

## Hardy: Women's Role in Society

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Hardy's affinity for women and their connection to nature is evident throughout all of his major novels, and though he portrays them as strong and capable, he also illustrates their vulnerabilities. While he seemingly promotes the assertion of individuality, the paradox remains: his belief, as revealed in his novels, is that women, try as they might, cannot escape gender determinism-- another example of the author's ambiguity. He has a generous fondness for women, but many of his fictional heroines endure rejection and unhappiness as if they are being punished for their nonconformity. According to Hardy women are like Nature; they are nurturing, often unpredictable, and occasionally destructive. As elements of nature, Hardy intimates that women should be accepted and allowed to grow and thrive in a nurturing environment free from oppression and social judgment. He asserts it is women's nature to be passive as well as passionate, traits that required considerable modification in the Victorian era with women's changing roles and society's expectations.

The end of the Victorian era marked the culmination of more than a century rife with change, and the role of the New Woman had been abundantly addressed in politics, philosophy, and literature. The assertions of late eighteenth-century feminist advocate Mary Wollstonecraft and the political agenda of John Stuart Mill in the nineteenth century suggested society functioned as a new fate which determined people's lives. Schopenhauer's metaphysics parallels this determination in denying free will and negating desire. He wrote of sacrificing pleasure to avoid pain in *The World of Will and Idea*. Schopenhauer's pessimism influenced intellectuals like Flaubert and Tolstoy, who wrote novels promoting the idea that individuals must assert

themselves within a kind of social fate. Hardy read the works of these philosophers and novelists extensively, supplementing his formal education with life-long self study. Though he was clearly influenced by the politics, philosophy, and literature of his era, he exercised independent thought, denied any firm belief in the ideas and theories of others, and never really found definitive views regarding women in nature and society. On New Year's Eve 1901, he wrote,

After reading various philosophic systems, and being struck with their contradictions and futilities, I have come to this—*Let every man make a philosophy for himself out of his own experience*. He will not be able to escape using terms and phraseology from earlier philosophers, but let him avoid adopting their theories if he values his own mental life. (*Life* 333)

Observing women with internal ambiguities regarding their role in society, Thomas Hardy attempted to create his own philosophy but was torn between societal standards and the drive to promote equality, an internal tension that he never fully resolved. His literary works combine the philosophy and politics of the Victorian era as well as nineteenth century literature. Hardy's intellectual contexts are relevant to the conflict between nature and convention in his female characters, and he combines a mix of utilitarian and existential ideas, thus redefining the standard for the human condition in his writing. Caught between the accepted norms of Victorian society and the change ushered in with the Modern era, Hardy created stories that more accurately defined the transitional struggles of the New Woman. Although Tess and Sue meet unfortunate ends, their stories are not tragedies; the hope of progress,

the natural (albeit painful) evolution of a better society, remains. True to his meliorist<sup>1</sup> assertions, Hardy believed people have the ability to improve their lives and that suffering can be ennobling.

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With an essentialist's alternate perspective, Hardy uses nature as a recurring theme, and the nature of his heroines, especially Tess and Sue, combines passivity with independence and strong will. Hardy believed it was something more than environment that influences women's roles in society. According to him, it is something inherent in their very nature that allows them to be passive and malleable, though not inferior or weak. After attending an event at Whitelands Training School in April 1891, Hardy writes his observation of the female students: "Their belief in circumstances, in convention, in the rightness of things, which you know to be not only wrong, but damnably wrong, makes the heart ache, even when they are waspish and hard... . You feel how entirely the difference of their ideas from yours is of the nature of misunderstanding" (*Life* 246). Hardy recognized women's susceptibility to convention as well as their capitulation to social expectation. He attempted to reconcile these passive attributes with women's inherent strength and capability through political and philosophical study and observation.

Counting Mill among his intellectual heroes, Hardy attended Mill's campaign speech at Covent Garden in 1865 when he was an impressionable young scholar. Nearly 40 years later, the author recalled his experience and wrote a description of the social reformer: "He stood bareheaded, and his vast pale brow so thin-skinned as to show the blue veins, sloped back like a stretching upland, and conveyed to the observer a curious sense of perilous exposure" (*Life* 356). Impressed with Mill's liberal political views about equality within societal structure, Hardy studied his essays with vigor. His copy of *On Liberty* is heavily marked with annotations and many of the passages are underlined, including one regarding individual thought that Sue Bridehead quotes in *Jude the Obscure*. In June 1876, Hardy reflected on Mill's perspective of independent thought; he writes of "the irritating necessity of conforming to rules which in

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themselves have no virtue" (*Life* 114). He was in agreement with Mill's celebration of the individual, examining nature and establishing limits of societal encroachment on personal life.

