972). The dominant establishment was sustained and vindicated in a self-perpetuating cycle of censorship and arbitrary judgement, as outlined by both Houghton (1957, p.356) and Stubbs (1981, p.15). Figes' analysis (1978) supports the proposition that the [male] medical and biological scientists of the day sustained and perpetuated the ideology with fallacious and, at best, illogical essentialist theories of women's innate sickness, inferiority and dependence on men. Duffin (1978) addresses the complex interplay of ideology and 'science' which was structured to maintain the idea of women's inherent pathology, classifying women as either the consumptive, the hysteric, the neurotic, or the pre-natal, since pregnancy and menstruation were also considered 'illnesses'. Elaine and English Showalter (1972) examine the "violent revulsion from feminine physiology" which informs many of the taboos and erroneous beliefs surrounding menstruation during the nineteenth
century. These beliefs were used to justify women’s ‘innate’ weakness and unfitness for education, politics, commerce, public life and virtually any worthwhile or useful activity.

Houghton (1957, p.183) and Stone (1977, p.423) provide an account of the principles of commercialism which resulted in a striking increase in business activity during this period, and which have significant implications for the development of the ideology. Figes (1978, p.77) predicates that property was paramount, and a man’s wife and children were included in the inventory of his possessions. A ‘marriage market’ became prevalent, as people were more concerned with material and titular gain than personal attraction or compatibility. Women, however, were still expected to make the marriage relationship and the home their raison d’etre, regardless of how loveless or humiliating it became, an untenable position described by Stubbs (1981, p.9). Male concepts of illegitimacy and primogeniture dominated the ideology, and legal and social institutions, such as religion and marriage, held control over all aspects of women’s lives. Historical and sociological illustrations of these limitations are provided throughout the works of Houghton (1957), Branca (1975) and Stone (1977).
2. MATERIAL CONCERNS

A. CLOTHING

Items of clothing are mentioned often in both novels, but never as a simple description of a character's appearance. The details given are judiciously selected, and are used to enhance the expression of emotion, attitude and gender of a character. Marty South's character in The Woodlanders transcends the idea of a conventional Victorian woman who was always conscious of her clothing and appearance; consequently, her unconcern with her appearance and apparel as the novel progresses is notable. Initially, she is mortified by her appearance without her hair, when she is still hoping to attract Giles' attention as a lover. She hides it by trimming a bonnet in a 'femininely' clever way, but as she realises that Giles is emotionally lost to Grace she grows more careless of her "meagre black" gown (TW, p.42) and is oblivious to her unflattering garments (TW, p.34, 50). When Fitzpiers witnesses her wipe off the paint which has ruined her dress, her mind is preoccupied as though she did not care (TW, p.114): as a worker and a spinster, she must be more concerned with warmth, utility and economy than 'beauty'.
Her disinterested attitude to the possible attractions of clothing sets her apart from the Victorian expectations of women, and is part of the *topos* that apotheosises her at the conclusion of the novel: Hardy’s glorification of Marty’s asceticism and purity of spirit, her “abstract humanism” (*T.W.*, p.323). Trivial vanities and common concerns are shed in the final scene as she transcends these ‘womanly’ vanities. Conventional gender-based attributes are rejected by her unworldly person. Marty’s unconcern with clothing or fashion is just one of the keys to her noble spirit.

In another sense, using this scene to close the novel is a subversion of the convention of marriage described by Boone (1984). It harshly contrasts with Grace’s reunion with Fitzpiers; combined with the cynical commentary of Melbury’s workmen (*T.W.*, p.320-322), it highlights the perceived deficiencies of the existing institution of marriage, and is a satire of the traditional closure in which the heroine finds happiness with her true love.

Mrs Charmond has a shawl “loosely” thrown around her (*T.W.*, p.211) before she discovers the extent of the scandal of her relationship with Fitzpiers, expressing her heretofore careless attitude in concrete terms. Eustacia “flings” (*R.N.*, p.396) and “throws” (p.114) her shawls away from her, movements which connote her undisciplined character. The village maidens in both *The Return of the Native* (p.322) and *The Woodlanders* (p.142) wear light coloured and
"fluttering" gowns; Grace reminisces on the daintily dancing "sylph-like" girls at her school in light muslin dresses (TW, p.85). These references to carelessness, lightness and airiness reflect generalist assumptions of women's unstable, sensual and unreliable natures, as outlined by Figes (1978). To a certain extent, Hardy subscribes to these assumptions; Suke's immodesty of clothing (TW, p.193) immediately pinpoints her as a hussy, as Mrs Charmond's purple negligee, bare arms and cigarette (TW, p.175) immediately signify her as a temptress. These women are only two-dimensional figures according to Stubbs (1981, p.84-87); both are fairly standard figures of the perceived danger of wayward lust and unconfined female sexuality discussed by Poovey (1988, p.15). Clym questions Thomasin's light and summery clothing on the day of the maypoling (RN, 452), causing her to blush and feel confused. He immediately interprets her change in style to a wish to 'catch' a new husband, which was supposedly a woman's main preoccupation.

Hardy is concurrently able subtly to challenge these attitudes to women's characters. In one parallel between the novels, both Grace and Eustacia suffer cold, discomfort and illness because their boots are thin and ill-equipped to protect them from the climate (RN, p.189; TW, p.147). This is symbolic of women's contradictory position in Victorian ideology, for they were expected to conform to oppressive and harmful ideals. Olly Dowden's creaking stays (RN, p.72) and
Mrs Yeobright's "'long clothes'" (p.85) are representative of forms of confinement of women's bodies which reflected the stifling of their minds, graphically described by both Atkinson (1978) and Brownmiller (1986, p.54-76). Hardy aligns the restrictions on women's bodies with the damage to their intellects inflicted by the confinements of the dominant ideology, a comparison also noted by Delamont (1978).

Hardy challenges, too, the perceived 'triviality' of women's natures. In a parallel incident, both Grace and Eustacia are careless and unheeding of their appearances and clothing when something more important worries them; Grace walks through the mud and the plants in the garden to her father when she feels she cannot marry Fitzpiers (TW, p.159). Eustacia is uncaring of her hair or clothing being dishevelled when she returns to her grandfather's house upon separating from Clym (RN, p.397). Prior to that, she had also been unaware of the attraction of her appearance to Clym in a moment of great stress and emotional upheaval (p.395) when he confronts her with the cause of his mother's death. Hardy attempts to show that they are capable of deeper concerns than their appearances, but this fails to the extent that the women remain within their arbitrary ideological sphere of matters of the heart. Their fundamental concern in life was supposedly with their personal relationships, a limitation which will be discussed further on. Hardy adumbrates this in the persons of Mrs Charmond and Suke Damson who are referred to as
"Petticoat the First" and "Petticoat the Second" (TW, 235) in relation to Fitzpiers. These denigrating and contemptuous reductionist terms describe them as merely female accessories. In these terms they are supernumerary; their characters serve no other purpose than to be the reason for Fitzpiers' infidelity. No investigation of their motivations or deeper emotions is attempted; they are simply sexual receptacles for Fitzpiers' lust. In neither case does Hardy prefigure any reasons for their attachments to Fitzpiers; it is assumed that as women they are naturally attracted by his handsomeness and manner, since it was assumed that women were only impressed by superficial appearances, not real merit or worth. Hardy writes in The Woodlanders:

It had sometimes dimly occurred to [Giles]... that external phenomena - such as the lowness or height or colour of a hat, the fold of a coat, the make of a boot... - may have a great influence upon feminine opinion of a man's worth, so frequently founded on non-essentials; (p.52)

Although the point of view is Giles', the sentiments reflect those inseparable from the dominant ideology.

Diggory Venn's darning and stitching (p.130) are symbolic of his 'weaving' of much of the plot of The Return of the Native; the fabric of conflict and confrontation is created by his efforts. His omnipresent role in the novel and his 'reward', Thomasin, in the conclusion signify one of Hardy's contradictory attitudes: Morgan (1988; p67) has pointed out how he often obliquely expresses disapproval of Venn's unprincipled behaviour, but there are critical
opinions that suggest Venn is a benign ordering influence of the 'chaos' in the novel, such as Thurley (1975) and Sumner (1981). Morgan stresses (1988, p.68-69) that Venn's disrespectful and offhand treatment of Eustacia passes without authorial reprimand. By implication, his underhand tactics with Wildeve are implicitly sanctioned by the fact that they work (RN, 329-333). His ulterior motive is always stated as a noble one; his handsome looks and desire to see Thomasin safely married to his rival, in order to save her reputation, impart a facile dignity to his character, which belies his manipulative secrecy. His demonic and often arrogant characterisation betrays Hardy's dislike and disapprobation of Venn; metaphorically, Hardy is criticising the domination and destruction of women by the patriarchal ideology which is embodied and symbolised in Venn's character. The following passage reveals his implicit abhorrence for Venn's destruction of Eustacia.

A cream-coloured courser had used to visit this hill, a bird so rare that not more than a dozen have ever been seen in England; but a barbarian rested neither night nor day till he had shot the African truant, and after that event cream-coloured coursers thought fit to enter Egdon no more. (RN 141)

The metaphorical parallels in this quotation between Eustacia's exotic and coveted 'foreignness', which also signifies her sexual desirability, and Venn's predatory and destructive aspect are clear. This is also an indictment of the ideology that found it necessary to crush what was different and threatening in order to maintain a denuded, but 'safe',

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Description of clothing is a major determinant of femininity; the discourse of sexuality is tied up in Hardy’s presentation of women through their clothing. There is a discourse of clothing between genders; men’s shirts, greatcoats and hats are usually mentioned, and women’s bonnets, shawls, cloaks, veils, muffls, gloves, gowns and boots or slippers feature most often, a division of garments and their attributes which reflects the ‘separate spheres’. Men’s attire is minimal and functional; feminine qualities of clothing are seen as the added furbelows and decorations, the useless and frivolous attraction of embellishment, as described through the wryly humorous sequence of the village sweethearts competing in adding bows, scallops, and other ‘unmanly’ decorations to the mummers’ costumes in The Return of the Native (p.178-9). The practical male armour is trivialised by feminine enhancements, an idea which received wider currency in the ideology since femininity was equated with triviality. Additionally, Bullen (1986, p.114) notes that Eustacia’s appearance is softened and enhanced by her attire, whereas Clym’s is simple and practical, especially when he begins furzecutting. This difference in representation is part of the marked discourse of sexual difference between male and female characters.

The potential seductiveness of women’s clothing is featured often in both novels. The allure of women’s partly concealed faces and
bodies is exploited by Hardy. He tantalises the reader with glimpses of women, using flickering firelight or dimmed red-shaded lamps to accentuate their sexuality. Eustacia is revealed in fragments, by fire and moonlight (RN, p.104, p.106, p.114). Felice Charmond is seen by night, by shaded lamp, or in profile in her carriage (TW, p.102). Grace is more appealingly seductive to Fitzpiers' appreciation when she is "muffled up in her winter dress" (TW, p.299), suggestive of hidden favours rather than blatantly revealing them. Hardy only employs this technique in relation to women; male characters, such as Clym and Fitzpiers, are normally taken at face value. Only women are perceived to have 'layers' which must be peeled away to reveal the 'prize' beneath. In this light, gloves are potent images in his scenes of seduction, and veils also feature as sexual metaphors. In a very erotic scene, Fitzpiers "strips" (TW, p.201) off Mrs Charmond's glove and kisses her bare hand; in The Return of the Native, Charley's reward for helping Eustacia to the mumming is to caress and fondle her hand, sans respectable glove (RN, p.183). During their courtship, Clym and Eustacia love to walk "bare hand in bare hand" (RN, p.265), and Hardy makes a point of mentioning how Eustacia readily removes her gloves for Clym. Venn finds and treasures one of Thomasin's gloves, significant in that it has been intimately associated with a woman. In contrast to Eustacia, Thomasin modestly requests that Venn return her glove to her, as it is a symbol of both intimacy and modesty (RN,
Brownmiller (1986, p.69-70) writes that veils are a worldwide symbol of mysterious feminine sexuality... The veil is perceived as erotic when sexual guilt is perceived as erotic.

Hardy's women veil themselves when they wish to protect themselves from men or from recognition; lifting those veils is equated with real or desired sexual intimacy. On her first visit to Fitzpiers, Grace covers her face with a thick veil (TW, p.121), and his consequent intimacy with Mrs Charmond is referred to as "lifting the veil of Isis" (p.198). Eustacia lifts her veil to reveal her face to Wildeve on his wedding day (RN, p.221), confirming any doubts which may have existed about their sexual intimacy prior to his marriage (p.139), and reinforces her sexuality. A veil hides a woman's face, her eyes, lips, expression: in other words, her sexual attractions, reducing its potential threat to the patriarchal social order. Brownmiller (ibid) asserts that projecting the guilt on to the women enables the order to retain its hold over them, paradoxically raising the moral high hand over those who at other times are held up as paragons of virtue and superior morality.

Sensuality and seduction are often obliquely presented through metaphors involving clothing; Hardy was unable to offer explicit descriptions of sexuality for fear of commercial rejection or stringent censorship. Stubbs (1981, p.16) describes how tropes were therefore necessary to depict these ideologically 'dangerous' sequences.
Clothing is depicted as an extension or 'feeler' of one's body, as the brushing of clothing initiates sexual excitement between Grace and Fitzpiers (TW, p.127), and Grace and Giles, when he caresses a flower attached to her bodice (p.192). Eustacia's desire is aroused by Wildeve's "elegant" summer suit in comparison to Clym's rough furzecutting garb (RN, p.343). Hardy's creation and concentration on sensual women who were not simply prostitutes was unorthodox and subversive considering the strictures of the ideology, and artistic censorship. He struggled to break from the dichotomy of angel/whore but did not always succeed fully. At this stage of his development as a novelist, he still relied to an extent on archetypal characters, such as the 'good little housewife', Thomasin, the 'village hoyden', Suke, and the 'voluptuous seductress', Felice.

Sexuality for Hardy, in both sexes, is always destructive. Stubbs (1981, p.81-2) discusses the "connection Hardy invariably makes between sex and failure or death", within or without the legitimising institution of marriage. Felice and Suke, because of their sexual activities, are merely homewreckers, and the former adversely affects at least four other people's lives. Williams (1987, p.174) calls her a "predator" who deprives the other characters of what they need or love. Eustacia's sexual desire brings herself and three other people to death or ruin. Grace's appeal for Giles may not be initially sexual, but this soon manifests itself in his admiration of her physical qualities.
(TW, p.66) and later his passionate kiss (p.260). Eventually, the suppression of his desire leads directly to his death. Fitzpiers' wandering desires have no positive outcomes and Marty's 'triumph' in the novel's conclusion is hollow, achieved at the expense of her sexuality. These recurring portrayals of the pernicious effects of desire and sexual passion show that although he was often iconoclastic in his treatment of women and sexuality, Hardy's attitude to the latter was just as often informed by the aversive and fearful overtones of the dominant ideology.

Eustacia is likened to women who are literally unclothed in folklore or mythology: Canduales' wife (RN, p.145) and ancient goddesses (p.149). These comparisons stress her vulnerability to male power and manipulation. Canduales boasted of his wife's naked beauty and mortified and shamed her; goddesses are invariably pictured nude by male artists or with erotically draped robes. Eustacia's obsession with romantic love leaves her painfully exposed to the desires of Wildeve and Clym:

[Hardy] shows how cultivating the emotions, to the exclusion of every rational occupation, could overbalance into a dangerous pursuit of feeling for its own sake. In nineteenth-century society women were forced into just this position by the ideology which confined them to purely personal and emotional sources of satisfaction. 

