Chapter I

Introduction

Feminist readings of Thomas Hardy’s work, especially of the major novels, abound. Though not much work has been done with regard to his shorter fiction, the gender matrix in these stories, however, is a rich area for investigation. In *Desperate Remedies* (1871) Hardy states,

> In spite of a fashion which pervades the whole community at the present day – the habit of exclaiming that woman is not undeveloped man but diverse … the fact remains that, after all, women are Mankind, and that in many of the sentiments of life the difference of sex is but a difference of degree (II, Ch 2, Pt 4).

The shorter fiction of Thomas Hardy is a product of its time slotted into a cultural matrix that can never be recreated. What we can do, however, is to use Feminist approaches and theories of gender to critically analyze this body of work in an attempt to show – in terms of what is posited in the title – the “gender matrix” in Hardy’s shorter fiction; how gender intersects with culture, history, class, sex and sexuality. Hardy’s constructions of gender lead him to complex female protagonists who refuse to be interpreted in essentialist terms. They are conceived within the power relationships of society but go on to challenge and subvert paternalist sexual imaginations with its notions of essentialist feminity and straightforward gender patterns attributed to
sexes. Indeed, even the masculine ideals are shown as highly problematic. Hence my thesis will attempt to examine Hardy’s attitude to and treatment of his female characters and of course, the inevitable relationship between his men and women in his shorter fiction to support his conviction that “Women are Mankind.”

As early as 1878, in *The Return of the Native*, he spoke of the “Irrepressible New” and nothing was more irrepressible than the “New Woman.” The Woman Question Debates that raged on both sides of the Atlantic were complex, and points on the various issues of roles, rules and freedom hardly converged and could not be explained absolutely along the lines of sex. A new radical uncertainty was emerging and some of the questions that were being asked were: What constituted the nature of woman? What was her status and role? What difference did class make? What was the relationship of women to men? and what was her destiny? Answers to these questions will weave the chapters that follow into a single whole and throw light on Hardy’s thesis that “Women are Mankind.”

A serious study of Thomas Hardy’s much neglected short fiction will no doubt reveal that beneath the seemingly funny, at times fantastical stories lies the crucial issue of gender and gender relationships which goes to suggest that Hardy’s women possess an “instinctive self-
respect, an instinctive purity” and that “the so-called difference of sex is but a difference of degree” (DR, Part 4). Hardy’s women can be unconventional and original. He is the only male Victorian writer who allowed his women greater liberty and in doing so captured the spirit of the age – an age of changes, when the New Woman was seen to emerge out of her cocoon as a fully developed, beautiful and startling creature. The women in Hardy’s short fiction foreshadow not just Tess but also Sue Bridehead. This ability to capture the diverse nature of woman is Hardy’s strength. “Taken together the stories constitute a significant body of fictional output informed by Hardy’s characteristic moral and artistic predilection” (Hasan, 127).

Hardy does not accept the view that life is governed by two conscious and opposing forces – good and evil, or that good would ultimately triumph. He is not with Browning who believes, “God’s in his heaven, All’s right with the world” or with Tennyson who sees good slowly evolving through experimental stages. Hardy does not believe in the possibility of perfection, but he does hold that it is our duty to make the most of life by removing the obvious follies and abuses, without asking whether they can all be removed. He believes that life, here and now, conditioned as it is, can be beautiful and happy, if only we live it bravely and truly, surrendering nothing to bogeys.
Hardy certainly shows us a world in which human individuality and desire are in conflict with the different governing powers, but there is nothing to suggest his contempt for human will, endurance and passion.

Harold Child says that one of Hardy’s distinctive gifts as novelist and dramatist is his double vision. He observes that if Hardy sees the littleness, he sees also the greatness of life. Watching from infinity, he shows human life as futile and trivial. But looking out of the very heart of some farmer or milk-maid, he shows human life heroically grand. All may be futile in the long run, but all are engrossing to the interest and compel admiration. In this simultaneous consciousness of man’s greatness and of man’s futility lies the secret of Hardy’s tragedy. Here, lies the secret of his humanitarian pity.

The message of Hardy is not altogether one of despair when we consider what power of love, endurance and trust are possessed by a simple, rustic girl like Tess. When we contemplate all this beauty slowly ruined by causes that man himself has in his power to remove simply by enlarging his ideas, we feel a determination to let no stupidity or timidity stand in the way of such virtue as human nature may possess, and such happiness as human may realize. It can never be perfect virtue, it can never be perfect happiness; but it is possible for man, though limited in
scope and always under the shadow of an unsympathetic destiny, to strip
away artificial casings of misery and waste.

Hardy shows in his novels that the mass of men are content to live
safely within a comfortable moral order, but he that aspires to be free of
it must take this upon him, there is no kindly omnipotence to come to the
rescue when his own courage, or wisdom, or strength falls short.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Hardy says at the end of the novel,
“Man should discover the secret of making limited opportunities
endurable, by cunningly enlarging those minute forms of satisfaction that
offer themselves to everybody not in positive pain; which thus handled,
have much of the same inspiring effect upon life as wider interests
cursorily embraced” (*MC*, 330). Again in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, he
says, “Our plan should be to move onward through good and evil – to
avoid morbid sorrow even though we see ugliness in the world : to do
good cheerfully, following Spinoza; battle with our evil star and follow
out our ideals” (*T*, Chap. 24).

It should be noted that Hardy’s philosophy of life is marked with a
strong note of fatalism. In Hardy’s novels Destiny is character. Man is a
helpless creature, a mere puppet at the hands of Destiny or Fate. Man in
Hardy’s world does not enjoy Free Will. The keen eyes of fate are always
looking intently on his activities with a view to intervening as and when
it so likes. Man is not free to choose the type of life he wants to live. Obstacles and hindrances swarm on his path of life, and they thwart all his hopes and aspirations, though man wages a futile battle against the odds so created.

A struggle between men on the one hand and, on the other an omnipotent and indifferent fate – that is Hardy’s interpretation of the human situation. This struggle determines the character and nature of his drama. Like other dramas, this turns on a conflict, but the conflict is not, as in most novels between one man and another, or between man and an institution. Man in Hardy’s novels is ranged against impersonal forces, the forces conditioning his fate. His characters are always aware of this. Henchard is obsessed by his hatred of Farfare, Bathsheba looks on Troy as the author of her misfortunes. Bathsheba and Henchard are seen to be under a delusion. For those whom they think their enemies are, as much as themselves, puppets in the hands of Fate. In fact, Fate, not they, is ultimately responsible for their quarrels and subsequent miseries. Unless they were destined to do so, they would not be in conflict with each other. Not that Hardy refuses to make moral distinctions between his characters. On the contrary, his leading figures divide themselves into instruments for good and for evil. This line between them is determined by their attitude to themselves. All alike are striving for happiness: but
whereas Eustacia or Fitzpiers or Arabella strive with selfish passion, Gabriel and Tess and Giles are prepared to sacrifice their own happiness to ensure that of other people. This difference, however, in their character does not affect the issue. This is in the hands of Fate. It may also be noted here that forces of Fate, in Hardy’s novels, incarnate themselves in two forms – as chance and as love. Of these chance is the most typical, and in most of his novels, chance exercises a conspicuous influence on the course of events. Hardy has been blamed for this; and no doubt, he does sometimes overdo it. But to condemn his use of chance altogether is to misunderstand his view of life. In life we witness the battle between Man and Destiny. Destiny is an inscrutable force – we do not understand its nature or its intentions. And we cannot, therefore, predict what it will do. In consequence, its acts always show themselves in the guise of inexplicable, unexpected blows of chance. Hardy himself says that human destiny is

The view of life as a thing to be put up with, replacing that zest for existence which was so intense in early civilization must ultimately enter so thoroughly into the constitution of the advanced races that its facial expression will become accepted as a new artistic departure. People already feel that a man who lives without disturbing a curve of feature, or setting a mark of mental concern anywhere upon himself, is too far removed from modern perceptiveness to a modern type *(Personal Writings*, ed. Harold Orel, 1967).
This evidently shows that people will gradually develop a feeling of resignation and indifference, because it is useless to fight against the Omnipotent Power. But, on the other hand, it is advisable to develop an attitude of resistance against the shocks and bolts of destiny. The development of a mental shell will enable the man to overcome the depression that will enfeeble his faculties to give a brave fight to his adverse fate. In fact, Hardy pictures the future generations, not as weak but mentally strong. Hardy is of the opinion that in future, the idea of mere joy of living will be replaced by a sense of resignation and indifference towards the joys and sorrows that life offers, and that people will develop a mental outlook that will neither feel joy at good fortune nor will it be shocked at the unkind blows of destiny. Edmund Goose observes that, abandoned by God, treated with scorn by Nature, man lies helplessly at the mercy of those “purblind Doomsters”, accident, chance and time, from which he has to endure injury and insult from the cradle to the grave.