Hardy was intrigued with Mill's liberal political perspectives on women's rights. Mill's assertions were reflective of the views posited by Mary Wollstonecraft, his predecessor in the feminist movement and author of *A Vindication on the Rights of Women*, 1792. Though he intentionally placed considerable distance between himself and the controversial feminist, Mill's ideas were primarily inspired by the early activist, who combined her skill as a writer with her desire to expose the falseness of the conventional attitudes concerning women. In the late eighteenth century, it was widely believed that women had both inferior mental power and moral sense compounded by a frail and weak constitution. As an anti-essentialist, Wollstonecraft argued that women were products of their environment; they were inferior because they were treated as such. While many women accepted the subservient role with no objection, Wollstonecraft, like Tess Durbeyfield and Sue Bridehead, found it both objectionable and unacceptable. She writes, "Behold, I should answer the natural effect of ignorance! The mind will ever be unstable that has only prejudices to rest on, and the current will run with destructive fury when there are no barriers to break its force" (23). Anti-essentialists like Wollstonecraft asserted that until women were extended the rights of equality and

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<sup>1</sup> the belief that the world can be made better by human effort

education they would continue to act as they were treated, as ignorant children. She argued that it was environment more than nature that promoted the idea of woman's weakness. [...]

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Even with a proper education, essentialists and anti-essentialists agreed that greater equality would not exempt women from their biological function and responsibility to have and nurture children. Wollstonecraft asserts, "a right always includes a duty, and I think it may likewise fairly be inferred that [parents] forfeit the right who do not fulfill the duty" (171). She

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states that while women would continue to have children, their role as mothers should not preclude their rights as human beings. Seeming to agree with this argument, Hardy often wrote of motherhood and Nature as Mother; they were recurring themes in his novels. Some of his early female characters die in childbirth or from complications following childbirth, but the heroines of his last two novels actually become mothers, though society deprives them the opportunity to properly nurture their children. Tess is responsible, nursing Sorrow in the field while taking a break from her duties. She also makes certain that he receives a baptism she finds acceptable and as good a burial as she can arrange. Likewise, Sue is always depicted as being a responsible mother, making certain that her children are clothed, sheltered, fed, and educated. Sue also embraces the role of mother to Little Father Time, something that Arabella found unimportant except when it promoted her own agenda. Both Tess and Sue are independent in thought and action, but they do not neglect their responsibilities as mothers. Seeming to agree with Sarah Grand and Mary Wollstonecraft about women's duty to have and raise children, Hardy notes the sacrifice of his heroines as it relates to their ability as mothers. The question of how motherhood and equality could be reconciled remained unresolved for many years.

Displaying Wollstonecraft's sentiments, Mill seemingly believed that much remained the same for women seventy-seven years after the first publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. In the 1869 publication of *The Subjection of Women*, he writes, "Society makes the whole life of a woman, in the easy classes, a continued self-sacrifice; it exacts from her an unremitting restraint of the whole of her natural inclinations, and the sole return it makes to her for what often deserves the name of martyrdom, is consideration" (306). Most of Hardy's fictional women struggle because they fail to restrain their "natural inclinations" and rather than consideration, they receive harsh legal and social judgments. From this perspective, Hardy's

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heroines are martyrs of the feminist agenda. [...]

Mill's work on equality for women arrived two years prior to the publication of Thomas Hardy's first novel, *Desperate Remedies*. Hardy started his career at a time when the Women's Movement had already established itself and was building considerable momentum. Feminist ideas were known and discussed, and some results had been achieved. In 1870, the Education Act had made elementary education compulsory for girls as well as boys and allowed women to vote for School Boards. Schools providing adequate secondary education for girls had been in