(Stubbs, 1981, p.76)

Grace's situation is compared with Lady Godiva and Vashti (TW, p.205): Lady Godiva was forced to expose herself in public by a brutish husband, and Vashti was also ordered by her husband to reveal
herself in public. In both *The Woodlanders* and *The Return of the Native*, Hardy accentuates the injustice of a situation in which the innocent woman is victimised by gossip and scandal, through no fault of her own. The men escape such censure and are relatively free to pursue their sexual affairs, unharmed by popular disapproval, because women bore the social and moral stigmas. Thomasin is the person who falls ill because of the shame she feels over her failed marriage and its reflection on her reputation (*RN*, p.167); she fears a derisive skimmity ride (p.96) and keeps herself hidden from public view. Both Mrs Yeobright and Clym are mortified by the possibility of such a scandal, and implicitly blame Thomasin herself. Clym writes to his mother:

'It is too ridiculous that such a girl as Thomasin could so mortify us as to get jilted on the wedding-day. What has she done?' (p.214)

He automatically casts the blame for the mishap upon Thomasin, and worries about its effects on his social standing. Wildeve, whose fault it was originally that they could not marry when planned, goes about his business as usual without overt criticism or censure. Similarly, Grace Melbury lives a reclusive and secluded life within the confines of her father's house during Fitzpiers' affair with Felice: like Thomasin, *she* suffers physically and socially for her husband's sexual exploits (*TW*, p.244).

When Eustacia changes into the mummer's costume, she feels no embarrassment until Charley's "vigorous gaze" (*RN*, 184) reminds
her of her sexuality and shames her into blushing awkwardness. Thomasin, too, is made to blush and feel confused by Clym’s notice of her attractive summer clothes after her mourning (p.452). Morgan (1988, p.36) describes how men change women’s perceptions of themselves through their (men’s) gaze; women are made to feel shameful and vulnerable, and this gives men an incipient power over them. Male guilt over their own feelings of lust and sexual attraction is projected onto women, forcing them to feel guilt for the appeal of their sexuality: "the viewer... by his mode of regard, shape[s] the viewed". Morgan argues that women’s consequent guilt and shame "serve the interests of the male society" (ibid, p.48) by placing women in a situation of inferiority to men, dependent on men for outward approval. Wittenberg (1983, p.158) writes that Hardy’s women are fearful of the concentrated gaze of a man. This gaze is a virtual appropriation of the woman’s body and sexuality, without her acknowledged consent, and is another of the exercises of power by the dominant ideology over female awareness and experience.

Hardy also uses clothing as a determinant of a woman’s personality: women are often subject to their attire as a definition for themselves. Eustacia’s bonnet is a synecdoche for her person; Grace’s white muff and boa are tropic signifiers for her to Giles and Fitzpiers, as is her boot to her father; Mrs Charmond’s furs embody her persona and her social position. Marty’s formless gowns and scarves are
signifiers of her status and social condition. Cloaks and veils are signifiers, often ironically, of women's idealised or deflowered purity and chastity. The rustling of silk is prevalent throughout both novels as a metaphor for the feminine presence. The aural and tactile imagery of this creates an omnipresent atmosphere of femininity, one associated with the wealth, idleness and languour that 'silk' connotes. Paris is a city long associated with similar ideas, and the metaphor "the skirts of Paris" (RN, p.300) connotes some of the received assumptions of women's shallow and hedonistic natures that Ellmann notes in her expansive review of Western literature (1968). In contrast, the sternness of Egdon Heath is subconsciously and implicitly male, although Hardy only uses neutral pronouns when referring to it.

Eustacia feels lost and frustrated in her plan of charming Clym because she is deprived by her mumming costume at the party of her feminine accoutrements (RN, p.200). Mrs Charmond's clothing is carefully detailed on Fitzpiers' first visit to her (TW, p.175) as an important and inherent element of her charm and attraction, as it is for both Eustacia and Grace. The heath dwellers admire Eustacia's "dandy gowns" (RN, p.80), and Grace's fashionable clothing is inseparable from the new character she is perceived to have formed as a result of her genteel education. Glimpses of her attire always serve as signifiers for her presence and personality before she is fully seen (TW, p.65, p.75, p.95, p.160). After Eustacia has drowned, the
narrator identifies her as simply a "bundle of wet drapery" (RN, p.439), a tragic reduction of the fullness of her life and intelligence.

Whether overt or unconscious, Hardy's references to clothing form part of the discourse of sexuality, the separation of male and female 'spheres' of activity and emotion. Although he is emphatic and unmistakable in his disapproval and dislike of the inequality and rigidity of human relationships at the time, Hardy is unable to depict a satisfactory alternative to the Victorian framework of human relationships. He deplores the institutionalised discrimination against women perpetuated by the ideology, but can offer no more than his disapprobation.

B. MARRIAGE

Grace's narrow physical escape from the man-trap (TW, p.313) is an ironic description of her moral and emotional position in marriage; run as swiftly as she may, the cruel steel teeth still ensnare her skirts, gripping them as intractably as she is held by the legal and social trap. Hardy shows that this is a pernicious marriage in the holes torn in her skirts by the steel teeth. A further level of irony is revealed in the fact that the 'man-trap' (emphasis mine) was originally set for her wayward husband; he escapes any injury, and the brunt of
the shock and possible wounding is aimed at Grace. Boone (1984, p.70-1) considers how the Victorian ideal of marriage and domesticity was centred around the subjugation of women to the narrow confines of the home, where they simply lived to please their husbands, fathers or brothers. Until the laws were reformed, it also usually meant legal and economic subjugation through an unfair relinquishing of rights and possessions to one’s husband. In this light, the man-trap is a symbol of a deeper injustice than simply class prejudice, as Saunders contends (1974). The "world of debilitating social conventions" (ibid, p.529-31) has roots which undermine women’s intelligence and independence, a much more institutionalised debilitation than simply upper class snobbery or social divisions based on wealth. Hardy is highlighting the effects on a woman of an unfair and damaging marriage which bound her irrevocably to a dishonest and unfaithful husband, because as a woman she did not have the fundamental legal or social rights to redress a pernicious situation. Later in his career, Hardy refined his dissatisfaction with the marriage state, and wrote in Jude the Obscure:

> And so, standing before the aforesaid officiator, the two swore that at every other time of their lives till death took them, they would assuredly believe, feel, and desire precisely as they had believed, felt and desired during the few preceding weeks. What was as remarkable as the undertaking itself was the fact that nobody seemed at all surprised at what they swore. (p.102)

In The Woodlanders he develops ideas of the specific injustice to a woman such as Grace, who is left in legal, emotional and social limbo simply because her wayward husband was not cruel enough to warrant
a legal divorce.

Although referring specifically to *The Woodlanders*, Jacobus' observation on the reconstruction of the traditional courtship plot in Hardy also applies to *The Return of the Native*:

Ousted from its traditional place at the end of the novel, marriage ceases to be a resolution and instead becomes a mid point of instability and anticlimax. (1979, p.123)

Boumelha (1982, p.48) states that this was his first attempt to present marriage as a real, 'lived' situation, and within that, "sexual discord and marital breakdown". Progressively she notes that *The Woodlanders* is the first novel to deal directly with the potential tragedy in the "definitive and exclusive sexual commitment" demanded by Victorian social imperatives, and that Hardy undermines the notion of determined monogamy and fidelity through the formation and breakdown of many relationships in both novels which arise from "inconstant sexual desire" (*ibid*, p.107). Part of his subversion of the traditional format of the 'courtship' novel lies in the fact that women do not play passive and accepting roles in the many liaisons. Even the 'Daphnean' Grace Melbury is capable of initiating tentative advances towards Giles when she believes herself free from the marriage bond (*TW*, p.259-60). Another element of this is that courtship itself does not constitute the major portion of the novels' interest; his concern in *The Woodlanders* and *The Return of the Native* is with the marriage commitment itself and its imposition on people's lives. The
importance of Hardy’s ‘anti-marriage’ stand can be appreciated by acknowledging

The centrality of the notion of marriage to any analysis of the assumptions underlying the Victorian novel cannot be overestimated. (Poole, quoted in Boumelha, 1982, p.54)

The aborted marriage ceremony between Thomasin and Wildeve opens The Return of the Native, which is completed later in shame and secrecy. The central marriage relationship between Clym and Eustacia is plagued with discontent and disillusionment; it is based on mutual misconception and self-deceit. None of the peripheral marriages in either novel is even close to the ‘ideal’ union in the Victorian sense, as described by Houghton (1957, p.342-44). Of the unions in The Woodlanders, George Melbury feels that he ‘stole’ his first wife from her real lover; his second marriage is simply one of convenience. Felice Charmond’s is the stereotypical mismatch of a young mercenary actress and a rich old man. Marty South attaches herself in a sort of pseudo-marriage to a dead man, and the narrator specifically describes Suke Damson’s and Tim Tangs’ mutual disappointment with their marriage. In The Return of the Native, Thomasin’s and Wildeve’s marriage is doomed before it begins; and Boumelha highlights shades of discontent revealed by Mrs Yeobright over her union with a man socially below her (1982, p.51). Christian Cantle describes how his proposal of marriage meets with scorn and repulsion from the maiden who calls him a "‘maphrotight fool’" (RN,
p.76). Clearly, Hardy is fulfilling his own demand that contemporary novelists should have revealed marriage for the "catastrophe based on sexual relations as it is" (quoted in Stubbs, 1981, p.22). As Morgan (1988, p.xv) points out, Hardy was dedicatedly opposed to the mythic idealisation of marriage that Heilbrun states was perpetuated in most of the 'popular' novels (1977, p.163-4). The latter also indicates that he began to question the traditional acceptance of the institution of marriage while the ideology still did not 'permit' writing explicitly about sex (ibid, p.171). To some extent, this could explain the many shifts and disjunctions of narrative mode in The Woodlanders and the experiments with fictional modes in The Return of the Native analysed by Boumelha (1982, p.113-4). What she describes as "the problem of finding a satisfactory way of raising those questions" (ibid) is Hardy's attack on the conventional realist novel, his attempt to move beyond the dictates of middle class ideological expectations.

Hardy's dialectic is concerned with the inherent contradiction in the ideal Victorian marriage. On the one hand, the primary concerns of economics and class status outlined by Heilbrun (1977, p.163) and Calder (1984, p.44) governed the choice of a partner for the middle and upper classes, in a union which was supposed to become the central pivot of one's emotional and moral life. This was especially so for women; as the keepers of the home and hearth, they were expected to cultivate the emotional side of marriage to "fulfil"
themselves, according to Stubbs (1981, p.76). The ideology limited women to purely "personal and emotional sources of satisfaction" (ibid), and this was held to be sufficient to compensate for all its other restrictions. Hardy deplored the hypocrisy that glorified romantic love, whilst simultaneously maintaining the "intimate connection" between "marriage, money, class, property and sex" emphasised by Heilbrun (1977, p.163). In both *The Return of the Native* and *The Woodlanders*, he highlights differing aspects of the "cash/sex nexus", a phrase coined by Calder (1984) which can be expanded to include class and status in the currency of the 'marriage market'.

The burgeoning Victorian commercialism, described by Houghton (1957, p.183), incorporated all aspects of middle class sensibility; women were caught in the ideological emphasis on possession, status and reputation as they, too, were numbered amongst a man's goods and chattels:

By conceiving of marriage as the natural goal of love's progress and the home as the centre of life's most permanent values, the Victorian ethos sought to transform the otherwise potentially disruptive energy of passion into a stabilising convention of bourgeois society. (Boone, 1984, p.65)

For middle class Victorian women, barred from valued employment and denied self-sufficiency, both Calder (1984) and Poovey (1988) stress how marriage was the only 'career' that could support them financially in a socially acceptable manner. In both novels, Boumelha notes that the overwhelming problem for both Grace and Eustacia is
"who will be the chosen one?" (1982, p.51). The men, Clym, Fitzpiers, Giles and Melbury, lead wider lives involving considerations of intellect, economics and philosophy, such as which career to pursue, to which field of study to devote one's time, and how to make money and 'get on' in the world.

To some extent, these novels portray the ideological perception that women's lives should be solely concerned with love and matters of the heart. However, Marty South is a projection into both spheres; Hardy justifies this by bestowing on her a neutral sexual status, and placing her in a unique position among the women of the novels. Later, when her hope of marrying dissipates, she enters the conventional sexual limbo of old maids and governesses which served to confine and negate women's potentially disturbing sexuality. A woman was recognised as a 'sexual' being only within the safe, confined definitions of a wife or mother; unmarried or widowed women were not acknowledged as sexual, unless it was as a fallen woman or prostitute. Without the duties and role of a wife/mother, a woman was considered fundamentally useless, and was relegated to the margins of society as an embarrassing burden, as observed by both Boumelha and Poovey:
Marriage is the sole recognised index of status for a middle class woman... [who is] dependent upon a husband for the conferment of a social role. (Boumelha, 1982, p.110)

As [the ideology] represents it, woman's proper place is in a monogamous marriage; as the legal state necessary to make children legitimate, the transfer of property patrilineal, and female sexuality controllable, marriage is the source of women's 'respect and value'. (Poovey, 1988, p.43)

The working of the marriage market reduced women to objects; they 'sold' their virginity and accomplishments to the highest bidder. Hardy emphasises this strongly in The Woodlanders; Stubbs (1981, p.78-9) points out that Melbury's attitude to his daughter is that she is an expensive but worthwhile investment who will pay dividends of old blood, respectability and a gentleman son-in-law. Fitzpiers 'balances' up the social disadvantages versus economic gains of marrying Grace; he coolly executes a cost-benefit analysis involving status, money and his desire for her (TW, p.162). Thurley (1975, p.88) describes how women, symbolised by their possessions, such as a glove or ornament, become "objectified" as they are equated with the "thing". A woman becomes interchangeable with the objects which represent her, and is essentially reduced to the status of a mere possession.

Part of the commercial discourse of marriage includes the commodification of women. As monetary values were placed on all aspects of the marriage transaction, each party expected to 'gain' a profit in reputation, security, status, material goods or a combination of any and all of these. It was inevitable that women would be 'valued' according to their future rate of return. Hardy often
consciously engages in this discourse to satirise the aspects of marriage he deplores. Melbury’s overt references to Grace as part of his goods and chattels (TW, p.94-5), an "article", (p.68), and the constant association of her in his mind with money, value and profit (p.149) are a direct indictment of the wider society which blithely accepted such comparisons. Likewise, Fitzpiers and Giles both use terms of objectification in reference to Grace. Fitzpiers refers to her as a "thing" and an "object", the "tree" upon which his rainbow is projected (TW, p.117) and Giles calls her "good material" (p.119). After Melbury’s speech to him about Grace’s "value" (p.148-9), Fitzpiers’ wishes that she had not been made available so "cheaply", and metaphorically considers her a "pearl" (p.149) which he attempts to possess. Melbury continues the discourse by proprietorially exhorting Fitzpiers to "take her" (p.149) as he would an object for sale, as earlier he had said to Giles "She's yours" (p.68) in the way of an item over which they had bargained. Thurley also assumes this attitude by stating that Giles should have been "rewarded" with Grace (1975, p.123). His implicit support of the materiality which views women as prizes in a competition is a reversion to the limiting strictures of Victorian ideals.

One could question whether Hardy means to depict that the women in these novels fail as wives, or whether marriage itself in the Victorian setting has failed as an institution. Whilst the women are not
portrayed as perfections or ideals, often far from this, it is apparent that Hardy abhors the ideological dictates of marriage which are pernicious and damaging to them. Sumner (1981, p.86) asserts that it is not just the patriarchal attitude, but more importantly Grace's acceptance of it herself, that leads directly to her "ruined life". Marriage for a middle class woman meant further stifling of her intellect and denial of her sexuality, a rigorous curtailment of her personal development. Springer's emphasis (1977, p.136-7) on the boredom and private discontent which inevitably resulted highlights women's burdens as they were pressed into the limited roles available. The society inflicted dependence and enforced chastity with an innate threat of dire social punishment, through ostracism, for a woman's infidelity after marriage. Houghton (1957, p.356) clearly shows how much worse it was for a woman, from social, legal and ideological perspectives, to be unfaithful than for a man.

The opinions of Yeobright and Fitzpiers embody two of the prominent views of marriage. The former believes in the ideal that a woman should be satisfied with her home and husband, and harbour no ambitions for any other sphere of life. She should be content to maintain the home, bear children and uphold the family's morals with her purity of mind. The latter is a personification of the 'double standard' between men's and women's sexual relations. Clearly, Eustacia is the antithesis of the expectations of an ideal Victorian wife:
discontented, socially ambitious, amoral and childless, she singlehandedly overturns all the conventions of the perfect Victorian wife. Her most marked rebellion against tradition is, as Wright (1989) remarks, her powerful sexuality and her awareness of it. She does not scruple to use her sensuality to manipulate Wildeve and Clym, and is forcefully reminded of this when she feels frustrated in the mumming costume which deprives her of the power of feminine sexuality (RN, p.200). One could contend that it is a striking example of Boumelha's observation that the ideology forced women to need the "recognition" of a man to confirm their sexual identity (1982, p.55).