Hardy’s novels present a gloomy view of life. His novels have an atmosphere of brooding melancholy about them. They almost give an impression that life is a punishment inflicted by an undiscriminating hand. In all the major novels of Thomas Hardy, there emerges a sort of theory of society into which the facts, as he sees them, fit, and widens
into nothing less than a view of the universe. But Hardy was consciously trying to convince his readers that he was not trying to give a gloomy view. But, as Albert Elliot also remarks, that in Hardy’s novels, it appears certain that he was not conscious of the extent to which his interpretation of life and its problems was leading him into the field of pessimism. Hardy’s tragic novels are always an indictment, an exposure of injustices. Time after time, he was in revolt against a malicious divinity arbitrarily interfering with man’s purposes. As Henry W. Nevinson says, the sorrows crown of sorrow remembering happier things, the sorrow of frustrated aims, the sorrow of the grave and the end of living of questioning to the universe and to God. In the final paragraph of Tess, it is said to have been “the President of the Immortals” who has had his sport with the novel’s heroine. Jude the Obscure presents “the unfulfilled aims,” aims which are thwarted by two distinct agencies; first the old established social prejudices scorning a poor man’s ambitions and secondly, the man’s own weakness of character.

Hardy’s novels have an atmosphere of gloom, sorrow and tears. Sufferance is the badge of the tribe of Hardy’s men and women. In such an atmosphere one normally cannot expect to find humour of any type. But Hardy has tried to relieve the gloom of his novels by introducing humorous talk and actions of his Wessex peasants who serve the purpose
of “choric characters.” The main characters could not admit of any humour. Henchard, Tess or Jude may suffer and die but the rustics go on forever. The opening pages of Hardy’s novels often depict a solitary figure moving over a landscape or submerged in it. R.M. Rehder says that most of the stories begin by watching an isolated figure or pair of figures moving in a landscape, often at twilight, as if hovering between sleeping and walking. The opening pages of The Return of the Native, The Mayor of Casterbridge, Tess of the D’urbervilles and The Woodlanders exemplify this: “A Saturday afternoon in November was approaching the time of twilight...” (The Return of the Native); “One evening of late summer, before the nineteenth century has reached one-third of it’s span…” (The Mayor of Casterbridge); “On an evening in the latter part of May a middle-aged man was walking homeward, from Shaston to the village of Marlott…” (Tess of the D’urbervilles); “The rambler who, for old fashioned sake, should trace the forsaken coach-road running almost a meridional line from Bristol to the South shore of England…” (The Woodlanders). Ian Gregor states that, these opening sentences all catch the classic cadence of the story-teller, the isolating precision of place and time, going along with a generalized expansiveness. Hardy’s prophetic openings in which every detail seems to foreshadow major themes, in conjunction with conclusions that
confirm the openings, are responsible for the sense of inevitability. The openings take the reader into a world where man’s aspirations are blunted, as external circumstances conceived with man’s hidden flames. As Daniel R. Schwartz remarks, by fulfilling the promise of the beginnings, the endings imply that the world in which men live is closed and invulnerable to essential change. The title of Tess’s last phase, “Fulfilment” Hardy means the inevitable bringing to fruition of the pattern that derives from the interaction of the central character’s psyche with the world in which he is placed.

Most of Hardy’s novels have markedly unhappy endings. This is a significant characteristic of their form. R.M. Rehder aptly says that Hardy is the first major author to write a number of novels that end unhappily, although the conclusions of his best novels can be called tragic. Hardy’s novels are all different but have much in common. In *Far From the Madding Crowd*, he makes use of his knowledge of sheep-farming, in *The Return of the Native* of furze-cutting, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* of the corn business and in *Tess of the D’urbervilles* his agricultural background. It is as if Hardy consciously set out to vary the region and the local occupation of each of these novels so that eventually they became a kind of Wessex epic of the nineteenth century. In all his major novels there is a tragic stress and conflict. This conflict may be of
any type – social, emotional and personal. Besides these, the conflict between the rural and the urban, free will and predestination are also there. The tragic hero ultimately wins the reader’s sympathy and admiration. The heroic dimension of Hardyian characters depends upon their self-realisation. All the epic novels begin and end with the protagonists. Towards the close of *The Mayor, Tess, and Jude*, the main characters die. Their intense suffering has the basic principles of the tragedies of the Sophoclean type. Hardy creates accidents, coincidences, and other artificial things to snatch the cup of happiness from the mouths of his characters. For example, the urgent letter that Tess wrote to Angel, to come back to England, reaches him late. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Lucetta was expecting Henchard, and, in walks Farfrae who had come to see Elizabeth Jane and who is at once charmed by Lucetta’s beauty. Such instances scattered over the stories of Hardy – all so arranged that the characters should not become happy. That is why a critic has remarked that the greatest enemy of the characters of Hardy is not chance, not fate, not God, but Hardy himself.

Hardy’s men and women are remarkable creations, each distinct and sharply characterized. His special tenderness and his intuitive insight into the feminine hearts resulted in the creation of unforgettable characters like Tess and Eustacia Vye. The novels of Thomas Hardy
illustrate the Byronian dictum that love for man, is a thing apart; for women, it is their entire existence. They are more complex, more difficult to understand and more unpredictable in their natures. These aspects fascinated the writer even at a very early age.

The Wessex country-side and the lives of people around him made an indelible impression on his mind. Hardy’s heroes and heroines are star-crossed souls, struggling against the powerful cosmic forces. Hardy’s portrayal of the men and women in his novels poses this question: what is Hardy’s view of his men and women, and how does he judge them? While human nature in general is as varied as everything in the world, Hardy’s men have certain basic characteristics, but which are often ambivalent. Male egoism contrasts with the noblest self-renunciation; the aggressiveness of Henchard is at odds with his own needless reticence, apart from the contrasts with Jude’s tender selflessness. There is opposition within Jude’s nature rendering him almost ineffectual. The number and variety of characters created by Hardy is amazing. It is impossible to group characters into rigid types. The rustics who form a group are all varied in their peculiarities – Oak, Giles Winterborne and Diggory Venn are distinct in their characters and roles. Dr. Fitzpiers is just himself unlike the other prototypes – Wildeve, Sergeant Troy or Alec. Positive virtues run counter to negative
weaknesses – a strong Farfrae chooses his women rather too practically and even unwisely. The view of man as potentially noble, virtuous, patient and heroic, is often accompanied with weaknesses leading to failure, defeat and even self-destruction. A close scrutiny of the lives of Henchard and Jude provides sufficient evidence of Hardy’s “intuitive understanding” of man – he does not require the modern tools of psychological theories, when the problems of the unconscious are suggested. This is the hall mark of Hardy’s success as a novelist inspite of the crudeness and ineptitude in his design and style. The central figures in The Mayor of Casterbridge and Jude the Obscure are the products of Hardy’s mellowed wisdom gained from his writing experience of twenty five years. They are the sum of all his knowledge of Man and his place in the Universe. Henchard, Tess and Jude – each is a tragic figure; they have all qualities in common but their chequered destinies are different. Some characteristics of Jude link him with Henchard in The Mayor for instance, A.J. Guerard remarks, the common sensitiveness to music, the imprudent early marriages, the addiction to drink, the need to punish and degrade the self publicly. Henchard and Jude are both working men; they are both tragic figures of frustration and failure. Simple and earnest in their pursuits, they are given to fits of gloom and depression. Both are sensitive and basically kind and
unselfish. They are victims of their own self-destructive impulses directing them to their individual doom. Commenting on the ending of the two novels in relation to the two characters, A.J. Guerard aptly remarks, “Jude Fawley might have signed Henchard’s will,” and their desolate state at the end of the novels being almost similar.