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operation for some time, and in London the first women's colleges providing university education had just opened. Although the Oxford and Cambridge Local Examinations had been open to women since the late nineteenth century, "Cambridge did not issue degrees to women until 1921" (*Women at Cambridge* 2). Women were soon to prove that mental inferiority was a fiction, something Hardy included in his novels. In his early days as an author, women were becoming shop assistants, clerks, secretaries, nurses, teachers, journalists, and a few pioneers were preparing for the learned professions. Some progress had been made for married women, as well. The Infant's Custody Act of 1839 and the Divorce Law of 1857 provided wives some measure of rights within their marriage. This legislation gave mothers custodial rights to their children under age seven, "but they could not take custody if they had been found to be adulterous" (Hurvitz 2). A series of acts and lawsuits covering the latter part of the nineteenth century began to rectify many of the legal wrongs. Although attempts to get the franchise for women would not succeed until well into the next century, the Women's Movement was making progress. Hardy was not a proponent of forcing political agendas; he believed in the slow process of natural evolution. As he wrote of Clym Yeobright in *The Return of the Native*, "A man should only be partially before his time; to be completely in the vanward in aspirations is fatal to fame" (156). Hardy was not in the vanward for women's rights and did not openly support suffrage like Mill, but he was in the debate through his fictional New Woman heroines. Hardy wrote fourteen novels from 1871 to 1895, all addressing issues of love, sex, and marriage complicated by socially and sexually mismatched characters. He did not idealize his female protagonists; he created them without trying to save them, and he only met with criticism on a large scale when he challenged society's conventions regarding sexual instincts, sexual morality, marriage and divorce with the publication of his last two novels. [...]

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Though Hardy confronts convention by rejecting the Victorian ideals of relations between the sexes in his literary works, his avoidance of a political agenda leads to the belief that he did not entirely agree with the philosophy and agenda of Mill and, indirectly, Wollstonecraft. His conservative views about women's right to vote did not mean that he disparaged women or was an unrelenting misogynist; they simply meant that he was both a man of principle and a paradoxical man torn between the real and the ideal. Although Hardy was impressed by Mill's political assertions, Schopenhauer was perhaps his strongest philosophical influence. After reading *The World as Will and Idea* in 1883, Hardy began to consider nature as the basic force

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that impels all processes, a topic he explored in his notebooks and letters, along with his thoughts on Darwin and Nietzsche. He accepted Darwin's philosophy and, though mostly embracing Schopenhauer's *Will and Idea*, he held conflicting views about Nietzsche's promotion of the individual over the collective, an ongoing struggle he experienced throughout his life and is best represented in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. Hardy's novels often reflect the conflict between instinct and intellect and convention and nature. He seems to regard instinct as something fundamental, untouched by civilization's conventions. The intellect, on the other hand, may be and is influenced by upbringing, education and society in general. Many of Hardy's female protagonists are intelligent, and their inquisitive nature leads them to make mistakes because of their conditioning by society. What Wollstonecraft and Mill regarded as choice in upbringing and education is considerably more complicated in Hardy's novels. He combines politics and philosophy to create a basic force influencing the essential nature of women that determines the personalities and lives of his educated

heroines which includes natural instinct, convention, and common sense-- a reflection of the struggle to reconcile social expectations with the assertion of free will.

Common sense, according to Hardy's novels, is that part of the intellect that should have the power to control natural instincts and judge social conventions in a logical and comparatively unprejudiced way by rejecting what is false. The tragedy with many of his heroines is that they permit themselves to fall in love regardless of convention or common sense; to love and desire love is inherent, part of their natural instinct. Their comparatively insignificant errors are often magnified through the eyes of their lovers who were brought up to regard social conventions as all-important. Through his unconventional heroines, Hardy addresses issues that had been overlooked in philosophy and politics. Wollstonecraft and Mill had little to say about the subject

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of sexual morality. To them, many of the problems arising from sexual instincts would solve themselves if men and women were given a sensible upbringing and education. According to their proposals, a properly developed understanding would rein in an abundance of passion. Hardy's views differed, as evident in Grace Melbury's return to nature in *The Woodlanders*. Though he promoted better education for women and greater equality in the nurturing process, as an essentialist, he understood women differently. To Hardy, it was women's natural instinct that overruled common sense and social convention. His assertion was that what cannot be altered should be accepted and embraced, leaving him torn between the conventional Victorian standards and liberal feminist activists. [...]

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Acknowledging the degree of attention Flaubert and Tolstoy bestowed upon their tragic heroines, Hardy was dissatisfied with an apparent lack of compassion for the unhappy women. To better tell the story of women's struggle, Hardy created characters that were no less biologically determined than their ancestors, but he gave them insight and presented them as products of a damaging and unforgiving Victorian society that judged harshly regardless of personal intent. Hardy's heroines, especially Tess and Sue, are representatives of the New Woman and reflect the fears and anxieties involved with the natural, impelling force that promotes the individual over the collective. And though Hardy was fearful of the New Woman himself, he admired her; he presented her to the world with character and strength and the promise of a better future.

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