Within the form of the realist novel, however, Hardy is unable to move beyond marriage to alternatives; this is the limit of his subversion. Grace and Giles never consider anything but legal marriage as a possible basis for their relationship. Once married to Fitzpiers, Grace is irrevocably tied to him, and this is generally accepted without dissent; there was no other option within the patriarchal society in that form. Even in Jude the Obscure, when the mismatched couples secure divorces relatively easily, Jude's and Sue's troubled relationship does not 'succeed'. His exploration of an alternative relationship shows them struggling vainly for freedom within the rigid Victorian structures. Similarly, once Eustacia moved outside the marriage superstructure, there was no place for her simply because she was a woman; logically her death was the only possible
outcome for a woman who would not conform to the social and ideological demands of Victorian society. Eustacia’s overt sexuality marginalised her from the mainstream heath society, graphically illustrating Boumelha’s assertion (1982) that a woman’s overt sensuality was not ideologically acceptable.

Other women in The Woodlanders are not untainted by the discourse of commodification. Marty’s hair is a synecdoche for her person, as the barber sees her as an "impression-picture" (30) where her hair alone is distinct. By selling her hair to him, she metaphorically places a value on herself, in this case two sovereigns. Boumelha (1982) emphasises that Hardy imbues the action with a sexual overtone: Marty’s "deflowered visage" and "raped" locks lying "on a bed" (TW, p.38) signify the deeper significance of the transaction. Later when she is working with the men, and Fitzpiers admires her skill with the bark-stripping tool, she deprecates her ‘value’ because the men’s "‘time is worth more than mine’" (p.133). This is an important aspect of the ideological division of sex and value; the woman’s value was always held to be less than a man’s. In one of the comic episodes, Grammer Oliver sells her head to Fitzpiers for studying after she is dead (p.62). However, the sinister aspect of this is revealed when it is apparent that she is now under an ‘obligation’ to him because he had paid her. This is a distant but pertinent parallel to the marriage relationship in which women are dependent on and
therefore under obligation to men for their livelihoods.

In a significant moment in *The Return of the Native*, Venn sarcastically describes Eustacia as a "'horse'" which Wildeve has "'bought'" at the market: "'A beauty, with a white face and a mane as black as night'" that he "'leads'" home (*RN*, p.327). Even metaphorically, the male is still presented as the guiding hand to the woman. Clym thinks of Thomasin as "sweet material" about to be "wasted" on the heath (p.460). Waste, to Clym, means unmarried, which represents the predominant attitude identified by Boumelha (1982) and Poovey (1988) that a woman's true and only roles were wife and mother. When taken in conjunction with the rest of the plot, it can be seen that Thomasin is the stake for which Venn gambles on the heath with Wildeve (*RN*, p.290-4). Venn is actually 'buying' her when he hands over the guineas (p.295), and later, when he parades his new status and respectability (p.451), he is covertly offering a suitable price for Thomasin. She, knowing too well the invidious position of an unportioned woman, saves all her inheritance for her daughter's future, living a frugal life herself (*RN*, p.p448-50) to save the child from such a fate.

Stubbs' (1981, p.31, 67) analysis of the cult of the virtuous bride and the "cash value on virginity" shows how marriage served a double purpose in the superstructure of the ideology: chastity, or the appearance of it, was necessary in a woman to be marriageable, and

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once she was within the confines of the marriage, the moral and social
strictures on a women’s sexuality would ensure the legitimacy of
offspring and patrilineal inheritance of property, as described by both
Stubbs (*ibid*, p.10) and Poovey (1988). Giles feels a fleeting revulsion
at his perception of Grace’s altered sexual status, when he considers
the sexual implications of her marriage. Even though he claims to
love her as before, it is apparent that her non-virginal condition has
less appeal for him.

The inevitable change, though known to him, had not been heeded; and it
struck him into a momentary fixity. (TW, p.251)

Heilbrun (1987) supports Boone’s contention (1984) that the
marriage market, and society’s demand for suppressed and
anathematised sexuality meant that unruly and dangerous passions were
defused and confined within the legal state of matrimony. Boumelha
(1982, p.53) notes that Hardy draws attention to Eustacia’s state of
"sexual suspension" between the time of her sexual awakening and
being subsumed into the taming marital structure the society required.
As yet ‘unconfined’ by marriage, she is therefore ‘dangerous’ to the
dominant order which required women to be sexually confined and
circumscribed. Her refusal to be totally curtailed is the cause of her
misfortunes: she is misunderstood, outcast, and finally, destroyed by
the demands of the ideology she rejects.

Both Morgan (1988) and Boumelha (1982) discuss how

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women's sexuality was relativised, which allowed it no existence apart from a man and made its expression dependent on being married. Grace's purity increases her value in the market, as Stubbs points out (1981, p.31), because virginity was a highly prized commodity; Eustacia's relative promiscuity takes her outside conventional marriage 'transactions'. She is not 'given' away in the traditional manner; at all times she is mistress of herself and her relationships and is not a virgin when she marries. However, Hardy's judgement is that she could not therefore survive in a society to whose rules she was so antithetical. Her 'penalty' is death. Grace, conversely, is 'rewarded' with a husband and a place in society. The deeper irony, however, lies in the emotional quality of that place and the perceived value of living in the society. Grace is covertly 'condemned' to a life of misery with a philandering husband, in a society which encircles and effaces women's individuality, and in which she has no identity apart from her husband. In spite of the tragic conclusion of *The Return of the Native*, Hardy seems unconsciously to admire Eustacia's individuality and spirit, whilst feeling a sort of contemptuous pity for Grace's state. Herein lies his ambivalence to the ideology: Eustacia's unconventionality and rebelliousness is raised to tragic status, while Grace's surrender to the ideology's expectations is almost made ridiculous by the author's melodramatic treatment of it.

Stubbs (1981, p.61) quotes that Hardy's primary objection to
marriage was in the "irrevocability" of the contract. He wrote to Florence Heniker in October 1911, saying

but you know what I have thought for many years, that marriage should not thwart nature, and that when it does thwart nature it is no real marriage and the legal contract should therefore be as speedily cancelled as possible. Half the misery of human life would I think disappear if this were made easy.

(Millgate, 1990, p.246)

He felt that to prolong the union when the people involved had changed and become incompatible was 'unnatural', according to Stubbs (1981, p.61). In both the central marriages of *The Woodlanders* and *The Return of the Native*, the women marry without fully understanding the nature of their own sexuality; Grace is unaccountably tearful and distressed when in Fitzpiers' company (*TW*, p.134, p.156) and Eustacia discovers too late that Clym can never fulfil her passionate needs. As Heilbrun outlines, however, women could not possibly speak openly of their sexual experience or acknowledge their own sensuality (1977, p.173). It was therefore ideologically impossible for Grace or Eustacia to explore their own natures before being committed for life to men with whom they would not long remain physically or emotionally compatible.

Hardy's tentative presentation of the shortcomings of the Victorian marriage relationship gains confidence and strength in his representation of women's physical and sexual natures. Opening out from his portrayal of failed or unsatisfying marital relations, he attempts to break from the dominant censorship whilst, often
contradictorily, subscribing to the stereotypes and archetypes he purportedly abhors. Poole (1981, p.340) points out that it is "foolish" to argue that Hardy was completely free of the limitations of the middle class Victorian expectations; however, in many respects he was able unfailingly to depict situations and characters revelling in a new literary freedom and iconoclasm. Paradoxically, the fabric of his character representations is continually run through with the threads of traditional ideas and expectations. The tension between these modes of thought forms the crucial point of explanation of his novels. Sympathetic portrayals of women coincide with pejorative generalisations; an ambiguous stereotype is often presented as reality.

It is possible to gauge the depth and complexity of his engagement with the dominant ideology by examining the many ways in which Hardy both subverts and succumbs to its sexual discourse through his portrayal of the physical and sexual natures of the women in the two novels.

3. PHYSICAL PERCEPTIONS

The following astute and succinct observation, made by Virginia Woolf, precisely highlights the area of Hardy's fiction which is most influenced by and supportive of the dominant ideological
attitudes towards women:

However lovable and charming Bathsheba may be, still she is weak; however stubborn and illguided Henchard may be, still he is strong. This is a fundamental part of Hardy’s vision; the staple of many of his books. The woman is the weaker; and the fleshier, and she clings to the stronger and obscures his vision.

Woolf (1928), quoted in Draper (1975, p.73)

Yet aspects of his portrayal of the physical nature of women are also the most subversive of these attitudes. The main female characters of The Woodlanders and The Return of the Native, Eustacia, Thomasin, Felice and Grace are a varied collection of the more or less idealised images of female physical beauty of the time. The often contradictory aspects of Hardy’s portrayal of the female physique are explained to an extent by Duffin’s apposite summary of the writer’s attitude:

we find we have a body of criticism of women as a sex [in Hardy’s novels], over against which we have only, as a counterbalancing criticism of men, those examples of unfeeling egotism that were noted in Knight, Yeobright and Clare.

A possible conclusion - I think the most tenable one - to be drawn from the foregoing facts is that Hardy saw the ordinary woman as inferior to the ordinary man, but regarded what Mr Humberto Wolfe calls ‘the uncommon woman’ as the flower of humankind. (1967, p.237)

To the Victorian perceptions being examined, a woman’s physical characteristics were the determinants of her sex, viz. her nature as a woman. Her femininity and sexuality were inextricably associated with her female physiology and morphology. An analysis of Victorian middle and upper class perceptions of female physiology is fundamental to a study of gender differentiation and sexuality for the
period. It is worthwhile to note the attitudes of the accepted scientific theorists and medical practitioners of the middle years of the nineteenth century, in order to establish the basis of many widely held beliefs about the biological nature of women. Many of the often erroneous assumptions which were drawn will also be noted, as they influence Hardy's portrayals as well as his rebuttals of the contemporary ideals. The Victorian idealisation of feminine beauty and form is acknowledged by Pearsall (1969, p.102) and is an important consideration; one is able to trace deep roots of the Victorian worship of the 'fair' and 'comely' woman in Hardy's works. A woman's sexual desires were not often acknowledged or even recognised in the period in question; Hardy flouts the ideology by presenting desire as an undeniable feature of human nature, male and female, and bases this firmly in his characterisation of women with strong, healthy, natural bodies.

A. MEDICAL IDEOLOGY AND SEXUALITY

Poovey (1988) closely analyses the phenomenon of the quasi-religious discourse used by the Victorian medical profession to appropriate the right to judge and contain the natural functioning of women's bodies. Moral opprobrium attended all aspects of the
physician's analysis of female physiology; women were paradoxically believed to be simultaneously chaste and corrupt. Poovey (1988, p.32-3) describes how the ideology proclaimed middle and upper class women to be the guardians of moral rectitude and chaste domesticity, whilst warning of the seething desires within that needed constant checking to be contained and suppressed.

The economic rationalism and utilitarianism of the age were reflected in the scientific exercise of biologically locating and explaining feminine dependence and passivity. Haller and Haller (1974) and Poovey (1988) describe how it was thought that as biological laws could govern the nature of a race, so could solely physical qualities determine the nature of the difference between the sexes. Gender differences were explained biologically; notions of superiority and inferiority were firmly grounded in the physiological 'facts' of women's lesser body weight and brain volume compared to men's. However, it was in the area of reproductive functions that the medical, scientific and religious disciplines located the irrefutable 'proof' of the fallibility and inferiority of women's bodies, and hence women's natures and minds. Haller and Haller report on the notion that a woman's place in nature, and in society, "rested ultimately on biological laws" (1974, p.78).

The same historians (1974, p.62) also outline some of the scientific assertions of the period: it was believed by doctors that
women's evolutionary development was curtailed earlier than men's in order to preserve the energy needed for procreation, and this explained women's lesser brain volume. Doctors also expounded that 20 percent of women's energy was diverted from the brain to the uterus where it was spent in reproductive activity, according to Haller and Haller (1974, p.66), an explanation offered to account for women's lesser strength and 'natural' tendency to feel tired and faint easily. The female reproductive system both fascinated and repulsed male medical and lay sensibilities. Poovey (1988, p.35) outlines the Victorian attitude in which it was held that a woman's mind and body were governed and controlled by the functions of her reproductive organs, mainly the uterus.

Furthermore, it was held that a woman's "value" was manifested in the processes of gestation and childbirth (ibid), but the obvious importance of parturition to the survival of the race was undermined by the ideological work which proclaimed these functions to be pathological disorders. Pearsall (1969, p.204-207), Haller and Haller (1974, p.68-72) and Poovey 1988, p.37) examine the religious and scientific attitudes that declared middle class women to be essentially invalids, and that "diagnosed" menstruation, pregnancy and parturition as "disorders" (Poovey, 1988, p.37). Poovey (1988, p.26, 44) engages in a more detailed explanation of the ideological function of such assumptions and examines the struggle between religion and
medicine to appropriate the right to control women's natures and bodies. The often illogical and paradoxical arguments were debated between men of theology and medicine; women themselves were rarely capable of or allowed any redress. The male doctors and clerics who adhered to and disseminated these ideas held positions of respect and power, and, through the vicarious authority of religion and science, maintained the supremacy of their ideas by excluding opposition from the argument. The invalidism and passivity being propounded were qualities which supposedly 'naturally' precluded women from engaging in the discussion: less brain volume meant inferior intellects, weaker bodies meant they could not withstand the strain of sustained work or intellectual debate. Not surprisingly, these assumptions referred solely to middle and upper class women; Stearns (1972, Ch 6) describes how working women were expected to work just as hard and as long hours as their husbands, as well doing as the unpaid after hours work of housekeeping and childcare. Brownmiller (1986, p.149) concurs with this view, stating that

partial invalidism and bodily frailty were assumed to be the female's natural state, unless the female was a servant or factory worker. A lady's pregnancy was tantamount to an illness that demanded lengthy confinement, and menstruation was viewed as a chronic sickness.

Ideas stemming from the purportedly incontrovertible 'fact' of women's innate physical and intellectual inferiority to men, grew into widely accepted beliefs. Poovey (1988, p.36, 42) elucidates this aspect of the dominant ideology, outlining the ubiquitous belief in the extreme
delicacy of female sensibilities and susceptibility to decline under society's physical and emotional demands.

Critics often use the attitudes of contemporaries like William Acton and John Ruskin to characterise the ideology's negation of middle class women's sexual needs and desires. Boumelha (1982), Stubbs (1981), Haller and Haller (1974) and Millet (1969) concur in their descriptions of the denial and revilement of women's sexuality perpetrated through the ideological tenets of medicine, religion and culture. Men like Acton and Ruskin held forth on the natural modesty and chastity of gentlewomen; sexual desires or even thoughts of sexuality were held not to be part of their personalities. According to the exponents of these ideals and half-truths, sexual intercourse was a woman's duty to her husband and society, and she did not gain any pleasure from it. Boumelha (1982, p.15) points out that while some contemporary critics of such ideas believed in a woman's ability to feel passion and desire, they were quick to qualify such ideas by saying that only courtesans and prostitutes felt strong sexual desires. Implicit in this is Boumelha's perspicacious observation of male fears of inadequacy, the fear of a sexually insatiable wife. By ensuring that the belief in what she calls "female sexual anaesthesia" (1982, p.14) was accepted by both men and women, men were protecting themselves from fears of failure and insufficiency. She proceeds to describe other ideological versions of female sexuality, in which the paradoxical
recognition/denial of feminine sexual desire is prominent (1982, p.15). According to Boumelha, the essence of the ideological work was that women's sexuality must be kept dormant through repression and ignorance, for fear of 'corrupting' innocent and decent women by its arousal (*ibid*). The ideology did not deny the *existence* of desire, but was averse to *accepting* its valid presence in all women, thus maintaining another facet of inequality that relegated women to an inferior class.