Like his men, the women also belong to different classes and categories. The silent suffering of women like Marty South and Elizabeth-Jane, stands as contrast to the more volatile and wayward types like Eustacia, Viviette, Tess and more particularly Sue. Lucetta and Mrs. Charmond are the lonely intruders in the rustic countryside causing misery to themselves and to everyone around them. Hardy’s women are pre-eminently sublime victims. Clarice Short remarks that in his major novels Hardy ascribes much of the unhappiness of human life to the character of women, who more than men, are tools of the life force. Rosalind Miles states that, a woman in Hardy’s hands would be made to bear a weight of suffering whose infliction transcend the personal and move through human to sublime. It is also observed that Hardy’s preference is for women who belong to the countryside. The finest qualities of women are developed and cultivated in rural surroundings. Tess, Elizabeth-Jane and Marty South are noble and gentle because they have been reared in the rural surroundings. To Hardy, women of the city
are sophisticated, cunning and hypocritical. Eustacia Vye, Grace Mulburry, Lucetta have been spoilt by their contact with the artificial and sophisticated life of the cities. This analysis, gives a rough picture of the large world of feminine characters created by the great master, who stands next to Shakespeare in his insights into feminine psychology. Many of the more recent critics have accused Hardy of entrapment in conventional views of women’s character and sphere of action, or else they have remarked on his particular interest and sympathy for women. More recent feminist critics have suggested that the “women” in the works of a male writer find their significance primarily as a means to the representation of maleness. For instance, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Michael Henchard, in selling his wife and daughter to the sailor Newson, repeats in a startlingly blatant form the definitive patriarchal act of exchange. The women of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* are at once the instruments for the probing of the significance of patriarchal power of the male, and “idealized and melancholy projections of a repressed male self.” Taken as a whole, *The Woodlanders*, *Tess*, *Jude*, and *The Return of the Native* are expressive, irrefutable criticism of society’s debilitating version of womanhood. He was consistently interested in women and became more compassionate towards them. Patricia Stubbs comments, “Women are almost always at the centre of Hardy’s tragic,
uncompromising vision, not merely of the universe, as in so often claimed, but of men and women in society” (Stubbs, 58).

Hardy’s women are almost always destructive and dominant and his men are invariably passive, worked on by their whims and designs. Boldwood, Oak, Jude, Phillotson, Giles Winterborne – the overall picture of men suffering from the actions of selfish and unpredictable women is inescapable and barely modified by the occasional woman as victim, Fanny Robin, Tamsin, Tess and Grace Melbury. And of these, Tess and Grace are central characters. Hardy often underplays women as individuals and their personal psychology is lost in his habit of seeing them first as sexual agents of a destructive destiny and only second as people. In Jude, the two women Arabella and Sue, are defined almost entirely by their sexual responses, a split image of female sexuality which is neatly enforced by class “characteristics.”

Hardy’s men are comparatively quiet, reserved and silent in their suffering. But Hardy did bestow as much or even more attention on his men. His Gabriel Oak, Dr. Fitzpiers, Clym Yeobright, Henchard and Jude are all unforgettable persons. Hardy’s men can be distinctly categorized under a few groups, though this does not mean that they can be branded as types. There is first, the class of the rustics who always appear in groups and are engaged in the activities of the countryside. Work keeps
them together and they are occupied in bee-hiving, sheep shearing, timber-cutting, hay trussing or farming and such other occupations. Besides, with their native wisdom and experience they are like the chorus in a Greek tragedy, commenting on the main characters and events in the novel. They have a queer sense of humour and with the exception of *Jude the Obscure* they provide some comedy which is not unrelated to Hardy’s vision of life. Grandfer Cantle, Joseph Poorgrass, Timothy Fairways and Solomon Lonways all exemplify this. Further, men like Gabriel Oak and Giles Winterborne are natives of the countryside and also central characters in the novels. Passive but strong, acquiescent but firm, resigned but heroic, they gave their support to the weak-minded women whom they love. For instance the very name Oak suggests that he is the centre of stability in *Far From the Madding Crowd*. Each of these men has a distinct personality and role in the respective novels.

A.J. Guerard is the first perceptive critic to observe their “unaggressive” and passive natures as both faults and virtues. This is perhaps Hardy’s own divided opinion about them. In the competition with the “modern” men their defeat is inevitable. Hardy admires them even while he exposes them to gentle ridicule. Clym Yeobright, Angel Clare and Jude are three instances of dreamers and idealists, who are forced to face harsh realities. While Clym is the “native” who returns
from his diamond-cutting business in Paris to become a school teacher and later furze-cutter in Egdon Heath, Angel Clare is a visionary with his dreams of the “virginal woman” which Tess is not. Jude’s dreams of becoming a scholar are both pitiable and ludicrous. In all these cases, illusions conflict with the realities of life and tragedy inevitably follows. J.O. Bailey in his well known essay on Hardy’s “Mephistophelian Visitants” classifies Sergeant Troy, Dr. Fitzpiers, William Dare, Damon Wildeve, Alec D’Urberville and even Farfrae and Newson as men who appear mysteriously in the novels from somewhere and consciously or unconsciously bring other characters to doom. They are the intruders “the aliens” whose role, it seems, is to do harm. Sometimes, they appear like mechanical contrivances in the plot, popping out only to bring about a reversal in the plot. It is however interesting to observe that Hardy does not class them as villains, he even sympathizes and justifies them, giving them rewards which they do not deserve. Troy dies but Fitzpiers is rewarded, and Farfrae even wins the battle against Henchard. Henchard and Jude stand apart from these people as the male protagonists of the two novels, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Jude the Obscure*. *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is a grand tragedy, magnificent in its fullness of expression; Henchard is a “man of character.” Henchard is a colossal figure that bestrides the book eclipsing all the other people around him.
The Mayor of Casterbridge deserves to be classed among the great “epic” novels along with Tess and Jude the Obscure. In this novel the characters, though many, are subordinate to the central figure. Quite uniquely, the women play only a secondary role. Jude is the protagonist in a quite different way. He is the “puppet” with whom life and the other characters play as a kitten does with a ball. This truth about Jude involved Hardy’s pity when he referred to him as “my poor puppet”. Jude’s innate nobility, his kindness to everyone, his self abnegation and also his struggles for self education elevate him in the reader’s estimation. If Henchard is heroic in spite of his failures, Jude is an anti-hero despite his aims and ambitions. One of the important features of Hardy’s characterization is that he presents good people with great admiration and gusto, and condemns villains and sophisticated persons with a sneering contempt. Hardy’s sympathy is always with good, noble and gentle hearted characters like Tess, Elizabeth-Jane, Gabriel oak and Venn, the Riddle man. He has a distinct dislike for shifty, cunning and hypocritical characters like Sergeant Troy, Dr. Fitzpiers and Wildeve.

According to some critics, Hardy’s faith in determinism makes him a pessimist, who sees no glory in life, little scope for happiness and perfection, man struggling in vain against an unsympathetic nature and adverse circumstances. His temperament is also responsible for this view
of life. He is by nature “vocal” to tragedy, rather than joy. He is apt to visualize men and women as snatching at happiness, striving to express and fulfill themselves, but only breaking themselves against a power that takes no heed of them. His historical contemplation of Wessex and its people is partly responsible for this gloomy view. The world is very old, and the life of man is very brief. The Romans used to drink and talk at Casterbridge as men do today, over Edgon Heath, the generations of men pass ceaselessly and leave no trace. Although the insignificance of man and the briefness of his life are always present in Hardy’s mind, he rejects to criticism that his “impressions” “pessimistic” calling it a “a nice wicked adjective” used by some critics to describe his work and vision. In the “Preface” to the Wessex Edition of Jude the Obscure, 1912, Hardy claims:

It must be obvious that there is a higher characteristic of philosophy than pessimism, or than meliorism, or even than the optimism of these critics – which is truth (J, 409).

Hardy as an artist creates in his novels an imaginative world expressing the real world as he sees. He sees in his world a bitter struggle for existence, among men as among beasts and birds, plants and trees. He is keenly alive to the thwarted desires, unsatisfied longings, undeserved sufferings, conflict of duties, broken commandments, disappointments and disillusionment, high and noble aspirations ending in miserable
existence. It is in the *Tess of the D’Ubérvilles* of all Hardy’s novels that his gloomy view of world is most strikingly expressed. Referring to the numerous children of the poor and feckless Durbeyfields, Hardy complains that children are born where they are not wanted. On the other hand, children are forced into the world without their having been asked “if they wished for life on any terms, much less if they wished for it on any such hard conditions as were involved in being of the shiftless house of Durbeyfield”. They are described as “passengers in Durbeyfield ship”, as “little captives under hatches compelled to sail wherever the Durbeyfield household chose to sail; into difficulty, disaster, starvation, disease, degradation or death” (*T*, 33). Hardy turns towards Wordsworth and demands to know whence the poet derived his authority for speaking of “Nature’s holy plan.” The government of the world appears to Hardy as the “ill-judged execution of the well-judged plan of things” for the man to love rarely coincides with the hour for loving. There is a perpetual hide and seek between man and nature till life becomes “an irksome, outworn game.” Man and woman wander about earth, like two halves of a perfect whole, out of which spring, anxieties, disappointments, catastrophes, and passing strange destinies. Hardy wonders if man will ever develop a finer intention and a closer interaction of the social machinery than the one that exists at present.
Commenting upon the knowledge gained by Tess through better experience, Hardy says; “At least she learned what to do; but who would now accept her doing? Experience teaches us truth; but at the same time incapacitates us for acting upon them. What an irony is there! We do not realize the whole truth of golden opinions while it is possible to profit by them. Knowledge comes too late. We are told how to live rightly, but are not permitted to do so” (T, Ch. 15).