Hardy's dialectical engagement with the assumptions of the ideology is an ambivalent one. He portrays physical qualities in his women which clearly refute the dictates of the ideology; often, however, his subversion is negated, either by the actions of the characters or qualifying commentary by the narrator which subscribe to erroneous beliefs in women's intellectual inferiority or physical incapability. A closer examination of his treatment of women in physical portrayals will reveal how incisive and acute was the observation made by Duffin (1967, p.237).

**B. PHYSICAL PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN**

Many of the physical characteristics imparted by Hardy to the female characters in *The Return of the Native* and *The Woodlanders*
are quite radical, considering the stereotypical heroines of the day, the "old fashioned heroine who has no occupation and exerts only a moral influence on events", described by Williams (1982, p.46). Hardy’s heroines exude a strong sense of their physical proximity; the influence of their physical presences is constantly felt by the other characters and by the reader. One of the recurring traits displayed by characters of both sexes is the manifestation of emotional disturbances in visible physical effects. The women flush hotly or blanch painfully; they sweat, cry, pant, feel sick, faint, and laugh out loud with equal vigour and naturalness, as when Grace Melbury sees Suke leaving Fitzpiers’ house at sunrise:

'I have been thinking about my position this morning...’ she began excitedly, trembling so that she could hardly stand. (TW, p.159)

Eustacia manifests strong physical reactions, especially at moments of crisis such as when Clym confronts her with her deception about his mother:

And while she looked the carmine flush with which warmth and sound sleep had suffused her cheeks and neck, dissolved from view and the death-like pallor in his face flew across into hers. (RN, p.389)

Hardy’s descriptions contain a mixture of both narrative distance and subjective details. The tangibility of the sensations involves the reader, but simultaneously maintains an arm’s-length detachment through the omniscient third person narrator. The prose is dramatic and dynamic because of the types of verbs and adverbs used: excitedly, trembling, dissolve, flew. The force of Felice’s realisation of the untenable
position she is in with Fitzpiers is mainly manifested in her physical reactions:

She became as heavy as lead... Her whole being seemed to dissolve in a sad powerlessness to do anything, and the sense of it made her lips tremulous and her closed eyes wet. (TW, p.185)

Even though she is a refined and mannered lady, the repulsion Grace feels for her husband is great enough to have physical effects:

but the conditions made her hesitate, and in a moment a cold sweat pervaded her at further sounds from the same quarter. (TW, p.277)

Images involving fluids and liquids are often used, imparting associations of melting or flowing. These connotations inform the ideological perceptions of female reactions, the belief in women’s susceptibility to excitement, and an inability to exert self-control. Again, Hardy invokes an unusual collocation of distance and subjectivity; the reader is simply an on-looker, but has some knowledge of their inner reactions through the manifestation of outward physiological effects, as in the description of Eustacia when she thinks Mrs Yeobright believes her to have accepted money from Wildeve:

The excited mother then withdrew, and Eustacia, panting, stood looking into the pool... She came indoors with her face flushed, and her eyes still showing traces of her recent excitement. (RN, p.305-6)

The quality of the tropes used and Hardy’s consistent reminders that these women are living, functioning animals imparts a vitality and vigour not often found in the demurely passive ideal heroine of the ‘popular’ novels and serials. Eustacia is described with an extremely
evocative image when she is likened to the manifestation of Venus and her accompanying odour:

When the disguised Queen of Love appeared before Aeneas a preternatural perfume accompanied her presence and betrayed her quality. If such a mysterious emanation ever was projected by the emotions of an earthly woman upon their object, it must have signified Eustacia’s presence to Yeobright now. (RN, p.199).

The olfactory stimulus of the simile imbues her with a highly tangible presence and existence that a simple visual trope could not have achieved.

Both Williams (1982) and Morgan (1988) point out that many of the women in these and other novels by Hardy engage in some kind of work for a living. The work they do gives the lie to the domestic ideal of the woman’s role existing solely for home and hearth. Contrary to this, Eustacia, Grace and Felice, as ‘fine ladies’, languish in the idle limbo of the middle or upper class woman, and Hardy implies that this is one of the causes of their emotional problems. The narrator says, somewhat disparagingly, of Eustacia that she is merely "filling up the spare hours of existence by idealizing Wildeve for want of a better object" (RN, p.123), and she sighs to herself, "'want of an object to live for - that's all is the matter with me!'" (RN, p.182). Felice, in her own words, does nothing but "'float about'" (TW, p.71), waiting for her next romantic attachment; Grace is a ‘vessel of emotion, going to empty itself on she knew not what’, (TW, p.69) awaiting a fate over which, for all intents and purposes, she has no
control. Conversely Thomasin, as the good little woman, is industrious and helpful, and is highly approved of by the narrator in comparison with the ambivalence he exhibits towards Eustacia.

Marty's manual work imparts a dignity to her character and status in *The Woodlanders*, which neither Grace nor Felice achieve in their educated and well-bred idleness; they both suffer the narrator's disapprobation at times, whereas Marty is able to maintain a constant, albeit lonely integrity throughout. However, even here, Marty's dexterity and skill in her manual work are directly compared with her potential talent for the conventional feminine artistic or musical pursuits, thereby endowing her work with a vicarious and somewhat dubious value. Hardy unconsciously denigrates her honest work by implying that the accomplishments of a genteel lady are more worthwhile than her manual labour.

Poole (1981, p.338) rightly claims that Hardy makes women's bodies "speak" because Hardy makes a point of describing women's physical forms in detail, and Bullen (1986, p.105) also discusses the precision of Hardy's descriptive technique, especially in relation to women. The nature of the tropes used imparts unusual but striking qualities to their bodies, and betrays Hardy's deep interest in and observation of female appearance and form, as seen in his initial description of Eustacia:

> She had Pagan eyes... partially hampered by their oppressive lids and
lashes;... the under lid was much fuller than it usually is with English women... the closing line of her lips formed, with almost geometric precision, the curve so well known in the arts of design as the cima-recta, or ogee... though full, each corner of her mouth was as clearly cut as the point of a spear. (RN, p.118-9)

The narrator has a voyeur’s pleasure in lingering on details, the key being the visual pleasure gained from gazing on beauty. Hardy dwells intimately on each feature, especially eyes and lips, and focuses on certain images and features as in this introduction to Grace’s attractiveness:

In her small, delicate mouth... there was a gentleness... She had well formed eyebrows which... would probably have been done in Proots’ or Vandyke brown. (TW, p.53)

It is usually only in describing women’s appearances that Hardy evinces his susceptibility to the thrill of the distant chase, a delight in elusive eroticism and tantalising unattainability. In this discourse of gender, a woman’s expressiveness is paramount, not her instrumentality. Hardy most often describes their outward images, and he selects certain details to suggest and tantalise, especially in relation to his unconventional characters like the free living, sensual Felice:

her almond eyes - those long eyes so common to the angelic legions of early Italian art - became longer. (TW, p.70)

Again, Hardy has focussed on the seductive qualities of a woman’s eyes. Juxtapose this intimacy and detail against the scanty descriptions of his male characters’ physical appearances, and one is able to identify the almost obsessive concern with female beauty and form which marks Hardy’s works. He provides an account of Yeobright’s
expression rather than his facial features, and a description of Wildeve's graceful gait only. Little or nothing is known of Giles' appearance; Fitzpiers' introduction contains the most detail of all the males, his eyes, nose, the curve of his mouth. The result is ultimately to endow him with a certain effeminacy and softness, associating his emotional susceptibility and desultory behaviour with femininity rather than masculinity.

In one regard, Hardy subverts the ideological structures which seek to confine and negate the female physique. "Hardy offends the taboos which seek to regulate body and movement", writes Poole (1981, p.338). He focuses on unusual and attractive qualities of movement and form of faces, breasts, feet, hands, arms and legs to ground the characters in solidity, rather than dreamy unreality, such as when the pragmatic Giles meets the long awaited Grace:

she held out to him a hand graduating from pink at the tips of the fingers to white at the palm; (TW, p.52)

Again, a voyeur's love of detail is apparent in Hardy's lovingly intimate description of Felice in her renounter with Fitzpiers after her accident:

her left arm, which was naked nearly up to the shoulder, was thrown upwards. (TW, p.175)

The use of "naked" so blatantly as an adjective alongside "thrown" imparts wanton and inviting associations to his portrait of Felice. In a similar way, he incites the desire to touch Eustacia in this frank
description:

She was in person full-limbed and somewhat heavy; ... and soft to the touch as a cloud. (RN, p.118)

The conjunction of unusual adjectives not usually seen together, "full-limbed", "heavy" and "soft", and the use of a tactile sensation in a society where members of the opposite sex, even brothers and sisters, rarely touched has a rather shocking effect. The unconventionality of the prose is thereby transferred to the character, who takes on the aspect of an unconscious seductress in Hardy's description:

The mouth seemed formed less to speak than to quiver, less to quiver than to kiss. (RN, p.119)

In the telescopic movement from the neutral "speak" to the erotic "kiss", Hardy brings the reader into close contiguity with his heroine, forcing even the most conventional reader to become intimately associated with Eustacia's desirable body and lips. However, the perspective is always a purely male viewpoint, evoking male desires through feminine voluptuousness. It also has the effect of suggesting that Eustacia's sole purpose is to exist as an object of male desire.

Instead of unreal and idealised angels, Hardy creates patently physical, earthy and healthy women. Morgan (188, p.82) notices that the males on Egdon Heath are sickly, addled or impotent: to her list of Clym, Christian and Johnny Nunsuch can be added aged Grandfer Cantle, whose offspring is the "maphrotite" Christian, and Olly
Dowden's husband, who is ill when the story opens (RN, p.87). In contrast to this, Poole (1981, p.338) points out that Hardy's women always have a "potent pre-eminence", the power to break away from confining taboos and rules through their 'flexuous' bodies. Morgan (1988, p.60) describes how Hardy reinforces Eustacia's "latent force" by portraying her physical sturdiness and "combative" potential, in comparison with Clym's soft meditative features, although she is still femininely "soft to the touch". Thurley (1975, p.97) draws a similar comparative picture between Eustacia and Wildeve, the former "full-limbed and heavy" (RN, p.118), the latter "light" and "graceful" (p.93).

The portrayal of vigorous health in these women, however, is undermined by the assumption that they have a greater susceptibility to succumb to emotional or mental trauma. Eustacia's emotional desolation and despair almost unhinge her mind and drive her to possible suicide (RN, p.421, 436); Felice's moral dilemma over her affair with Fitzpiers drives her to "fretting", headaches and physical discomfort (TW, p.224), and Hardy implies that her "personal condition" leads directly to her death from shock (TW, p.295). Grace's terror at Fitzpiers' presence drives her to feverish illness (TW, p.291), enough to induce her to flee hastily her husband's presence in the way Sue Bridehead jumps out of the bedroom window in order to escape Phillotson in *Jude the Obscure*. Thomasin's trouble over her
postponed marriage and concern for her 'reputation' sees her confined and ill in her aunt's house for weeks (RN, p.164). Hardy has clearly subscribed to the ideology's depiction of women as weaker and more susceptible to illness and hysteria, in spite of his characterisations of strength and resolution in their natures.

Deen (1960, p.211) claims quite inaccurately that Eustacia "wants to alter her essential human condition, to change her sex". He proceeds to condemn her rebellious nature by saying "A dissatisfaction so thorough-going amounts to a denial of life itself" (ibid). It is clearly not apparent to him that Eustacia's longing for the opportunities that were automatically a man's right, was simply the natural desire of an intelligent woman from whom all avenues of development were shut off because she is a woman. Hardy, with characteristic insight, could foresee the potential for critical reactions to Eustacia's desire for life and adventure, and wrote to the illustrator of *The Return of the Native* in Belgravia in 1878, "Eustacia in boys' clothes, though pleasant enough for the imagination, would perhaps be unsafe as a picture" (in Millgate, 1990, p.21). Deen subscribes to the fallacy which holds that physical qualities determined the nature of gender, the idea that the feminine physique was the ultimate determinant of a woman's character and ability. Hardy's intersexual imagery subverts this to an extent, as shown by Morgan's (1988, p.160) emphasis on his portrayal of androgynous ambiguities in males like Fitzpiers, Yeobright,
Wildeve, and Swinton St Cleeve (*Two On A Tower*). Stephen Smith (*A Pair Of Blue Eyes*), Angel Clare (*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*) and Donald Farfrae (*The Mayor of Casterbridge*) can also be included in Morgan's catalogue. As well as having a gracefully slim feminine figure, which the narrator describes as a "dancing master's" (*RN*, p.116), Wildeve "curses" his ill luck at being born with a "woman's sensitivity" (*RN*, p.95).

Hardy concentrates on qualities of movement and form which endow women with a genuine presence, with bodies that move "reflectively and transitively" (Poole, 1981, p.338), simultaneously affecting both themselves and other people. The desire that Grace excites in Fitzpiers in turn causes her "an unaccountable tendency to tearfulness" (*TW*, p.134); Eustacia's power over Wildeve is reciprocated by her involuntary violent sighs and shudders which continue even in her sleep (*RN*, p.117), "no fragile maiden sigh, but a sigh which shook her like a shiver" (*RN*, p.116). Wright (1989, p.58) notes the frequent association drawn between Eustacia and fire which imbues her with its heat and energy, but also with its transience and self-consuming nature.

Supple movements characterise most of Hardy's female characters; his conception of feminine beauty includes the proviso that a woman be slim and graceful. Poole (1981, p.338) points out that one of Hardy's favourite adjectives for women is "flexuous", a word which
encapsulates the sense of fluid, symmetrical movement with which he so often endows his female characters, such as Eustacia's feline agility:

she sprang up with a lightness which seemed strange after her listless movement. (RN, p.242)

or Grace's sturdy yet refined air:

She walked as delicately as if she had been bred in town, and as firmly as if she had been bred in the country. (TW, p.1114)

Grace's very name signifies the associations of gentle harmony with which Hardy wishes to imbue her.

Coxon (1982) examines Hardy's extensive use of hair motifs throughout his work. The sexual connotations associated with a woman's luxuriant hair inform many of the images used. One of Coxon's discussions (1982, p.99) focuses on Hardy's dichotomy of women who have light or dark hair. The major characters with dark hair are "highly sexed, passionate and discontented" (ibid); Eustacia is unmistakably included in this group. The morning Clym confronts her with his knowledge of his mother's death she is "coiling" her hair around her head (RN, p.389), a serpentine reference to sexual desire and 'temptation'. Immediately after this, she relinquishes the mass of hair which falls dramatically around her shoulders in the archetypal movement of sexual abandon. Brownmiller relates how, traditionally, the unpinning of a woman's hair implies "uninhibited sexuality" (1986, p.39). To Victorian sensibility, the loosened, cascading hair was a highly erotic image.
In Coxon's view, the hair-motif is definitely "a stable symbol of female sexuality" in Hardy (1982, p.103) and Brownmiller (1986, p.53) states that "Hair indeed may be trivial, but it is central to the feminine definition". It is interesting to note, pointedly, that false hair has "symbolic significance" (Coxon, 1982, p.102) in The Woodlanders. Hardy relies here on the stereotypical attributes of woman as arch-deceiver, a being steeped in artifice with no underlying substance behind the 'front'. However, it is important to recall Humm's analysis (1984, p.43) of the radicalism of Hardy's women, who usually contradict this stereotype:

Hardy's revolutionary... women are able to dissociate beauty, artifice and manner, those hitherto considered feminine skills, from the real attributes of character - sensitivity, warmth and strength.

Such characters negate the stereotypical qualities which are often evident in Hardy's characterisations.

C. DESIRE

Morgan (1988) emphatically stresses that the main female protagonists in these two novels are sexually aware beings. They are aware of their feelings and needs, although they may not always understand or explore their sexual feelings and desires. Eustacia is acutely aware of her desires and those she excites in men.
She seized the moment, and throwing back the shawl so that the firelight shone full upon her face and throat, said with a smile, 'Have you seen anything better than that in your travels?' (RN, p.114)

Morgan (1988, p.60) analyses Hardy's metaphor of the horns of a mollusc to show how he suggests "sharpened appetites and sexual arousal" in both Wildeve and Eustacia. Wright's analysis (1989, p.58) reveals that she is one of Hardy's first attempts to portray a woman as the subject of desire instead of merely the object of men's desire. She (1989, p.58-9) discusses Eustacia's transitional status in the progression of Hardy's portrayal of women as both an object of desire, and having strong sexual desires herself. This was a revolutionary depiction of a woman at the time, and one of the most notable areas in which Hardy broke from the ideological stereotypes. Morgan qualifies this by stating (1988, p.81) that she is ultimately always reduced simply to the sum of male attitudes in the novel, either a witch, a captivating beauty or an exotic temptress. However, Eustacia's consuming passions and desires become what Stubbs calls "self-tormenting contradictions" (1981, p.80), an increasing complexity of emotional portrayal which reveals Hardy's progression to an examination of the nature of desire rather than simply a flat condemnation of 'feminine' vanity and fickleness. Grace, more so than Felice, is aware of the uncontrollable nature of desire, and its evanescence, although she does not understand and is hardly aware of the awakening of her desire for Giles. She says to Felice when they
are wandering in Hintock Wood:

‘You may go on loving him if you like - I don’t mind at all. You’ll find it, let me tell you, a bitterer business for yourself than for me in the end. He’ll get tired of you soon, as tired as can be - you don’t know him so well as I! - and then you may wish you had never seen him!’  

(TW, p.217)

Grace’s incipient desire for Giles, when she "offers" herself for a kiss, "Then why don’t you do what you want to?" (TW, p.260), however, is sublimated into romantic Arcadian fantasies, which belie what is a very earthy and elemental attraction for him on her part, wrought in as it is with her earliest memories and loves:

He looked and smelt like Autumn’s very brother, his face being sunburnt to wheat-colour, his eyes blue as cornflowers, his sleeves and leggings dyed with fruit-stains, his hands clammy with the sweet juice of apples, his hat sprinkled with pips, and everywhere about him that atmosphere of cider which at its first return each season has such an indescribably fascination for those who have been born and bred among the orchards. (TW, p.191)

The pagan overtones of Grace’s perspective are part of the subversion of the notion that respectable women do not experience desire:

her fancy wove about him a more romantic tissue than it could have done if he had stood before her with all the specks and flaws inseparable from concrete humanity. He rose upon her memory as the fruit-god and the wood-god in alternation: sometimes leafy and smeared with green lichen, ... sometimes cider stained and starred with apple pips. (TW, p.248)

Dressing her aroused feelings in Arcadian garb helps to disguise the true import of the scene, whilst still evoking the sense of her ‘natural’ feelings of desire for Giles. The concern with physical detail signifies the fundamental nature of the desire. However, her fantasies of desire are sublimated in order to make them palatable for the prudish establishment which could not accept the existence of sexual desire in respectable women.
In spite of the two-dimensional quality of her character, Felice's moral agonising and justifications during her affair with Fitzpiers are not part of the stereotype of the cold-hearted mistress simply amusing herself with a gallant. She certainly suffers more than Fitzpiers during their relationship, as she is attributed sole blame for the affair by all in Hintock, and is the one eventually 'punished' with death, which is foregrounded in her mental suffering when Melbury appeals to her to 'release' Fitzpiers:

“O, Melbury... you have made me so unhappy...It is too dreadful!... As soon as he was out of the room she went to a corner and there burst into tears, and writhed... her soul was being slowly invaded by a delirium... and this was where she found herself - overshadowed with sudden night, as if a tornado had passed. (TW, p.213)

Her violent emotions and dramatic sensations, as depicted, do tend to evoke pity on her behalf and raise her from the moral ire which would normally be aroused by the archetypal Delilah or Eve. She is shown to be equally, if not more damaged mentally and emotionally by the affair. Fitzpiers' only regret about their affair is that it is too late for him to take advantage of her wealth and position by marrying her; his only thought of her is an inadequate, "Poor Felice" (TW, p.224).

Hardy does not merely reproduce the image of the seductive mistress; he explores various levels and qualities of desire which can be evoked in both men and women. Morgan (1988, p.xii) and Stubbs (1982, p.65) both highlight that it was Hardy's portrayal of women with sexual desires and needs, who were sexually exciting but not
prostitutes or 'fallen women', that was unique at the time. Poole agrees that Hardy broke away from the taboo which said only women who were prostitutes were allowed to have bodies that were sexually arousing (1982, p.339).

Rogers states (1975, p.251) that "sexuality is essential in Hardy's passionate women", and for Hardy, part of their sexual natures is desire. Desire is problematic for Hardy, even though he accepts its presence and intimately depicts this aspect of human nature in both sexes. Hardy's portrayal of sexuality and sexual relations is described by Wright (1989, p.84) as "relatively explicit" for the period, and Stubbs highlights the erotic nature of his portrayals of Eustacia and Felice (1981, p.76-7). However, Boumelha's analysis of Hardy's presentation of women's sexuality relates it to Jacobean tragedy (1982, p.50) in which it "functions as a corrupting disease or as an inexpiable crime". Again, it is simply the fact of their femaleness that "dooms" women like Eustacia and Felice (ibid). Draper (1987, p.173) sees Felice's death as a punishment for her sexual sins but, rather pointedly, omits any mention of Fitzpiers' sins. Fitzpiers' actions represent a case of the damaging hypocrisy of the sexual double standard. He suffers in no way for his digressions; Grace and Felice must bear the ignominy of social examination and discussion as only they really feel the brunt of the scandal. Hardy highlights this irony by having Felice unceremoniously 'executed' for
her sin, and Fitzpiers 'rewarded' with Grace's return. Stubbs (1981, p.10) discusses how the double standard penalised those women who showed by their actions that they were not the cold "asexual" beings in the myth; for Eustacia and Felice their penalty was the ultimate one. Unlike Eustacia, Grace succumbs to the ideological demands to be an 'acceptable' woman, and, in re-embracing her husband and denying Giles, she accepts the demands of the society and its view of her as simply the dependent possession of her husband. The inglorious compromise which concludes the novel is what Williams identifies as Hardy's judgement on the state of marriage (1987, p.178-9): the opposite of a triumphant vindication, it is an acknowledged defeat of the ideology's version of the ideal marriage. Humm makes an astute observation of Hardy's treatment of women with emotional and physical force when she asserts that "they are assigned a sense of sin" (1984, p.42) simply because they have strength and sensuality.

Another of Hardy's contradictory depictions is the portrayal of desire as both an "external compulsion" enforcing submission, as described by Boumelha (1982, p.107), and as an inextricable part of female sexuality. Hardy's descriptions of Grace's reactions to Fitzpiers embody this idea:

An indescribable thrill passed through her as she perceived that the eyes of the reflected image were open gazing wonderingly at her. (TW, p.126)

He seems to emphasise the action of desire as an irresistible power:
Fitzpiers acted upon her like a dram, exciting her, throwing her into a novel atmosphere which biassed her doings until the influence was over, when she felt something of the nature of regret. (TW, p.151)

Grace's reactions to Fitzpiers' presence depicts desire as an insidious influence, almost as if it is something against which she must struggle as it tries to control her. Throughout the affair with Fitzpiers, Felice, too, is conscious of being led on by a power beyond her control, a force to which she must inevitably succumb:

A fascination had led her on; it was as if she had been seized by a hand of velvet; (TW, p.213)

Hardy builds a more complex picture of Eustacia's feelings of desire; it has elements of developing both from within her, and an outer force that can affect her behaviour, as in the dream that excites her desire and curiosity:

Such an elaborately developed, perplexing exciting dream was certainly never dreamed by a girl in Eustacia's situation before. (RN, p.173)

and later when she is dancing with Wildeve:

Her beginning to dance had been like a change of atmosphere; outside, she had been steeped in arctic frigidity by comparison with the tropical sensations here. (RN, p.323)

All the women's reactions to their feelings of desire are similar in that they do not know how to deal with these emotions; they are either afraid or confused, but always they are powerless and usually succumb to it.

Hardy is not able to reconcile the undeniable existence of sexual desire with a satisfactory resolution of its ultimate fulfilment.
As depicted in both novels, the attempt to fulfill evanescent and capricious desire leads only to misery and sometimes tragedy. Sumner, however, emphasises the debilitating physical effects on women of sexual repression (1981, p.98) and Morgan’s analysis of the “Egdon paradigm” and its Hellenic associations (1988, Ch 3) stresses Hardy’s symbols of the spiritual freedom of healthy sensuality. This reading offers a possible ‘answer’ to Hardy’s ‘problem’ of desire: he believed that mistaking ephemeral sexual desire for more lasting emotional and intellectual compatibility will always cause conflicts and disappointments between partners caught in the then almost permanent bond of marriage. If people were honestly to recognise and confront these desires rather than repressing them or sublimating them as ‘love’, such mistaken marriages and the resulting conflict possibly would not occur.

The only ‘successful’ relationship between a man and woman in either of these novels is that between Marty and Giles, because as Squires notes (1987, p.183) it is an "asexual alliance". It is called successful in that the two people involved are ultimately faithful to each other and close the novel together, but it is a qualified success. Marty must shed her femininity, and implicitly her sexuality, because for Hardy this is one of the few ways that the ‘problem’ of desire can be solved. It is also an ironically one-sided relationship, as Giles never spoke to Marty of love when he was alive. He was never
infatuated with her in the way he and Fitzpiers were with Grace, or Fitzpiers was with Felice, and so their relationship was never based on the fickle and inconstant elements of desire which Hardy explored.

D. BEAUTY

Hardy's idealisation of feminine beauty is a thoroughgoing product of the Victorian era. Pearsall's comment is apt and succinct:

The Victorians were transfixed by feminine beauty. In a sea of changing values, this was something that was permanent. (1969, p.102)

Hardy's striking and vigorous female characters, without fail, are physically and facially beautiful. Bullen (1986, p.105) describes Eustacia as

the type of aesthetic beauty which was then in vogue... pale, distraught... dark hair falling in masses over the... eyes full of love-lorn languor or feverish despair.

Hardy succumbs to the Victorian romantic ideal of the time, even though it is used ironically to an extent, as Stubbs finds in her analysis (1981,p.76). She views his portrayal of Eustacia Vye as a criticism of the over-indulged romanticism and cultivation of emotional life required of women by the ideology; it is also found to be an indictment of the narrow and confined lives which had such deleterious effects on the minds and bodies of those women for whom this was the norm.
A propos of this, it seems that Hardy's portrayal of his 'heroines' as irresistibly beautiful is some sort of token appeasement for their lack of material power or intellectual outlets. Wright (1989, p.71) holds that the distinguishing element of Hardy's later novels is that the women use their physical attractions to their own advantage; however, the key to this assertion is that this manipulation is "the only power they possess" (emphasis mine), and reflects the condition of women at the time. It is an inherently ineffectual power, relying as it does on subjective and transient qualities of physical beauty and desire which are not permanent and by nature passive, relying on the presence of a male onlooker for instrumentality. Percomb, the barber, proprietorially and contemptuously, strokes Marty's hair with his stick when he places the value of two sovereigns on its beauty (TW, p.30); Giles looks in upon and admires Grace through her bedroom window, once alone and once with Fitzpiers, both times without her knowledge (TW, p.68, p.119). Morgan (1988, p.xiii) analyses Hardy's contradiction of a solely male appropriation of female sexuality, examining his portrayal of female erotic experiences beyond the physical presence of a male, but these are limited as they still require the vicarious presence of a male, as in The Return of the Native, when Eustacia's autoerotic dream disturbs her and inflames her with desire for the as yet unknown Clym (RN, p.173).

Pearsall (1969, p.102) discusses the sublimation of male
sexual desires in the idealisation of women's beauty. The voyeuristic
gaze of desire is converted to a semi-religious worship of nature or
'Creation', displacing the disturbing arousal of sexual desire on to
more ideologically acceptable abstract qualities. Christ (1977, p.149)
emphasises the traditional attitude that beauty is unquestionably equated
with virtue in the ideological values; replacing desire with 'virtue'
helped to legitimate and purify what was considered undesirable, viz.
the uncontrollable, socially disruptive feelings of sexual desire.

Hardy's adulation of women's physical beauty and sexuality is
a double-edged praise, for it belies the underlying unfavourable attitude
towards women's intellects. By concentrating on external attributes,
Hardy often neglects their intellectual and emotional qualities or
potential, and in this he succumbs to the Victorian ideal that women
make beautiful ornaments for the drawing room or parlour, but are
inherently incapable of deeper, complex thought or intellectual
sophistication. Sumner (1981, p.87) notes Hardy's tendency to linger
on Grace's "externals", and Vigar (1974, p.138) points out that
Eustacia's presence is 'primarily invoked by her outward beauty'. The
result of this is inevitably that the women are dependent upon their
appearances as definitions of their characters and personalities.
Morgan (1988, p.81) posits that Eustacia is merely a composite picture
of varying male views of her, and this is also true of Grace and Felice;
their worth as 'people' is reduced to the amount of male notice and
attraction their outward beauty can draw to themselves. Rogers' claim that Hardy's emphasis on "Tess' physical beauty further distracts attention from her mind" (1975, p.250) is also true for Eustacia, Grace and Felice. The lovingly intimate details he provides of their physical beauty are not matched by an equally intricate exploration of their psyches. It is telling that Hardy writes in *The Return of the Native* that

> ideal beauty is incompatible with emotional development and a full recognition of the coil of things. (p.194)

For the women he portrays, the way they look is the paramount consideration: other qualities of intellect, emotional sophistication or complexity are secondary or unimportant while their beauty is the sole measure of their worth.

Insofar as beauty is guaranteed to attract the attention and admiration of men in the novels, Hardy succumbs to the presentation of women as innate competitors for male desire: there are pairs of rivals in both novels: Grace and Felice, Marty and Grace, Suke and Grace, Eustacia and Thomasin, even Eustacia and Mrs Yeobright, to engage Clym's Oedipal association to its fullest. Implicit in the adoration of feminine beauty is also the assumption that a less beautiful woman is not as worthy of attention and analysis as a conventionally beautiful one. In *Daniel Deronda*, George Eliot makes a brief, but apposite reference to this sort of unconscious judgement:
‘I should not have forgotten the look of misery if she had been ugly and vulgar,’ he said to himself. But there was no denying that the attractiveness of the image made it likelier to last.

Appreciation of beauty relies on a receptivity to outward show and surface impressions; the significance for this analysis is that a beautiful woman is supposed to be parading everything worthy of notice on the surface and that there is nothing more about her worth discovering.

Another brief but perspicacious observation of Eliot’s is pertinent:

Being beautiful was after all the condition on which she most needed external testimony. If anyone objected to the turn of her nose or the form of her neck and chin, she had not the sense that she could presently show her power of attainment in these branches of feminine perfection.

(Daniel Deronda, p.214)

The ideology did not allow a woman to be free from needing male approbation; the "beauty myth", described by Wolf (1990), helped to keep women dependent on the power of male desire for approval and status, instead of being able, like men, to rely on their own abilities and achievements to impart worth and value to their characters.

Deen (1960, p.214) calls The Return of the Native an "allegory of flesh and spirit", and claims, rather officiously, that Eustacia has the "masculine" attributes of aggression, energy and ambition that Clym "lacks". Vigar (1974, p.138) also highlights the opposition in this novel between Clym’s philosophical rationalism and Eustacia’s emotional imaginativeness. However, it is Boumelha who incisively cuts to the heart of this ideological dichotomy of ‘feminine’ physical beauty and ‘masculine’ intellectual sophistication when she
states of *The Return of the Native* that "the man's tragedy is primarily intellectual, the woman's sexual" (1982, p.48). She continues, "Hardy, in fact, is writing another version of the Ruskinian polarity of man as culture, woman as nature" (1982, p.49). This observation is also true of the relationship and failed marriage of Grace and Fitzpiers: she, too, is childless and unsatisfied by her wayward husband, whilst he only bewails the curtailment of his social and professional development.

The fate of the women in both these novels is inevitable simply because they are women; the men are given "intellectual and moral choices" (Boumelha, 1982, p.49). Eustacia, Grace, Felice, Mrs Yeobright and Thomasin act the way they do because their physical natures as woman/mother dictate their actions; Fitzpiers, Clym, Melbury and even Giles in his materially poorer condition make calculated moral choices about their lives, and the lives of the women for whom they are 'responsible'.