There is a morbidness in the sentiment that “the day of our death lies slyly and unseen among all the other days of the year. Giving no sign or sound when we annually passover it; but not the less surely there” (T, 446). Hardy winds up the story of Tess with the remark that life is a sport of the gods with mortals. In his Mayor of Casterbridge Hardy remarks in one place, “life is a brief transit through a sorry world and hardly calls for effusiveness. Happiness is but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain” (MC, 322). Again, “Life and its surroundings are tragical rather than comical and though one could be gay on occasion, moments of gaiety are interludes and no part of the actual drama” (MC, Ch. 8).

It is amazing how little is known about Thomas Hardy’s shorter fiction, considering the fact that he wrote nearly fifty short stories – Wessex Tales (1888), A Group of Noble Dames (1891), Life’s Little Ironies (1894) and A Changed Man and other Tales (1913). These stories
were written between 1874 and 1900 – around the time that he wrote his major fiction. “The care with which he revised and arranged many of these stories suggests that he took much interest in them as in his other writings” (Hasan, 104). An early reviewer of the anthology of the short stories commented, “If he had produced nothing but the short stories that have been assembled in this fat volume, what an abounding legacy of human histories he would have left behind” (Gibson, 148-9). Before this “legacy” of short stories can be examined to assess their relevance to a study of gender relations, a comprehensive research is required on the impact made on women, in general, by the social infrastructure and religious interpretations prevalent at the time. Therefore, a study of the historical, social, economical and political events that impacted man-woman and gender relationships and their portrayal in the literary works dating from the Elizabethan Age is essential.

Women in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were challenged with expressing themselves in a patriarchal system that generally refused to grant merit to women’s views. Cultural and political events during these centuries increased attention to women’s issues such as educational reform and by the end of the eighteenth century, women were increasingly able to speak out against injustices. Though modern feminism was non-existent, many women expressed themselves and
exposed the conditions they faced, albeit often indirectly, using a variety of creative and subversive methods.

The social structure of sixteenth century Europe allowed women limited opportunities for involvement; they served largely as managers of their households. Women were expected to focus on practical domestic pursuits and activities that encouraged the betterment of their families, and more particularly, their husbands. In most cases education for women was not advocated – it was thought to be detrimental to the traditional female virtues of innocence and morality. Women who spoke out against the patriarchal system of gender roles or any injustice ran the risk of being exiled from their communities or worse, vocal unmarried women in particular were the targets of witch hunts. Anne Hutchinson who challenged the authority of Puritan clergy, was excommunicated for her outspoken views and controversial actions. Anne Askew, a well-educated, out-spoken English Protestant was tried for heresy in 1558, her denial of transubstantiation was grounds for imprisonment. She was eventually burned at the stake for her refusal to incriminate other Protestant court ladies. Elizabeth I ascended the throne in 1558, a woman who contradicted many of the gender roles of the age. She was well-educated, having studied a variety of subjects including Mathematics, foreign languages, Politics and History. Elizabeth I was an outspoken but
a widely respected leader, known for her oratory skills as well as patronage of the arts. Despite the advent of the age of print, the literacy rate during this period remained low, though the Bible became more readily available to the lower classes. Religious study, though restricted to “personal introspection,” was considered an acceptable pursuit for women and provided them with another context within which they could communicate their individual ideas and sentiments. In addition to religious material, women of this period often expressed themselves through the ostensibly private forms of letters and autobiographies.

Within this period, Shakespeare’s representation of women and the ways in which his female roles are interpreted and enacted have become topics of scholarly interests. Shakespeare’s heroines encompass a wide range of characterizations and types. Within the gallery female characters, Shakespeare’s women characters display great intelligence. These qualities have led some critics to consider Shakespeare as a champion of womankind and an innovator who departed sharply from flat, stereotypical characterizations common to his contemporaries and earlier dramatists. Contrastingly, other commentators note that even Shakespeare’s most favourably portrayed women possess characters that are tempered by negative qualities. They suggest that this indicates that Shakespeare was not free from misogynistic tendencies that were deep-
seated in the culture of his country and era. William Shakespeare lived during the Elizabethan era and wrote all his works based on the society of that time. The Elizabethan era was a time when women were portrayed as the weaker gender. It was firmly believed that “women are to be seen and not heard” (Calder, 160).

The historical records reveal that the position of women in this society was extremely miserable. They occupied an inferior position and were always oppressed. It was a natural phenomenon, accepted and practiced in every household whether rich or poor. In Shakespeare’s plays, there is a positive attitude towards the female characters especially in his famous tragedies – *Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, King Lear, Antony and Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet*. According to Virginia Woolf, Shakespeare is a writer who made his work transparent and free of any personal vices in delineating the women characters of his extraordinary genius for portraying human behaviour. While depicting the conditions of women in a patriarchal society he clothes their character with a richness that transcends the boundaries of time and space. In *Hamlet and Macbeth*, one sees potential conflicts arising from female ambition for sovereign power and corruption of the political body through corruption of the female sovereign body. In both plays, Shakespeare mirrors the anxiety within the Elizabethan culture due to the existence of and
dependence upon a female monarch. Again, both plays end with the diminution of the female sovereign authority and an apparent return to a state of normalcy within a more traditional patriarchal framework. The return to patriarchy represents both Shakespeare’s political resolution and the Elizabethan cultural desire.

Shakespeare realizes that throughout the history of mankind, women have always been at a disadvantageous position socially, economically and politically. Through strong female characters, Shakespeare has delineated gender issues. He has given comprehensive views of life with equal emphasis on both male and female characters. His female characters show the social stigma attached to their gender during the times. Shakespeare’s heroines are strong, intelligent and independent and in this regard we can consider him to be one of the pioneers of the feminist movement in Literature. Deeply influenced by classical drama and by Shakespearean tragedy, Hardy framed his own tragic pattern. Hardy himself states in his diary: “a tragedy exhibits a state of things in the life of an individual which unavoidably causes some natural aim or desire of his to end in a catastrophe when carried out.” Tragedy according to him “may be created by an opposing environment either of things inherent in the universe, or of human institutions.” Hardy thus classified his own view of tragedy in several of his personal
writings. Jeannette King observes how, the titles of his four great tragic novels define the central characters by such “situations” – “the Native,” “the Mayor,” “the Obscure” and “the D’Urbervilles.” Hardy also wrote that his art consisted in intensifying “the expression of things.” Hardy himself defined tragedy thus: “the best tragedy highest tragedy …. Is that of the WORTHY encompassed by the INEVITABLE” (Personal Writings ed. Harold Orel, 1967). In The Mayor of Casterbridge and Jude the Obscure, life appears stark and cruel with very little or no bright intervals of hope or joy. Jude the Obscure is the gloomiest of his novels – devoid of even the faintest trace of humour. Hardy once commented, “All tragedy is grotesque – if you allow yourself to see it as such.” Henchard, Tess and Jude, among others are examined in terms of modern depth psychology. But even at the external level Hardy’s love of the abnormal and morbid love of horror and sensation are evident in scenes like the pig-killing episode and the murder of the innocent children in Jude. Tess’s murder of Alec with a knife with the blood dripping through the ceiling is another instance. Among the earlier novels in Far From the Madding Crowd Bathsheba’s opening the coffin of Fanny Robin is almost new, dramatic, in a Dickensian or even Jacobean way. Hardy’s short stories provide scores of examples of this love of the macabre.
The seventeenth century was not an era of drastic changes in the status or condition of women. Women continued to play a significant, though not acknowledged, role in economic and political structures through their primarily domestic activities. They often acted as counsellors in the home, “tempering their husbands” words and actions. Though not directly involved in politics, women’s roles within the family and local community allowed them to influence the political system. Women were discouraged from directly expressing political views counter to their husbands’ or to broadly condemn established systems, nevertheless, many women were able to make public their private views through the veil of personal, religious writings. Again, women who challenged societal norms and prejudices risked their lives – Mary Dyer was hanged for repeatedly challenging the Massachusetts Law that banished Quakers from the colony. Though their influence was often denigrated, women participated in various community activities. For example, women were full members of English guilds, guild records include references to “brethren and sistern” and “freemen and freewomen.” During the seventeenth century, women’s writings continued to focus largely on religious concerns, but increasingly, women found a creative and intellectual outlet in private journals and letter–writing. Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative, published in
1682, is a famous narrative ostensibly for personal use that was made public and became a popular success.