It is vital to this analysis that Eustacia, Felice and Grace have not been or will not become mothers. Boumelha (1982, p.59-60) acknowledges that

*Pregnancy and motherhood are a major element in the representation of female characters in nineteenth century fiction... [it is] the index of recuperation into the prescribed female role.*

She finds that Hardy's depiction of Eustacia's bitter disappointment with her "social failure" (RN, p.313) is a veiled device of his own
"pre-censorship" (1982, p.60), marginalising and silencing the covert sexual dissatisfactions of the novel. The childlessness in *The Woodlanders* functions in a different way: Felice has been in an apparently loveless marriage to a man much older than herself and Grace is married to the last scion of an effete old family. Neither of these relationships is conducive to fertility and vigour. Hardy, perhaps, wishes to portray the destructive, sterilising effects of the ideology on the minds and bodies of young, healthy women.

Poole (1981, p.340), however, correctly states that it is foolish to argue that Hardy is himself free from the effects of the ideology. The strong and earthy physical nature of his main female characters is undermined by the depiction of their ‘inherently’ weaker bodies and minds; their individual and acknowledged sexuality is often a pernicious or damaging influence on themselves and others. Their resilience and determination are often belied by their ‘womanly’ caprices and impulses; their faces and bodies are necessarily beautiful and pleasing to men, sometimes to the woman’s detriment. Hardy’s entanglement in such a maze of ambivalence and contradiction, however, cannot disguise his genuine admiring respect for women who are independent and intelligent, with strong and healthy bodies. Morgan is emphatic in her assertion that

Hardy’s platform remains consistent and forthright: the world that denies autonomy, identity, purpose and power to women, is to be, on his terms, the loser. (1988, p.xvi)
4. SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

A set of common and widely-held beliefs and social definitions, defined by Poovey as the "socially based discourse of sexuality" (1988, p.2) underwrote the Victorian ideology, cemented as it was in gender difference and a social apportionment of labour and ideals of duty. The organisation of sex differences into "binary opposites" (Poovey, 1988, p.6) formed the basis of and permeated all aspects of middle and upper class Victorian ideology. The social development of separate spheres of life for men and women was the most powerful work of the ideology, leading to what Poovey defines as "the imaginary relationships of individuals to the real conditions of existence" (1988, p.3). She echoes Boumelha's interpretation of ideology as real experience (1982, p.5), since the assumptions and images manifest themselves in concrete social practices and institutions (1988, p.3). Ideology, therefore, consists of real experiences which are psychologically assimilated through the veil of social constructs, projected assumptions and apparent truths.

The sociological division between male and female spheres of life and work involved foremost the confinement of women to narrow lives concerned only with matters of domesticity and personal relationships.
Pearsall (1969, p.137) quotes an edition of *Saturday Review* of November, 1859:

> Married life is a woman's profession... to this life her training - that of dependence - is modelled.

The exaltation and exaggeration of family life as a refuge and a temple away from the ravages of the real world of men was postulated as the reason and justification for the limitations on women's lives and personalities. Trudgill (1976, p.39) examines possible reasons for the "evangelical fervour of home worship", the Ruskinian obsession with referring to the home in religious terms such as temple, shrine, or altar. He concludes that the concept of the quiet and conservative home became a "bulwark" (*ibid*) against commercial worries and anxieties about the rapidly changing principles and institutions of the time. However, the full burden of maintaining this haven fell upon women, and the fulsome praise of Victorian demagogues could not prevent it becoming a narrow, dull and trivial life for them.

In this role, women were adored as "the custodians of conscience" (Stubbs, 1981, p.6). George Eliot expresses the commonly held male expectation of middle class home life in *Middlemarch* through the eyes of the well-born doctor, Mr Lydgate. He dreams of married life as

> going from your work [and] reclining in a paradise with sweet laughs for bird-notes and blue eyes for a heaven. *(p.122)*
The ideology thus often distorted the lives and expectations of both sexes in their dreams of marriage and relationships: the women who dreamed of financial and social security, and the men who believed, like Lydgate, that they would obtain for themselves pliant, submissive decorations for their parlours and self-abnegating mothers for their children. This was an emotional and physical trap that could lead to a great deal of misery and bitterness, as depicted so often by Hardy.

Another critic expresses it more coldly and bluntly:

The assumption on which the concept of the female character was based was that women existed not for themselves nor for whatever contribution to society they as individuals could make, but for the pleasure and service they could render to men... Her supreme duty was obedience, as a daughter to her parents, and as a wife to her husband. (Zinn, quoted in Siefert, 1977, p.65)

The idealised vision in no way resembled the reality: many writers have documented the women's circumscribed lives of boredom and triviality. Stubbs (1981, p.4) uses a passage from a well-known Victorian's autobiography, Edward Carpenter, to carry this point graphically:

"[For ladies] every aspiration and outlet, except in the direction of dress and dancing, was blocked... More than once, girls of whom I least expected it told me that their lives were miserable, "with nothing on earth to do"."

Women were simply barred from every useful or challenging activity. Again, it is George Eliot who bitingly points to the futility that underlay the gentility, what she calls, in Middlemarch, the "gentlewoman's oppressive liberty" (p.307):
there was the stifling oppression of that gentlewoman's world, where everything was done for her and none asked for her aid.

Stubbs clearly illuminates how the ideology persistently emphasised romantic love and the importance of emotional life and personal relationships as 'ambitions' for women (1981, p.29); she stresses the prevalence of the "notion that only through... a man can a woman find happiness".

Siefert (1977, p.6) describes how women in the nineteenth century often had a struggle with ennui, discontent and boredom, arising from the tension between individual aspiration and an uncongenial society.

She proceeds to analyse the stereotyped self-definitions imposed by the society on women, and shows how conflict often arose between these roles and the natural desire for personal freedom felt by many women.

Stubbs (1981, p.5) claims that the exaggeration of the ideals of separate spheres of life for men and women arose for three reasons: to confine women to the home, to safeguard chastity and the legitimacy of male heirs, and to protect the ideals of home and family. In this way, women's lives were enclosed and defined within the boundaries of the domestic circle; their educations were at best perfunctory and mostly decorative. A woman's aim in life was simply to marry, and, once married, to remain a faithful, suitably ornamental piece of property for her husband's drawing room and parlour, and to concern herself solely with domestic details and her narrow social round of
visiting, dinners and balls. Women's "oppressive, yet trivial, existence" (Stubbs, 1981, p.4) at this time, the confinement to narrow routine, is encapsulated in George Eliot's depiction of Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch*; her life revolves solely around her drawing, piano-playing, dresses, and of course, finding a suitable husband:

> It had not occurred to Lydgate that he had been the subject of eager meditation to Rosamond, who had [nothing] to divert her mind from that ruminating habit, that inward repetition of looks, words, and phrases, which makes a large part of the lives of most girls. (p.195)

Part of the pernicious effect of the ideology is that, though exalted as the guardians of home and hearth, women's lives and natures were denigrated by men as trivial and meaningless, which, sadly, they often were. The indulgence in personal emotions and relationships was often the only diversion from narrow routines and restrictions, but women's lives were nevertheless viewed by men either contemptuously or patronisingly.

Poovey (1988, p.11) adroitly points out that the other face of the separate spheres was that women remained financially, socially and emotionally dependent, and therefore supposedly 'needed' male control; she states that this was an integral part of the ideology of gender difference. It provided a justification for the vaunted superiority of male rationality and intellect, and one of the reasons why women were excluded from instrumental roles in the educational, political, religious and economic life of the society. Since women were not believed to be governed by reason and a rational mind, as it was
held men were, female inferiority and dependence could thus be maintained and institutionalised. The stereotype of the petty, capricious woman, although damaging, was influential.

Out of this grew the stereotypes and models of women which were to govern the majority of thinking about women throughout the period in question. Poovey notes that a woman's 'natural' role was supposedly to be a wife and mother (1988, p.1) and Trudgill highlights the belief that submission was "God's natural plan" for women (1976, p.70). Poovey also describes how women were seen as naturally tender and self-sacrificing (1988, p.7), and how virtue became enmeshed in the female gender and the ideal of domesticity (p.10). Other facets of the stereotyped ideal of the 'perfect lady' held submissiveness and dependence to be innate feminine traits. Pearsall (1969, p.74) outlines the medical and psychological belief that submission was a "womanly instinct", a necessary adjunct to the maternal instinct. He reiterates the prevalence of Ruskin's attitude (1969, p.74-5) that women existed as the helpmates of men, whose sacred duty it was to smooth the way for the males. Siefert (1977, p.68) also stresses the prevailing belief in the "subservience" of women, and Trudgill (1976, p.66-7) concurs with Stubbs (1981) in his description of how the ideology encouraged delicacy and frailty in women, together with an unabated over-indulgence in emotionalism and romanticism.
The sexual double standard which required the utmost chastity and faith in women, whilst turning a blind eye to the many exploits of men, resulted in the denial and suppression of 'respectable' women's sexuality, in a society which was supporting an ever-growing population of prostitutes along with a widespread pornography and child prostitution trade, facts well documented by Pearsall (1969). As the purported 'custodians of society's conscience', women were far more confined and governed by ideals of sexual continence and restraint than men. Trudgill (1976, p.16) quotes Dr Samuel Johnson’s views on this subject:

'Consider of what importance to society the chastity of woman is. Upon that all property in the world depends. They who forfeit it should not have any possibility of being restored to good character.'

Stubbs summarises the stereotyped ideal Victorian girl/woman succinctly and pointedly:

Chastity was the foundation of her personality, and its superstructure was made up out of a judicious arrangement of emotionalism, passivity and dependence.

(1981, p.26)

According to the ideology, these three elements were ineluctable traits of the feminine character, and chastity was an imperative. Contemporary medical opinions of men, such as Greg and Acton, held that the emotional constitutions of women "debarred them from sexual appetite" (Trudgill, 1976, p.59). The ideology proclaimed that women were fundamentally angels, men animals, and thus lay women's duty to save men from themselves. The invidious nature of the 'Angel by the
Hearth's stereotype was that, in spite of the supposed moral influence they wielded, the ideology rendered women institutionally inferior and powerless; their position in legal and political terms was non-existent, as described by Poovey (1988, p.23). As the binary opposite to the passively dependent and submissive feminine ideal, the ideal masculine counterpart was rational, independent, intellectually driven, worldly and instrumental.

To consider Hardy's level of acceptance of these stereotypes, it appears that, although in many ways he is able to expose what Poovey calls the "artificiality of the binary logic" (1988, p.11), the author simultaneously perpetuates many of the assumptions and stereotypes of the ideology. This dilemma manifests itself in the character of Eustacia Vye; whilst fiercely rebelling against the limitations and confinements of her time, she still longs for ultimate acceptance as a "splendid woman" (RN, p.421), as mistress of an acceptably fashionable, middle class establishment in Paris or Budmouth; this is the limit of her ambition. Eustacia's spiritual rebellion is eventually undermined by her inability to rise above and beyond her petty schoolgirl dreams. Similarly, Hardy's ideological rebellion is weighed down with the burden of received assumptions, stereotyped features and unresolvable dilemmas. They are unresolvable because he is unable to offer viable alternatives to life's problems, once he has discounted those he knows instinctively to be
spurious, the superficial ‘solutions’ to life’s real dilemmas demanded by the ideology.

The ramifications of the pervasiveness of Victorian ideology for Hardy’s works is that the main female characters go through what they do, not primarily from any quirks of fate or inherent flaws in their natures, although these are still important considerations in Hardy’s world view. The choices they make, their actions, and the consequences they evoke are such that only occur because they are women. All action and conflict stem from the fact of their sex: their faults are ‘womanly’; their irrationalities and caprices are inherently ‘female’; their griefs are the griefs of all women. They are trapped by their gender, which is in itself part of Hardy’s themes on fate and destiny. It is part of their unfortunate destinies to have been born women at that time, encumbered with the stereotypical ideas of their constituent weakness and innate inferiority to men. This fact encapsulates the essence of Hardy’s movement within the ideology: as Duffin (1967) pointed out, he admires and faithfully depicts extraordinary women with unique drive, intelligence, beauty and strength of character. According to Duffin (1967, p.238) deep down Hardy believes women suffer more as the weaker and more inferior sex, because for Hardy, "the unalterable laws of nature are based upon a wrong" (quoted by Williams, 1982, p.59). Given such an attitude, it is therefore possible to understand his ambivalence towards
Eustacia, his disapproval of Felice, the nature of Marty’s fate and Grace’s mistakes, and Mrs Yeobright’s fate. Williams (ibid) states that women were always victims for Hardy, because he believed they were born weaker and therefore more vulnerable.

As described by Stubbs (1981, xiii), women are defined and encased by their emotional lives and are not depicted with other dimensions to their personalities:

A genuinely feminist novel must surely credit women with more forms of experience than their personal or sexual entanglements... literature which continues to concentrate exclusively on women’s private lives is in a sense perpetuating a lie. Women do not live off their relationships. Like other people they work, and even when they do not work outside the home, they still have contact with the material world, with people and things outside their own intimate feelings. [The conventional novel] encourages them to see an enormous area of their lives as irrelevant to their real selves, seducing them with a fantasy world of wholly satisfying relationships... it perpetuates what is in fact both a falsification and a limitation of experience... even at its best, it has not yet been able to break free of this narrowing interpretation of women’s experience.

Siefert (1977, p.63) deplores the "depersonalisation" of women, the reduction of their characters which occurs when they are identified purely in terms of their ‘functions’: wife, mother, nurse, sister. She describes how this rigidly small "repertory” of roles (1977, p.64) was the chief definer of women’s personalities and souls; contemplating a similarly foreshortened catalogue of female ‘roles’, Stubbs (1981, p.7) makes the perspicacious observation that a woman’s function was simply never to be "herself". 
Jekel (1986) and Morgan (1988) highlight Hardy’s creation of independent, sexually exciting and intelligent women, which often went against the grain of the conventional presentation of women in popular literature at the time. They praise his depiction of strong, ‘equal’ women, often the central characters in his novels, who are emotionally complex, instrumental in their own lives and whose zest and enthusiasm for life, action and achievement surpass that of their male counterparts. This is true, but only to a certain extent; it must be noted that Hardy’s portrayals of women are qualified by his absorption of the dominant ideology. This reveals itself in the text as his ultimate acceptance of many of its assumptions, ideals and stereotypes in its perception of gender difference and separate spheres for men and women.

Stubbs (1981, p.71) asseverates that Hardy’s most important criticism of the preponderance of the ideals of romantic love is The Return of the Native. The driving action of this novel is that Eustacia Vye takes refuge in her dreams of attaining romantic and passionate love as a way of fulfilling her empty life:

To be loved to madness - such was her great desire. Love was to her the one cordial which could drive away the eating loneliness of her days. And she seemed to long for the abstraction called passionate love more than for any particular lover. (RN, p.121)
Her life is vacant and idle, and as Boumelha (1982, p.51) highlights, Eustacia’s only problem is finding an adequate lover to live up to her fantasies; Stubbs rightly calls this a "dangerous pursuit of feeling for its own sake" (1981, p.76). She analyses the situation of the nineteenth century middle class woman, confined solely to emotional sources of satisfaction by the ideology (ibid) which held these as sufficient compensation for the lack of involvement in other aspects of a wider life. Miles (1987, p.29), like Poovey (1988), points out that Hardy, through Eustacia, exposes and satirises the female character type of romantic aspiration, who was developed entirely through her emotions. He abhors and criticises the other side of the romantic ideal: the idleness, the tawdry shopgirl dreams, the overdramatised imagery are all treated with irony in The Return of the Native:

Her presence brought memories of such things as Bourbon roses, rubies, and tropical midnights; her mood recalled lotus-eaters and the march in 'Athalie'; (p.123)

Although exotic, these trappings invariably impart a sense of superficiality and exaggeration to Eustacia, and are symptomatic of Hardy’s limits in creating such a female character. He relies on purely descriptive means to convey her identity, without invoking any more profound analyses of her psyche. Her appearance and actions may be unconventional and rebellious, but her driving motivation is traditional: finding a suitable husband. Her dreams are trivialised, as they mainly consist of brave, handsome men and the accompanying romance:
romantic recollections of sunny afternoons on an esplanade, with military bands, officers, and gallants around, stood like gilded letters upon dark... Egdon.