The eighteenth century brought the beginning of the British cultural revolution. With the increasing power of the middle class and an expansion in consumerism, women’s roles began to evolve. The economic changes brought by the new middle class provided women with the opportunity to be more directly involved in commerce. Lower to middle-class women often assisted their husbands in work outside the home. It was still thought unseemly for a lady to be knowledgeable of business, so though some class distinctions were blurring, the upper class was able to distinguish themselves from the rest of society. The rise in consumerism allowed the gentry to place a greater emphasis on changing fashion and “display”, further distancing them from the middle class. With the advent of changes in rules of fashion and acceptable mores within society, some women established a literary niche writing etiquette guides. Also due to the cultural revolution, mounting literacy rates among the lower classes caused an increase in publishing, including the rise of the periodical. Men and women of all classes found new ways to express ideas in the wider publishing community. Though, women found a wider market for publication, the act of professional writing was still considered “vulgar” among the aristocracy. In defiance of social
strictures, women such as Mary Wollstonecraft began to speak out publicly on women’s rights, including education and marriage laws. Though women had better access to education, the goal was to attain an “ideal womanhood.” A “proper education” was viewed as one that supported domestic and social activities but disregarded more academic pursuits. Women such as Wollstonecraft advocated access to education for women that was equal to that of their male counterparts. Marriage laws, which overwhelmingly favoured men, also spurred public debate, though little was accomplished with regard to reform laws during this period.

Throughout the world, women took action to advance their political and social rights. Catherine the Great of Russia devised a coup d’état to seize the throne in 1762, an aggressive act to prevent her son’s disinheritance. Catherine was a shrewd politician, and used wide public support to enact laws that significantly altered the Russian political system. In France, Olympe de Gouges demanded equal rights for women in the new French Republic, and was eventually guillotined in 1793. Madame Roland, who also met an untimely death in 1793, influenced revolutionary politicians and thinkers during the French Revolution through her famous salon. She too was an activist for women’s social and political rights and was executed for treason, largely due to her outspoken
feminist ideas. Phillis Wheatley, an African-American slave, examined slavery and British Imperialism in her poetry. Increasingly, women rejected traditional roles and spoke out against the social and political inequalities they faced. The century closed with the deaths of visionaries such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Catherine the Great, and the birth of a new breed of female writers and scholars. The political and social changes that took place in the eighteenth century paved the way for these future writers and activists to advance the cause of women’s rights.

Since the Elizabethan times, the role of women has changed slowly and gradually. In the Elizabethan times most people’s rights were fairly limited. There was no democracy, and most people had very little say in national politics, though on the parochial level, men and women could be elected to parish councils. What people did with their lives was much influenced by social class, degree of wealth education and gender. It was taken for granted that people deferred to those of the higher class and the young to the old. This trend continued till the nineteenth century, when men and women obtained significantly more rights, for instance, until 1833, in the UK, only a very small number of propertied men had the right to vote. But the franchise was extended to more men in the course of the nineteenth century and to women in the early twentieth century. For women specifically, there were married women’s property acts which
were passed between the 1860s and 1880s. The divorce laws were changed so that a woman could obtain divorce from an adulterous or abusive spouse, and the Infant Custody Act gave women who were innocent parties in a divorce the right to have custody of young children. Women began entering University in the 1860s although, even for men, it was the privilege of the titled and rich minority. There were more occupations opened to women in the later of the nineteenth century, the invention of the typewriter, for example, led to more women being employed in offices from the 1860s onwards. The invention of the telephone gave employment to many women as operators and secretaries. Women became librarians, nurses, governesses and teachers. Some even studied law and medicine. For the working class women, though, the main areas of employment remained what they had always been as domestic helpers, clothes makers, shop keepers. One occupation that declined in prestige was that of the midwife. In the Elizabethan times, the role of the midwife in society was an important one, since childbirth was regarded as an exclusively female affair. The midwife had to be a woman of good character and was licensed by the local bishop since she was authorized to baptize newborn babies, who she thought were unlikely to live long enough to have a proper baptism. However, in the eighteenth century, the rise of the obstetrician meant that the midwife became a
marginal figure in the child-birth process. The Industrial Revolution and the separation of the home from the work place also brought about a decline in the role of a housewife. In the Elizabethan time, when most people lived in the country and were, at least, partially self-sufficient, being a housewife was a demanding role that involved many skills. A housewife had to brew and bake, spin and weave, preserve food, make home remedies for illness, make household items like soaps and candles, some women even made their own cosmetics and perfume. They were also in charge of the poultry and dairy and churned their own butter and cheese selling the surplus produce at local markets. But the Industrial Revolution brought about a separation of work place from home which ultimately led to a decline in the prestige of a housewife as she could no longer contribute to the family income.

In this world, which was fast changing, Thomas Hardy can be viewed as the last lonely representation of an ancient race. Endowed with Elizabethan imagination, he found himself by Destiny in an unknown world of the later nineteenth century. He did not find man to be a noble piece of nature but found him to be the late and transient product of some automatic principle of life, cast in a universe he knew nothing about and to whom he was nothing. He therefore, sought comfort in the imaginary world called Wessex, where men and women struggle to overcome the
obstacles encountered in their journey through life and, happiness is but a brief episode in the general drama of life. In order to understand Hardy’s “Philosophy of Life” his treatment of the female characters and the ranging vision found in his poems, novels and short stories, we have to understand the historical era he belonged to – The Victorian Age.

Queen Victoria’s coronation in 1837 signals the official inception of an era which we now designate as The Victorian Era, just as her death in 1901 marks its official demise. Amid the working of social and political forces of this age, a few things stand out clearly. It was an age of democracy, educational awareness, religious tolerance, as well as an age of profound social unrest. Thousands of men, women and children in the factories and mines became victims of both social and industrial slavery. Therefore the Victorian period became synonymous with great upheavals and reconstructuring of ideas and theories at the social, economic, political and religious levels. It is also known as the Age of Skepticism, when the old order of society seemed to be crumbling under the weight of the new order. Age-old beliefs, which provided people faith, support and succour were shattered as new scientific theories were introduced. Darwin’s Theory of Evolution in his book The Origin of Species shook the foundations of Christianity.
Victorian culture emphasized nationalism and Cultural Absolutism. The Victorians placed humans above and outside nature and believed in a single way of looking at the world with absolute and clear-cut dichotomies between right and wrong, good and bad, and, hero and villain. Further, they saw the world as being governed by God’s Will and that each person and thing in the world as having a specific use. Finally, according, to them mankind was neatly divided into the “civilized” and the “savage” people - the civilized people belonged to industrial nations, cash-based economies, Protestant Christian traditions and patriarchal societies; the savage people belonged to agrarian and hunter tribes, barter-based economies, pagan or totemistic tradition and matriarchal (or, at least, “unmanly”) societies.