(p.121)

As a woman, the extent of Eustacia's ambition as portrayed is simply to catch herself a man, the ideologically prescribed 'profession' of a woman:

Her prayer... ran thus, 'O deliver my heart from this fearful gloom and loneliness: send me great love from somewhere else I shall die'. (p.122)

Vigar (1974, p.131) focuses on the perception that Eustacia's world view is entirely subjective and impressionistic. Her life alone on the heath is symbolic of the emotional prison of the nineteenth-century woman; surrounded by a society antagonistic to the female gender, the self remains as the only medium on which to expend energy and concentrate the attention. Eustacia's highly developed sense of her slightest emotional fluctuation results in an extreme form of complete subjectivity, and indicates how this 'epicurism' could lead to a self-destructive over-cultivation of one's emotional life:

She thought of [love] with an ever-growing consciousness of cruelty... framed to snatch a year's, a week's, even an hour's passion from anywhere it could be won. (RN, p.121)

The search for love and romance becomes the central and pivotal force in her life. The narrator's concentration on her idleness reveals Hardy's innate disapproval of Eustacia, his chastising attitude that manifests in Venn:
Fidelity in love for fidelity's sake had less attraction for her than for most women: fidelity because of love's grip had much. (RN, p.122)

The emphasis in the above quotation denotes Eustacia's obsession with melodramatic romance and chivalry, and reveals Hardy's belief in women's inherent faithfulness. He again depicts her idleness, as well as her lack of judgement and discretion in her unwise choice of lover:

filling up the spare hours of her existence by idealizing Wildeve for want of a better object. (RN, p.123)

Boumelha refers to Hardy's treatment of Eustacia's character as a "hesitation between mythologising and irony" (1982, p.54) and that she is eventually made ridiculous by the trappings in which he drapes her. Eggenschweiler (1971, p.445) also points out the ambivalence felt in Eustacia's portrayal, the writer's curious tug-of-war between presenting a mythical heroine of tragic stature, versus the overblown melodrama of trite vanity and common daydreams. He, too, stresses the fact of Hardy's ironic portrayal of Eustacia's deification (1971, p.449); it is a purposeful representation, not a lapse into melodramatic nonsense (1971, p.454). Eggenschweiler holds that Hardy is satirising traditions of courtly love in literature, but as Stubbs (1981) has revealed, it is a far deeper criticism of the ideology's confinement of women to purely emotional and personal interests.

The complexity of his attitude to Eustacia becomes more apparent as her character and situation develop. Hardy vacillates between the two perspectives of her nature throughout the novel, never
ultimately deciding where he stands. Death imparts appropriate dignity and tragedy to her life, but the tragedy lies rather in the sorry fact of her wasted potential than in the romantic aspirations for which she dies:

'I was capable of much; but I have been injured and blighted and crushed by things beyond my control!' (RN, p.421)

Stubbs (1981, p.73) asserts that Eustacia’s thwarted and frustrated energy coexists with Hardy’s recognition of her selfishness and triviality: these latter qualities are part of his indictment of the ideology which did not recognise women’s abilities and potential, but rather encouraged these unworthy attributes. Goode (1988, p.39-40) also points out the trivia and inconsequence associated with Eustacia; in this regard it reveals Hardy’s underlying belief in these aspects of the stereotypical woman, who is only concerned with appearances:

she had wondered if Pontius Pilate were as handsome as he was frank and fair. (RN, p.122)

Her rekindled attraction for Wildeve is based on his genteel and attractive dress and demeanour:

She recollected how quietly well-dressed he had been that morning... and then she thought of his manner towards herself. (RN, p.363)

These examples of her nature show a ‘womanly’ concern with appearances rather than a person’s character or worth. The following generalisation by the narrator exposes Hardy’s belief in gender-based traits, as well as in the pettiness of women:
when she did scheme, her plans showed rather the comprehensive strategy of a general than the small arts called womanish. (RN, p.124)

Eustacia’s sense of frustration and longing could never have been fulfilled; as a dependent, ill-educated woman, she was always going to be cut off from any practical means of satisfying or even expanding her ambitions beyond finding a handsome lover. However, to the end of her life she is rebellious; her diffuse sense of constraint and oppression is her unconscious kicking against the ideology:

For the rest, she suffered much from depression of spirits, and took slow walks to recover them. (RN, p.124)

Siefert’s (1977, p.66) opinion is that part of the dilemma of a talented heroine, such as Eustacia, lies in the fact that the roles set down by society are too limited for the "serene acceptance" demanded by convention. Her analysis can be related to Eustacia’s situation in that she is free enough from strong parental control to reject stereotyped expectations to an extent (1977, p.68), but greater personal tragedy is attendant on this (1977, p.69), a reminder, unconscious or otherwise, that the ideology does not permit such a rebellion to persist. Her conflicting needs for both self assertion and identity, and acceptance in an ideology, which is inherently harmful and depersonalising, lead eventually to her destruction. Eustacia has always what Siefert calls

a sense of herself as an unfulfilled being who is essentially capable of living more purposefully and ‘being’ more profoundly than she does in actuality… an indistinct sense of herself as potentially capable of being something other than sister, wife, daughter. (1977, p.112-113)
The ideological restrictions on Hardy’s vision limit her to tawdry dreams of Paris and esplanades, rather than any more ‘worthwhile’ ambitions. Hardy’s use of Eustacia as a satirical vehicle, his superficial presentation of her through her fantasies and associated paraphernalia of romanticism leads critics like Sumner to complain that there is “no deep analysis” of her character (1981, p.101), and Hasan (1982, p.47) to call his characterisation "simply conventional" and "ambivalent" (ibid, p.46). In the light of this discussion, Hardy’s manner of presentation in Eustacia’s case indicts the ideology that limits her to the narrow and transient world of emotionalism, where her "loneliness" can only "deepen her desire" (RN, p.122) without ever allowing her to satisfy her longing for life and freedom.

In Stubbs’ analysis of The Return of the Native, Egdon Heath is a "microcosm of society" (1981, p.73), with Eustacia standing for women who are barred by the ideology from useful activity. Her environment has trapped her, frustrating her intellectual potential. Venn is surprised by the "mental clearness and power" he finds in Eustacia (RN, p.148). The parallel drawn by Stubbs highlights that, as her ability and intelligence have no place or use on Egdon, she therefore has no place in the society, because she is a woman (1981, p.73). Morgan (1988, p.59) uses the image that Eustacia is a "prisoner" in her world, yearning for freedom and action. Through Eustacia, Hardy exposes the frustration of restricted intelligence and
energy symbolically in the mumming scene when she chafes against the restrictions of her costume (RN, p.200), and through Venn’s destructive pursuit which Morgan describes as symbolic of the unprincipled manipulation of women by the ideology (1988, p.66-67). Even Eustacia’s hope of marriage as a release and an escape (RN, p.123) is a false hope. Morgan points out (1988, p.74-75) that marriage was an “overshadowing” for a woman, in which she was doomed to be decorative and dumb. Timothy Fairway sums up the ideology’s view when he says that whoever marries Eustacia will have “an uncommon picture for his best parlour” (RN, p.101). After their marriage, Clym is genuinely surprised that Eustacia has harboured desires and ambitions of her own; he is selfishly dogged when she tries to express her wants:

‘Must I not have a voice in the matter, now I am your wife and the sharer of your doom?’
‘Well, there are things which are placed beyond the pale of discussion; and I thought this was specially so and by mutual agreement.’

(RN, p.307)

The ‘things’ Clym considers to be undiscussable are his own wants; furthermore, they had never agreed ‘mutually’ to anything. He made his decisions privately and expected her to silently fall in with them. Clym simply does not want to hear opposition to his own plans for their lives.

In spite of her potential, once married, Eustacia suffers the lot of most women of her time: a patronising husband who ignores his
wife’s perception of reality, a flaw in Clym’s character highlighted by Humm (1984, p.44). Morgan (1988, p.78) describes Clym’s patronising treatment of Eustacia during their courtship and later in their married life as paternal and contemptuous. He answers her heartfelt confession of love with the trite comment "'Spoken like a woman'" (RN, p.258). She also shines a new light (1988, p.80) on Clym’s apparent unselfish industriousness: he is not willing to remain idle and so takes to furze-cutting. However, he completely ignores Eustacia’s feelings towards this, and does not perceive that her life seems doubly unproductive and empty of activity:

There had been nonchalance in his tone, showing her that he felt no absolute grief at a consummation which to her was a positive horror. (RN, p.311)

Her loneliness and idleness form two sides of the ambivalence Hardy displays; he disapproves of her laziness and desultory nature, but pities her for the undeserved cruelty of her fate.

Russ states bluntly that "Culture is male" (1972, p.4), and outlines the ideological status of women as "The Other" (ibid), reliant on the dominant male for her source of ‘being’ and awareness. From this perspective, Boumelha’s analysis of Eustacia’s behaviour (1982, p.55) is important, as it shows how she seeks the reaffirmation of her identity and sexuality, purely through male approval. Her dependence on male acceptance undermines the strength of her character; as a woman, Eustacia could never have been truly independent and
emotionally self sufficient, even had she a more developed intellect and productive occupation, without overt ideological approval. Morgan reiterates that the ideology simply did not accept a purely female sexuality and awareness (1988), and Sumner’s psychological critique of these characters (1981, p.94) stresses that women’s personalities can only be confirmed in their acceptance by men. In this regard, Hardy is in accord with the demands of the ideology, as he depicts his female characters’ discovery of identity and purpose contingent on the approval and acceptance of the men in their lives: fathers, husbands, lovers, cousins.

Hardy, however, is still able to reveal the restrictions of the ideology on women’s personalities. Morgan (1988, p.82) states that Eustacia is prevented from coming into being in a world which "denies autonomy, identity, purpose and power to women". The use of ‘prevented’ suggests a belief in an actively hostile force at work, and Eustacia’s railing at her fate shows her, and Hardy’s, belief in an omnipotent and misogynistic power controlling her destiny. Just before her death, she cries out:

‘How I have tried and tried to be a splendid woman, and how destiny has been against me!..I do not deserve my lot!.. O, the cruelty of putting me into this ill-conceived world!’ (RN, p.421)

Goode (1988, p.47) interprets Eustacia’s part in the mumming as an attempt to become accepted by the community. The irony is that she has to deny her sexuality, and take on a ‘role’ with set actions and
dialogue to achieve acceptance into the society through a "traditional role" (1988, p.51). This is an apt metaphor for how Hardy sees women forced into the roles set out for them by the ideology; he is not able, however, to break from these himself, nor to suggest any alternatives. In spite of her potential and curtailed possibilities, Eustacia for Hardy is always going to be

a person inhabiting a world in which the only reality is frustration and endurance. (Russ, 1972, p.13)

B. GRACE

Stubbs (1981, p.78) sees Grace Melbury as a victim of legal and social injustices. The main conflicts of the novel and the miseries of her life stem from her treatment at the hands of father and husband. The irony here is that they do not viciously maltreat or abuse her; simply by fulfilling their roles as her controllers and decision makers, they deny her the opportunities and therefore the ability to make her own choices about her life. Stubbs (1981, p.80) concludes that The Return of the Native and The Woodlanders criticise the ideology's "debilitating version of womanhood". Both novels show how women's lives were distorted because they were women, the powerless, dependent half of society, locked away by the ideology from autonomy and self-fulfilment. As Hardy clearly portrays in the discontent and
near-tragedy of the latter part of Grace's life, she is

trapped in moral order rooted in discrimination and a social structure that refused to acknowledge [women] as complete humans. (Stubbs, 1981, p.80)

Boumelha's analysis (1982, p.101) describes Grace as empty, a passive reflector or register of other characters. Hardy portrays her lack of power and control over her own life by highlighting this passivity and her contingent status. She is often associated with mirrors and is reflected with other people, such as the moment when she and Felice are reflected together (TW, p.72-3), and when she sees Fitzpiers' gazing at her reflection in his mirror (TW, p.126). Grace only acts in response to the wishes or bidding of another; rarely does she initiate actions or conversation. The one time she does try, when she attempts to break her engagement to Fitzpiers, she is cajoled and persuaded by both her father and fiance to go through with the marriage. In these ways she is truly the perfect product of her schooling and the dominant ideology: pliable, willing to please, innocent to the point of naivete, and, above all, quiescent:

Relieved of her doubt, somewhat overawed, and ever anxious to please, she was disposed to settle the matter. (TW, p.161)

However, The Woodlanders reveals the discord and misery that result from the strict adherence to the written and unwritten laws of the ideology. Grace's unquestioning acceptance of her father's will and decisions, and later her passive and mostly unresisting acquiescence to her husband in the face of his deceit and infidelity are shown to be
inadequate and eventually harmful to her. Hardy challenges the wisdom and beneficence of the ideology that constantly demands blind acceptance and passive uncomplaining endurance from women, but again cannot offer viable alternatives. Grace’s "frail barque of fidelity" (TW, p.113) to Giles’ memory is soon swamped in the tidal wave of conventionality and propriety, and she is quickly enticed back into the formalities of a marriage which, Hardy makes quite clear, is not going to be anything like the ideal. Hardy does not agree with nor condone the forms of the ideology, but in this case accedes its victory.

Boumelha (1982, p.110) points out that Grace’s education merely left her hanging between the levels of Victorian society, rather than opening up opportunities for her to progress in a career or socially. Clym Yeobright’s education in The Return of the Native sets him on a path to prestige and relative wealth; Grace’s schooling simply makes her a better ‘catch’, increasing her value in the marriage market. Furthermore, the reader never discovers the content of her learning; one can only assume it consists of the standard accomplishments such as music, dancing, embroidery and etiquette: what George Eliot calls in Middlemarch the "toybox" of ladies’ education. Williams (1987, p.176) wryly acknowledges that, even with her education, Grace’s only ‘profession’ is marriage. Speaking widely of Western literature, Russ states succinctly that

the one occupation of a female protagonist in literature, the one thing she can
As a woman, Grace’s position in society is further qualified and denigrated because of what Boumelha calls (1981, p.111) the “dependence upon a husband for conferring a social role”. Hardy reveals the subtleties of the working of the ideology through his portrayal of the overt injustices suffered by Grace: her self-imposed convent-like existence during her husband’s absence; the inability to dissolve the marriage legally because Fitzpiers had not been cruel enough; her assumption back into the marriage with a fickle and inconstant husband through her superimposed sense of duty.

Writers such as Jekel (1986) and Morgan (1988) praise the way Hardy depicts women with strong physiques and healthy, vigorous bodies. Grace is one of the exceptions, described by her father’s workmen as a “teuny, delicate piece” (TW, p.44), nervous and sensitive. It is accepted that her highly strung nerves make her unable to control her irrational impulses. Ideologically, this is perceived as ‘womanly’, and Hardy seems to support this assumption:

> from a corner a quick breathing was audible from this impressionable creature, who combined modern nerves with primitive feelings. (TW, p.265)

Rogers (1975, p.256) states that Hardy believed in women’s inherent irrationality, and Williams (1982, p.57) points out that Hardy shared the ideological belief that a woman’s mind was more delicately balanced and was therefore more likely to give way. The rapidity with
which Grace succumbs to her fretful illness, when in doubt of her marital status, reveals some of Hardy’s acceptance of the view of women as mentally weaker and likely to relent in the face of a stronger force; usually the stronger force is male will and character.

Hardy does not fulfil the expectations of the traditional realist novel in what Bournelha (1982, p.108) calls “Grace’s unconventional response” to Fitzpiers’ affair, and Goode (1988, p.102) points out that this is the basis of Hardy’s subversion of convention in this novel. Hardy’s rejection of the standard melodramatic response of the wronged wife in Grace’s languid resignation to Fitzpiers’ infidelity, his ironic narrative statements on Grace’s “absence of hot jealousy” (TW, p.194) and her claim to have lived with Giles are subsequently negated by her true admission to her father and eventually to Fitzpiers, and by her return to the unsatisfactory, and inescapable, marriage. Stubbs’ (1981, p.86) analysis finds that archetypal love roles take over, to the detriment of the novel. These roles include Giles’ long-suffering fidelity and Felice’s melodramatic seductiveness. She believes that Hardy’s iconoclasm is often “attenuated by the weight of received assumptions” (1981, p.80) about women’s easily impressed and changeable characters. Rogers (1975, p.254) offers a shrewd observation of the difference in Hardy’s depiction of male and female motives: Grace’s behaviour in letting Giles give up his hut is ascribed to “timid morality” (TW, p.278), whereas Giles’ motives are eulogised
as chivalrous, pure, (TW, p.279) scrupulous, and most of all "manly" (p.191), which for Hardy is synonymous with nobility and integrity.