Similarly, women in the Victorian Period were still struggling for the essential human rights. The age marked by a growing agitation for the equality for women and the conventional social response to the agitation was largely unfriendly. The women’s rights protests challenged the received wisdom about appropriate women’s behaviour. One aspect of the challenge was the more or less formal Women’s Rights Movement protesting a whole range of social and domestic injustices. Many women were willing to struggle for emancipation even at the cost of death. They had lived for too long under many societal constraints, which kept them
subservient and shackled to their relationships. When these women struck out for independence and vitality, they were often crushed by an unbending Victorian society whose mores did not encourage personal growth or empowerment for women. Furthermore, within the Victorian society, women had an extremely well-defined repressive and limited roles to play with strict taboos surrounding female sexuality and passion. From infancy they were kept ignorant of the mystery of their female bodies and puberty, defloration and sexual intercourse were subjects not fit for polite conversation. Added to these social constraints were rigid laws that afforded little freedom to the “inferior sex.” The status and positioning of women in Victorian society was based on the presumption that they were by nature inferior to men. This picture of them was also inscribed in the law; women along with lunatics and working-class men were denied, for instance the right to vote. In addition to the law, women’s lesser status became evident also in literature; novels both reflected and confirmed the prevailing account of women as essentially inferior to men. Besides viewing women as less than adults, certain ideal characteristics were attached to them, which were also endorsed by literature. According to one of the most pervasive ideologies of the age, the ideal womanly virtues were sacrifice, self-effacement, moral purity and service. Coventry Patmore’s domestic epic, The Angel in the House
(1854-62), for example, conveniently suggested that to be truly feminine, a woman must fulfil the functions of wife and mother which nature has assigned to her, and thus become a self-effacing angelic figure who dedicates her life to the service of her husband and children, like Baptista in “A Mere Interlude.” Interestingly enough, as argued by Shirley Foster, there were many women in the period who apparently not only accepted this view, but actually sought to make it widely known like Phillipa in *Noble Dames*. Many nineteenth century female writers, for example, earnestly stated their belief in an exclusively domestic standard of womanly excellence. It will be illuminating at this juncture to highlight some of the laws, which adversely impacted the lives of women in the Victorian Age [Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries*]:

1. **Marriage laws** – Through marriage the husband and wife are, by law, one person: that is, the very being or legal existence of the women is suspended after marriage. This system of coverture underpinned the laws of Victorian England so far as they related to married women. In effect, a woman surrenders her legal existence on marriage.

2. **Property** – On marriage, the control of the woman’s real property and income, that is, property held in the form of freehold land passed under common law to her husband, though he could not dispose it without her consent. Her personal property, that is, money from
earnings or investments, and personal belongings such as jewelry, passed absolutely into his control, and she could part with them only with his consent; he could, however, overrule any bequest made by her on her personal property. To evade these provisions under the common law, it was necessary to agree to a marriage settlement under Equity Law.

The Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act, 1857, denied the husband any rights to the earnings of a wife he had deserted and returned, to a woman divorced or legally separated, the Property Rights of a single woman. The Married Woman’s Property Act of 1870, allowed women to keep earnings or property acquired after marriage and further The Married Woman’s Property Act, 1882, allowed a woman to retain what she owned at the time of marriage. The Property Laws before 1882 had further consequences, related to the fiction of the legal identity of husband and wife. A married woman could not sue or be sued, for example, if she felt herself libelled, only her husband could sue and claim for damages, because he was the only injured party, but she could not. Correspondingly, he became liable for her debts and contracts and for any breaches of the law committed by her before or during their marriage, since it was held that she acted only under her husband’s direction (it was this
provision that made Dickens’ Mr Bumble declare that the law is an ass). In brief, married women held the same legal status as criminals, minors and the insane. It was only post-1882, that the possibility of success in the campaign for women’s suffrage was greatly improved since one powerful argument against it – that a married woman was simply the extension of her husband, so that married men should in effect have two votes – was made less plausible.

3. Divorce – Before the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act, 1857, divorce could be obtained in England, through a cumbersome process involving a suit by the husband against another man for “criminal conversation,” that is, for compromising his wife and therefore diminishing her value, so that he could claim damages. Then, there was an Ecclesiastical Divorce which did not allow the right to remarriage and a private Act of Parliament which separated the parties “exvinculis matrimonii” (from the chains of marriage) and did allow re-marriage. The 1857 Act designed in the effect, to allow moderately wealthy men to divorce their wives. A woman could be divorced on simple grounds of her adultery (her adultery threatened his ability to pass his property to his male heirs), whereas a woman had to prove adultery aggravated by desertion (for two years), or by cruelty, rape, sodomy, incest or bigamy. The husband could claim damages against
the adulterous third party, the wife could not. There was no provision for consensual divorce, so for example, the divorce granted Jude and Sue in *Jude the Obscure* would have been invalid since they were not, in fact, adulterous and they had been in breach of law in allowing it to be supposed they were. This was the law till 1923, when the grounds of divorce were made the same for both sexes. Until Legal Aid became available in 1949, divorce remained expensive and the less well-to-do had to make use of the Matrimonial Causes Act 1878 which allowed a less costly separation but without the rights to re-marriage. This Act promised maintenance to the woman separated from her husband in case of assaults. It also triggered off discussions on various marriage problems including neglect or simple incompatibility. Mona Caird wrote profusely about the marriage debate in several of her articles. For, her marriage was “an established system of restriction” where “the victims are expected to go about perpetually together, as if they were a pair of carriage horses” (Caird, 166). The Victorian society held rigid views on marriage and the role of women in Life. Most women regarded marriage as a fixed fact of nature. It was a fundamental part of their life plan, as with childbearing. In the mid-nineteenth century, reproduction was considered a woman’s only correct occupation. Therefore, Marriage
and Divorce Legislations regulated the relations between men and women. When a woman married, she lost her independent legal personality as a “femme sole” (sole woman) and became a “femme couvert” (covered woman). Men could divorce their wives solely on the grounds of adultery but women were forced to show proof of cruelty and infidelity. Divorce being expensive, people preferred to simply live apart or separated from one another. The Matrimonial Causes Act, 1923, equalized the grounds for divorce by allowing a woman to sue an adulterous husband for divorce.

4. Education – Campaigns to improve women’s education continued throughout the century, strengthened by the imbalance of numbers between men and women (there were half a million more women than men). Queen’s and Bedford Colleges at London University offered women education at the end of the 1840’s; colleges for women at Oxford and Cambridge began in the 1860s and 1870s, while the Girls Public Day School Trust, Cheltenham’s Ladies College and other new institutions sought to improve the intellectual training offered to girls in their teens. Resistance to these developments came especially from the medical profession, who argued that the physical demands of menstruation and the intellectual demands of study were incompatible and that educated women would become mothers of “a puny,
enfeebled and sickly race.” Key texts in this debate are to be found in the *Forthnightly Review* 1874, by Henry Maudsley and Elizabeth Garret Anderson (the first woman doctor) under the title *Sex, Mind and Education*.

5. Children – Children, these “little ambassadors of the familiar and expected” as one feminist called them late in the century, were also the property of the husband. The Act of 1839 allowed an innocent wife, custody of her children under the age of seven years, later raised to sixteen years in 1873. The Infants Custody Act of 1886, made the welfare of the children the determining factor in deciding questions of custody, but even then, the father remained, during his lifetime, the sole legal guardian.

Consistently, with these provisions, a woman’s body was also held to belong to her husband. It was not until 1891 that a High Court Ruling denied the husband the right to imprison his wife in pursuit of his conjugal rights. It was not until 1991, that a similar ruling denied him the right to rape her.

6. Prostitution – The Contagious Diseases Act (1864, 1866, 1869) were introduced, in order, to protect members of the home forces from sexually transmitted diseases. In their final form, they provided that where a woman was believed to be acting as a “common prostitute” (a
term not defined in the Act) within ten miles of one of eighteen specified naval and garrison towns, she could be reported to a magistrate and obliged to attend for inspection at hospitals, created for the purpose. If found to be diseased, she could be detained for up to nine months for treatment; refusal to attend could be met with forcible examination (termed “instrumental rape,” by opponents of the Act) or by imprisonment. The Acts were repealed in 1886, following a campaign led by Josephine Butler. Incident to this campaign was another, to raise the age of consent from twelve to thirteen in 1875, and then to sixteen in 1885. The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 followed the exposure by the journalist W.T. Stead of a trade in child prostitution. The facts about male sexuality disclosed by the campaigns of Josephine Butler and Stead, among others, helped to radicalize a number of women, though it should be remembered that most of those working in both causes were less concerned with liberation than with moral rearmament. The new Law offered coercion as well as protection; it was under this legislation, that Oscar Wilde was sentenced, a decade later and there was pressure to raise the age of consent to twenty-one.

Into this world of strict social codes, Hardy came into being. He lived in a time where marriage was the expected practice for young men
and women. He had a very distinct view of the institution and the implications that came along with it. He was himself, married twice in his long life, both times not very happily, and had progressive views about the union of the sexes, most particularly regarding divorce. His ideas and opinions are not too carefully concealed in his literary works, though, he contested that he kept his own views out of his fiction.

There are a number of injudicious, difficult, and failed marriages in Hardy’s work and some of the ideas in Hardy’s portrayal of women in his short stories especially in *The Wessex Tales* which was set in the nineteenth century, he got from his grandparents; he used to spend long evenings next to the fire listening to his grandparents telling stories from the past. He also got his ideas from things that he heard from the locals and things that happened in his village. Hardy was acutely aware of the social status of people, how village and town life was conducted, how men and women reacted to their own sex and to each other and the part religion and laws played in people’s lives. During his 88 years he wrote fifteen novels and one he never published. He also wrote over 900 poems. He wrote and published four volumes of short stories. Thomas Hardy invented his own places, highlighting the point that women around that time do not have a say in anything. The expectations of women were that they had a lower profile. At this time, people lived in close-knit
communities and each knew the other well and if anyone erred, gossip rendered them victims of their community which usually resulted in isolation.

Due to the importance that was attached to the role of wifehood, the Victorians deemed marriage as the ideal example of womanly fulfillment, alternatives to which were regarded as either pitiable or unnatural (Foster, 6). As Nina Auerbach discusses, even women who were wealthy enough to live comfortably on their own, chose matrimony over singleness like Lady Icenway and Lady Penelope. Although they did not need a husband for financial reasons, they aspired to the marital status, for society rejected old maids. However, in spite of the emotional and psychological pressures to marry, the percentage of females independently supporting themselves increased during the century, (for example, Sally and Leonora in Wessex Tales and Life’s Little Ironies) . According to Shirley Foster, this was partly because of the sexual imbalance – there were more women than men – partly because many men were marrying later or not at all, and partly because a growing number of eligible bachelors emigrated to the colonies (Foster, 7). As a result, it was literally impossible for a considerable proportion of Victorian women to ever experience matrimony. Given this state of affairs, as Foster argues, the issue of marriage became a source of great
anxiety for Victorian women; as in the Noble Dames they were trapped by the pervasive ideology that a woman’s sphere is in the home as a wife, mother and devoted home maker. They understood that it was wrong to pretend that these roles were available to all. Since it was impossible for all women to achieve these fulfillments, they began to claim that society should stop promoting delusive ideologies, which, as Shirley Foster puts it, only caused unnecessary pressures on women.

To a modern reader, ironically enough, Victorian singleness appears in many ways more attractive than the married state. Although a number of laws which improved women’s legal position were passed towards the end of the century, married women continued to be treated more or less as objects possessed by their husbands. As Merryn Williams points out, for example, once engaged, a woman lost the right to use her money or sell her property without her future-husband’s consent. Up to the time of the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, it was nearly impossible for a wife to petition for divorce. From then on, obtaining a divorce became somewhat easier, as it no longer required an Act of Parliament, but became a matter that had to be dealt with in a civil court. Edith Harnham and Raye in “On the Western Circuit” were separated though genuinely in love with each other due to the inavailability of divorce; Emmeline (GND) ran away to escape a cruel husband only to die at sea.
Although the grounds for dissolving a marriage were now treated separately for each partner, the 1857 Act still disadvantaged wives. Whereas a man was able to get a divorce for even a single act of his wife’s adultery, a wife had to not only prove her husband’s adultery, but also to provide some aggravating factor, such as bigamy or extreme cruelty. Adultery without an aggravating factor was not regarded as an adequate reason for a woman to sue for divorce until 1923. As Ingham argues, such a standard encouraged the prevailing sexual double standards; a man’s adultery was not regarded as the same kind of offence against the marriage as a wife’s (Ingham, 57).

As the nineteenth century was drawing to its end, an alteration was taking place in the prevailing sexual ideology, which had its effects also on Victorian marriage. According to Penny Boumelha, there was a decisive shift from moral discourse to that of the scientific, and in consequence, the authority of Christian morality that had been dominating sexual ideology became replaced by the authority of biological law. Evolution, as Boumelha explains, replaced God as the origin of moral behaviour, and it merged together the moral and the natural. This shift changed Victorian marriage as well, as it became more secularized. What it brought with it was a set of complicated rules and procedures, and a specific emphasis was placed upon marital duties,
obligations, rights and privileges. In Rosemarie Morgan’s view, therefore, the late-Victorian marriage became assimilated to “a male governing order less concerned with holy rite than with patriarchal might.” Thomas Hardy evinced interest in the nature of Victorian matrimony as well, and when Jude the Obscure was published, it was viewed by many as the author’s contribution to the growing discussion about marriage. Hardy explained, however, that the matrimonial institution was important to the novel – since one of its themes has to do with marriage and its legal aspects – but only as a means, not an end, as is suggested by William R. Goetz (Goetz, 190). The author admitted, though, that he was very skeptical about marriage as the ultimate goal of happiness for two people in love, and in Jude, as Morgan argues, Hardy gives one last twist to the marriage-and- happy-ending denouement that he had always regarded as false and misleading.

When Hardy began to write novels that increasingly focused on the “Woman Question” – as the temporary people called the discussion of women’s rights and role – he showed clear signs of unconventionality both in the way he used language and the way he treated his topics. By the 1880s, Hardy had recognized explicitly his desire to change novelistic language as it related to women, and as he later told a journalist and editor in 1891, he felt that “the doll of English fiction” must be
demolished. He also took up topics such as marital breakdown and adultery as found in “A Changed Man,” which had been made well-known by the sensation novels. According to Ingham, however, Hardy’s treatment of such topics in *Tess* and *Jude* differs considerably from his prior works. In her view, the author had now abandoned the hypocritical approach commonly associated with these subjects, and his treatment had become more direct.

Hardy’s personal philosophy on “the marriage question” – (it was a subject dear to his heart, since he felt that his own marriage to Emma Gifford had run onto the rocks of boredom and indifference once it had passed beyond its early days of romance) as it was often phrased, was progressive for his time. He felt that the institution of marriage damaged through “overregulation” what it sought to protect. He felt that it was absurd to force two people to vow to love each other forever and if that failed, the couple was socially required to stay together. Marriage in Hardy’s fictional world, means unhappiness. Rarely is a married couple blessed with marital bliss. Perhaps, this accounts for the reluctance of the majority of Hardy’s heroines to marry. So many marriage licenses are cancelled and many are sought for at the spur of the moment. Moreover extra-marital affairs are quite common. His fictional world throngs with heart breakers as well as girls and women who are evasive, coquettish
and enchanting. Divorce was not only expensive, but it went against the social mores of Victorian society as can be discerned from the legislation incorporated then. Hardy was not so much against marriage as against the idea that it was an irrevocable contract.

Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* deals with the full spectrum of gender issues: while approaching the gendered system as posing problems for both male and female lovers; while, Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* seeks to transcend gender within love altogether. The women in Jane Austen’s novels offer a clear representation of the nineteenth century women. Austen refuses these women any sexual expression and focuses more upon their concern with marriage and society. Thomas Hardy resists Austen’s socially accepted depiction of the female, with his radically independent heroines. He redefines the role of his women in his fiction by focusing on their sexuality. By emphasizing the physical aspect of femininity in his unorthodox representation of the sexual female, Hardy threatens the Victorian model of women. In an age that placed a high value on reticence, self-restraint and certain feminine qualities such as delicacy of health, a retiring disposition, physical and intellectual timidity, Hardy’s women with their admixture of qualities – transcending the stereotypes of Madonna and whore – must have confused many readers caught with conflicting feelings of admiration and
alarm. Indeed, for removing the paragon from her pedestal and for raising
the fallen woman from the gutter, Hardy was, charged with
misrepresenting womankind. Hardy abhorred what he called the “perfect
woman in fiction,” hence, contrarily, his heroines best faculties are
presented in the context of their less-than-perfect natures in a less-than-
perfect world. The prosaic reality in *Far From the Madding Crowd,*
where two aspiring farmers rise to prosperity but only the female
contender is denied legal rights and privileges, constitutes a primary
motif modulating into a dominant theme in the darker world of *Jude the
Obsure.* Hardy was moving in a completely different direction. Early on
in his career he had studied, taken notes and made diagrams of Charles
Fourier’s work (a French revolutionary, utopian scientist, philosopher).
Fourier believed in free sexual relationships.