In returning to Fitzpiers, Grace is seen as foolish and even 'unfaithful' to Giles by the other characters. However, it must be remembered that her education, and her passive and yielding nature did not allow her to rebel for long against convention and propriety. This is another of the contradictions in Hardy, and one which shows his simultaneous acceptance and rejection of the main tenets of the ideology. Given the time and social conditions, there was little choice for Grace to do anything other than return to her husband, or remain forever a social outcast and recluse. Her re-reading of the marriage vows is symbolic of the strength of the ideology in forming the base and source of morality.

That particular sentence, beginning, 'Whom God hath joined together', was a staggerer for a gentle woman of strong devotional sentiment. (TW, p.312)

However, there is an inherent criticism of Grace in the text. Hardy permits a socially inferior man such as Robert Creedle to pass unfavourable judgement on Grace's actions, which can hardly be justified when one considers she is merely doing her duty in succumbing to the demands of the dominant ideology:

'Ah, young women do wax wanton in these days! Why couldn't she ha' bode with her father, and been faithful!' (TW, p.320)
C. MARTY

Marty South is independent-minded and rational, but, as Goode asserts (1988, p.97), she is exploited. He discusses the concept acknowledged earlier in this essay of women as both victims and commodities (1988, p.101) in an ideology which maintained their status as the possessions and chattels of both property-owning and poor men. This idea is extended in The Woodlanders when Mrs Charmond buys Marty's hair, making her also the victim of a rich woman. Marty is constantly devalued and depersonalised in the novel. As an unmarried woman, she is without ‘value’ and status; she is paid less than men for doing the same work; she must hide the fact that she does her father's work during his illness, for fear of it being unacceptable. Her hair is described in commercial terms as her only "asset" (TW, p.30); her other qualities of dignity, industry, dexterity and faithfulness are demeaned because she has not the one quality demanded by the ideology which, according to Wolf (1990), imparts value and worthiness to a woman: beauty. Jekel (1986, p.154) points out that Hardy seems willing to let Marty suffer because of her sexlessness, and her lack of beauty and desirability.

Boumelha (1982, p.108) proposes that Marty's "singleness of commitment" is gained only at the loss of her sexuality. Her
transcendence over everyday humanity is achieved at the expense of
'womanly' sexuality and other feminine traits, in keeping with Hardy's
belief that ultimately these are incompatible with intellect and "abstract
humanism" (TW, p.323). Jekel (1986, p.128) sees Marty as

the familiar Hardy combination of weakness with strength, fragility with
endurance, and passivity coupled with a basic practicality about survival.

However, all the positive characteristics are undermined and negated
by the essential assumptions that women are always innately weak,
fragile and passive.

Williams (1987, p.176) identifies the fact that, without the
prerequisites of love and marriage, Marty is debarred from the
ideology's ideal of womanhood. She is desexualised in the novel
because she does not have the appropriate trappings of femininity. As
an unmarried woman, the 'spinster', she is defined by sexual negation
according to Siefert (1977, p.65), and is able thus to play the role of
the eternal virgin mourning her dead lover, rather like the fate of Lucy
Snowe in Charlotte Bronte's Villette. To some extent, though, Hardy
still centres Marty's character around her emotional life, her silently
enduring love for Giles. She sells her hair, not for the money which
she so desperately needs, but in self-mortification because she
discovers the man she loves is enamoured of another (TW, p.38). Her
role, at the close of the novel, is to remain faithfully loving to the dead
Giles, as the emotional pivot and support of her now empty life. The
unspoken theme here is that a woman *needs* a man in her life to be truly fulfilled, even if it is the memory of a dead man.

Rogers (1975, p.250) draws attention to Hardy's praise of submission and devotion in such characters as Thomasin and Marty:

*But [Marty] was a heroic girl, and though her outstretched hand was chill as a stone, and her cheeks blue, and her cold worse than ever, she would not complain whilst he was disposed to continue work.* (TW, p.75)

With similar forebearance, Thomasin never reprimands, contradicts or chastises Wildeve. She patiently endures his philandering and domineering inadequacy as a husband, as well as her own disappointment. Marty remains faithful to Giles' memory, waiting for Grace to accompany her to the grave long after Grace has forgotten:

*Yet her sense of comradeship would not allow her to go on to the grave alone, and... she stood there with her little basket of flowers in her clasped hands, and her feet chilled by the damp ground till more than two hours had passed.* (TW, p.322)

Thomasin and Marty, like Tess, exhibit those qualities of silent endurance, faithfulness, and gentle persistence against odds that Hardy, and the ideology, admired as *womanly* traits and praised because implicitly they made women better 'helpmates' for men. The pathos of his descriptions of their long-suffering endurance endears them to the reader, rather than making one wish they were more independent and self-serving. Hardy accepts the ideology's demand which requires good women to be self-sacrificing and enduring. Thomasin's 'reward' of a good husband and settled middle class life was admitted by Hardy to be a concession to the demands of serial publication, in a note to the
penultimate chapter of The Return of the Native. Clearly he considers
this fate, like Grace's, to be a double-edged prize, but cannot find a
satisfactory way of resolving problems about the nature of marriage
and sexuality any other way than that demanded by the ideology: in the
reaffirmation of marriage as the only institution for enclosing relations
between men and women.

D. FELICE

Felice Charmond is like Eustacia Vye, according to
Boumelha, (1982, p.107) in that she is also "doomed" by her sex and
sexuality. Her strong passions and unconventionality have no place in
the ideology; she is viewed as the predator and destroyer of traditions
and lifestyles in Hintock. Williams (1987, p.173) writes of Felice as a
stereotyped character; she points out (p.174) that even Fitzpiers is
given dignity and credibility through his vocation as doctor and healer,
but that Felice has no redeeming quality. She is trivialised and
demeaned in the same way as Venn treats Eustacia. The narrator of
The Woodlanders refers to her off-handedly as "Inconsequence" (TW,
p.182). Hasan (1982, p.99) also notices that Fitzpiers, even though
only pseudo-intellectual and desultory in his studies, achieves dignity
and consequence in the village, while Felice is simply denigrated as
capricious, devouring and dangerously passionate:

She was a woman of perversities, delighting in piquant contrasts. (T.W., p.182)

Many of the qualities with which she is endowed are recognisably those of the tragic, melodramatic heroine:

Mrs Charmond's mobile spirit was subject to these fierce periods of high tide and storm. (T.W., p.213)

In spite of these observations regarding the two-dimensional nature of Felice's portrayal, the archetypal Eve/temptress, Hardy still challenges the ideology that circumscribes her character. Stubbs' critique (1981, p.77) shows how Hardy depicts Felice as a victim of her own desires rather than simply a depraved seductress or predator. Further to this, the reluctant alliance between Grace and Felice is another, more complex challenge to the prescribed caricatures of 'good' and 'bad' women which separated middle class women from their 'fallen' sisters through social censure, ignorance and emotional manipulation (Stubbs, 1981, p.78). Grace and Felice are unconsciously allied by their mutual mistreatment at the hands of a deceitful and unscrupulous man, when, according to the ideology, they should be at each other's throats "unguibus et rostro" as Melbury thinks they should (T.W., p.203).

Felice's unfortunate death, the direct result of her personal condition', is Hardy's capitulation to the ideology's demand for her to meet with a tragic end. Like Eustacia, a woman who ignores society's
rigid and irrefutable rules, especially with regard to sexuality, has no possible future or place in the form of the realist Victorian novel. Their literary antecedent, Catherine Earnshaw in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, could also not survive in a society so antagonistic to her self, and they, like her, suffer early tragic deaths as a result of insurmountable conflicts with the dominant ideology.

E. **MRS YEOBRIGHT**

Boumelha notes (1982, p.58) that Mrs Yeobright leads a vicarious life through her son Clym's achievements, and the disappointment she feels at his 'failure' to continue his career is taken as deeply to heart as if it had been her own personal failure. Because of her own perception of her relationship with her son, and the narrator's perspective:

> Being a mother, it was inevitable that she should soon cease to ruminate on her own condition. (RN, p.351)

She is defined primarily by her role as a mother, and her existence is circumscribed by the wishes and hopes she has for her son. After wife, motherhood was a woman's sole purpose for existence, and the main register of her status.

The complicated feelings and complex relationship between Mrs Yeobright and her son are distilled by Hardy into her
disappointment with his financial status. Her disagreements with Eustacia become a competition between women for male attention and love, but Hardy does not delve deeply into these feelings and impulses on the older woman’s part. Since she is a woman and a mother, she must ‘inevitably’ be solely concerned with her child’s welfare above her own, and this is depicted by Hardy in her debilitating and eventually fatal breakdown when her son seems not to be concerned with her:

‘Tell her you have seen a broken-hearted woman cast off by her son.’

(RN, p.350)

Her failure to maintain a successful relationship with her son is a devastating event for her, as a mother and a woman, and the curtailment of this relationship leaves her life empty and meaningless, since ideologically it has no other purpose.

of all the possible actions people can do in fiction, very few can be done by women.

(Russ, 1972, p.5)

Sumner (1981, p.82) reiterates this when she identifies that when women are central characters, the plot of a novel invariably deals with marriage and the domestic sphere, those areas specially defined as the feminine sphere. Goode (1988, p.104) states that the woman’s sphere is socially constructed, and the ideology which constructs it prevents it from widening to include aspects of life beyond the details of a woman’s personal emotions and narrow domestic interests.
Dyhouse (1978) uses the example of Mrs Transome in George Eliot’s *Felix Holt, The Radical* to highlight how such women as she and Mrs Yeobright "become painfully reminded that they had 'selves larger than their maternity'" (p.177) when their children leave them and, ostensibly, they have no further role in life. The point is that once they have fulfilled their roles of wife and mother, they lose their sense of selfhood and identity for which they were previously reliant on children and husbands.

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Women are presented as passive victims of the male ego, according to Rogers (1975, p.251), but men are depicted as victims of devouring female passions. Hardy’s strong men have a susceptibility to passion as a strong alien force, writes Rogers (1975, p.251), and since sexuality and passion are inherent in Hardy’s striking women characters, this becomes a foreign and predatory influence on men. To recapitulate an earlier discussion, Boumelha holds that for Hardy, desire in women functions as an "inexpiable crime" (1982, p.50), and sexual passion is the "drag" on promising men referred to disparagingly in *The Return of the Native* (p.246). Sumner (1981, p.109) also highlights this perception of female sexuality. Jekel questions the validity of T.S. Eliot’s comment in *After Strange Gods* (1934) that "strong passion is only interesting and significant in strong
men" (1986, p.89). Hardy certainly did not subscribe to this point of view, but it is apparent that sexual desire posed problems for him which he could not resolve satisfactorily in fiction.

Humm (1984, p.42) sees Hardy's dialectical pitting of male expectations against female images result in the destruction of the women, either physically or emotionally, or both. She highlights Hardy's depiction of women who are corrupted and crushed by the rigid social and sexual conventions of men (1984, p.44). One of these sexual conventions is that a woman must remain faithful to her husband, no matter what the circumstances. Duffin (1967, p.243) and Houghton (1957, p.356) agree in their assessment that infidelity by a woman was seen as the worst sin she could commit. Clym Yeobright encapsulates this attitude in his incredulous cry "what's worse than the worst a wife can do'" when he wrongly suspects Eustacia of being an unfaithful wife (RN, p.427).

In an astute analysis of where Hardy's subversive limits become apparent, Rogers (1975, p.252) notes that his works often depict worthy men being exploited and snubbed by foolish women such as Grace and Thomasin, because of their 'womanly' preference for flashy and undeserving men. Others who come immediately to mind are Bathsheba Everdene (Far From the Madding Crowd), Anne Garland (The Trumpet-Major), Fancy Day (Under the Greenwood Tree) and Ethelberta Petherwin (The Hand of Ethelberta). Rogers
asseverates that there are continuous disparaging generalisations by Hardy regarding womanly traits which are deplorable, such as that expressed in *The Woodlanders* that "feminine opinion is founded on non-essentials" (quoted by Rogers, 1975, p.253), and the belief that inconsistency is "peculiar" to women's nature (*ibid*). The negative side of Hardy's depiction of reasonable and magnanimous women, revealed by Rogers (1975, p.257), is that he makes it clear that they do so in *spite* of their sex. Corresponding with the use of 'womanly' in a derogatory sense, she finds that the term 'manliness' only appears with positive connotations, signifying virtuous and honourable behaviour (1975, p.257) in such men as Diggory and Giles. Ultimately, says Rogers (1975, p.258), for a woman to be rational, moral and fully human, according to Hardy's portrayals, she must overcome the innate limitations of her sex, a feat at which she rarely succeeds.

**CONCLUSION**

Determining the extent of Hardy's subversion of the demands of the dominant Victorian ideology will not be simple nor straightforward. It will not be possible to conclude with a simple
affirmation that he does break free from the enclosing discourse of sexuality, for it is often apparent that he succumbs to the assumptions and cultural confinements that governed much of the literature at the time. The complexity of Hardy’s engagement with the ideology reveals that even in such an enlightened author, sexist stereotypes and assumptions are able to hold sway over his attempts to more profoundly portray complete characters, especially women.

My textual analysis is evidence that the area in which Hardy is most willing and able to relinquish the ideological stereotypes is in physical perceptions. In this realm of human relationships, he sees most clearly and portrays truths most faithfully. Even here, however, the ideology made inroads into his awareness of the vigour and potential of female bodies and sexuality. It is where he comes closest to seeing women as human beings in the same way as, and equal to, men.

Although the intensity of his radicalism is more concentrated rather than widespread, it still has important ramifications for the images of women he portrays, the events in which they become involved, and his assessment of their reactions and characters. Sometimes the diffuse and unconscious acceptance of cultural stereotypes and received assumptions about women undermines the strength of his subversion, but let this not be mistaken for a negation of his contestation. The fact that Hardy was able, to a lesser or
greater extent, to see beyond the empty stereotypes of the ideology at that time makes his fiction, if not unique, nevertheless striking. His portrayal of sexual and marital conflict, growth and development in women characters and his attempt to break down the rigid and confining superstructure of human relationships at the time was quite radical.

Hardy is enveloped by the ideology in his belief that it is women’s inherent weakness and inferiority that ultimately betrays them. Even though he may empathise with rather than criticise them for these ‘innate’ flaws, this attitude informs even the most radical of his portrayals of women and prevents their triumph over the dictates of the ideology. Whether their fates are tragic, like Eustacia’s, or ignominious, like Grace’s, they never ‘win’.

Because Hardy’s sympathy with the Victorian women’s lot is embedded in his awareness of reality through the filter of the ideology, it is inevitable that this will tangibly affect his representation of women in his fiction. The alienation of his characters from either their ‘selves’ or their society is the result of this inner conflict. Eustacia is always an outsider on Egdon Heath, and never fulfils her dreams of being ‘herself’: the splendid woman. Grace is alienated from her childhood’s world and her true feelings by her education and subsequent marriage; her attempt to regain these elements of her self is thwarted by the actions of men and the novel ends with her about to be
physically as well as emotionally removed from her friends and home. Their fates are the manifestation of Hardy’s own struggle with the rigidities of the ideology and his desire to portray new versions of women. However, because he was a man and a product of that very ideology, those representations would always be attenuated portrayals of women.

The women he does portray are usually dramatically removed from the accepted ‘heroine’ of the day. The judgement should be given relative perspective. In our ‘enlightened’ age, his images to some may seem tame and flaccid, but for the time were inspired and determined. Hardy’s attempt to break the shackles of the ideology was successful in that it caused many people to think about and question things which had been blindly accepted. His fiction exerted a new pressure on the ideological structures and images by offering rigorous opposition and antagonistic material in place of complacency and hopeless resignation.

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