Hardy was deeply opposed to the liberal feminist’s idealization of
marriage. The lone anti-marriage campaigner, as embodied in Sue
Bridehead arrives late on the scene in Hardy’s novels. Before Sue
Bridehead, are dissident and rebellious characters, beautiful and enduring
women like Bathsheba and Elfride. Bathsheba’s views on marriage,
while more tentative than Sue’s, spring from a shared ideology and
shared feminine consciousness which hotly denounces the notion that
marriage should be the expressed goal of a woman’s sexuality. This
consciousness is evident, even in the women of Hardy’s shorter fiction, which will be discussed at length in the later chapters. For now, the focus will be on Hardy’s women in his novels – their individuality and courage in the face of a disapproving social system. These disruptive women evidently unsettle more worlds than their own, and Hardy stands firmly behind them. From Elfride’s embattled sexual confrontations with Knight to Sue’s outrage at the notion that a married “woman” should be regarded as man’s property, Hardy’s platform remains consistent. Mid-to-late Victorian medical theorists held that all serious discussions of female sexuality should be properly confined to the medical journals, where, under the heading of pathological disorder, it would be addressed in terms of malfunction. It took Hardy twenty years or so to openly declare himself in Tess, as an opponent to such medical theories – an opponent of the prevailing sexual ethics and sexual double standards. In Candour of English Fiction (1890), Hardy argued against Victorian literary conventions and pointed out that there were only two courses open to him – either he produced in his characters, the spurious effect of their being in harmony with social forms and ordinances or, by leaving them alone to act as they will, he must bring down the thunders of respectability upon his head. His first heroine, Cytherea Graye, in Desperate Remedies is not drawn into any form of defiance. She is, on
the contrary, a thoroughly orthodox creation, rare in the Hardyian world. *A Pair of Blue Eyes* initiates the long line of his unconventional, voluptuous heroines, the first of his so-called “misrepresentations” of womanhood. Elfride is not a stereotypical Victorian maiden awaiting self-definition through marriage – a man’s name, identity, status and economic standing. Her growth and maturity are attained through sexual development, exploration and an increasing awareness of her own psycho-sexual needs. We are drawn to this beautiful human being because she is imperfect – brave and fearful, strong and weak, headstrong and vulnerable. She sets the pace and is sexually instigative but her intellectual and moral seriousness is not undone by her sexuality. Indeed, she concludes that Stephen is not man enough for her and Knight’s fastidiousness throws doubt in Elfride’s mind of his virility. This reversal of roles blatantly transgressed convention and openly subverted the ethical codes of the culture.

Again, in *The Return of the Native*, Hardy creates an unconventional woman struggling against the desires of passionate love and the independence of the man. Like the heath, Eustacia is untameable and even masculine. She is a wonderful combination of the strength of a man and the beauty of a woman. Her desire to be loved, not by one man but many, does not only defy the accepted moral codes but is in itself
subversive. A similar conflict occurs in *Tess* probably Hardy’s most challenging rejection of the Victorian “dichotomy,” was to give his novel a subtitle – “A Pure Woman.” This subtitle caused a great scandal, for Tess, bears a child out of wedlock and as per the notion of “respectability” in those days, she cannot be “pure.” But Hardy challenges this idea of purity and calls her “pure” on the basis of her moral integration. In her defiance of the Victorian ideal, Tess gains her strength and empowerment but her passionate sexuality also results in isolation, and ultimately, her death. Strength and independence characterize, Hardy’s heroines and they are a clear departure from the ideal Victorian heroine, the combination of sexuality and masculine qualities in Hardy’s passionate heroines exemplifies a new characterization of women. Sue, offers another example, in *Jude the Obscure*, though not married to Jude, she lives with him and bears him children. This union, in conventional standards of morality, is condemned as “depraved.” But Sue, in actuality, is an extremely moral person, conscientious and even high minded. As readers, we are invited to examine all the evidence in this complex case, before rendering a verdict. Indeed, the moral police in Hardy’s time saw his treatment of sexual desire as sensational, scandalous, violent, pagan and even bestial. The use of explicit description of female desire and his sympathetic
treatment of his heroines makes Hardy appear as subversive. His heroines are faced with a psychological struggle between enslavement to Victorian norms or freedom to lead an unshackled life. In Hardy’s view, moral judgements need careful thought and each individual case must be considered on its merits to apply ready-made judgements regardless of circumstances, is profoundly unjust. Elizabeth Lee, wrote in the article, *Sex and Sexuality*, that we are well accustomed to the ideas of the prudish, sexually-repressed Victorians and who cautiously guarded themselves against any temptation, no matter how slight. Critics and readers have largely and successfully questioned this conception and proven it inaccurate. For during this period, even in seeking any man’s or woman’s ultimate goal in achieving the apparently conservative happy ending of marriage, Victorians were inevitably led to the consummation of their love and the creation of one’s own home and family. Sex and sexuality, then, were unavoidable issues for the Victorians.

Hardy’s world presents men and women in varying combinations: the star-crossed and ill-matched pairs and the wrong lover. The hour of loving rarely arrives for the truly faithful ones and love often brings destruction and ruin. The mind expects punishment as coming from “without” and yet, intuitively, observes it coming from “within,” where it often does come from, after all. This Victorian dichotomy is a moral and
intellectual construct or generalization that was created largely by males without much reference to human realities.

It was commonly believed that male intelligence was greater than the female’s, that men had greater courage and independence and were able to expend energy in sustained bursts of physical or cerebral activity, while women were superior to men in constancy of affection sympathetic imagination and intuition. The roles of men and women, understood thus, the Victorians still had to deal with the sexual act, wherein the bipolar models was upheld. Earlier in the century, women were considered to be the weaker and more innocent sex – she had little or no sexual appetite while men represented the fallen, sinful and lustful creatures, wrongfully taking advantage of the fragility of women. However, this notion changed, in the later half of the period – women had to be held accountable for indiscretions, while men slaves to their catabolic sexuality, could not really be blamed. Therefore, women were either portrayed as frigid or sinfully insatiable. A young lady was only worth as much as her chastity and innocence, once led astray, she was considered “a fallen woman,” with no hope of redemption, till her death. Many artists and writers of the period did not accept such strict roles for men and women and Hardy was one of them. He redefines the role of women in his novels by focusing on their sexuality. This is evident in Far From
the Madding Crowd when Bathsheba, unknowingly, admits her passion to Sergeant Troy. This is a trait previously found only in male characters the openness about one’s sexuality.

“The Victorian notion of sexuality” is intriguingly obvious in nineteenth century reviews of Hardy’s fiction beginning with the 1871 publication of the first novel, which provoked a set of responses that remained consistent at least until 1891. With the appearance of Tess of the D’Urbervilles, The Athenaeum objected to “an occasional coarseness” in Desperate Remedies, while The Spectator found the novel “disagreeable” because it portrayed “no display of passion except of the brute kind.” These accusations of “coarseness” and “brutishness” were re-echoed in both negative and positive connotations, in reviews of Hardy’s work during the ensuring two decades. The reviewers or guardians of Victorian prudishness found, not only, the explicit descriptions of female sexuality objectionable but had no tolerance for Hardy’s obvious sympathetic treatment of these women. Victorians found it shocking that “a fallen woman” like Tess is called a “pure woman” by Hardy and if Tess is not troubling enough for them, Hardy’s Sue horrified them further. What they failed to grasp in their narrow-mindedness is that, symbolically, Hardy’s heroines represent the strife and struggle of the Victorian women.
The interpretation of Hardy’s texts by Havelock Ellis is of paramount importance, in the light of Sexology. This is a new genre of science which deals with psycho-sexual interpretation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In 1893, Ellis placed Hardy’s fiction – because of its “minute observation,” its “delicate insight” and its “conception of love as the one business in Life” – in the feminine tradition of novel writing represented by authors such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte and George Elliot. Ellis summarized an aspect as Hardy’s writing that was endlessly intriguing to Victorian readers: here was a male writer using a style of writing and of plot construction that was considered to be exclusively female. Charles Dickens and William Thackeray, for example, whom Ellis invoked as contrasts to Hardy, did not confine their emphasis exclusively to the courtship plot, especially to the woman’s position in that plot. According to Havelock Ellis, Hardy’s fiction differed from that of his female counterparts in the way in which his heroines are more “instinct-led” than concerned with moral questions. This is a term he uses repeatedly to describe the Hardyian heroines:

Morals, observe, do not come in … Mr. Hardy’s heroines are characterized by yielding to a circumstance that is limited by a play of instinct. They are never quite bad. It seems, indeed, that this quality in them, which shuts them out from any high level of goodness, is precisely that which saves them from ever being very bad, they have an instinctive self-respect; an instinctive purity…Even Eustacia
Vye has no impure taint about her. One feels compelled to insist on the instinctiveness of these women (*From Marlow to Shaw*, 230-231).

Implicit in the language of the above passage is a linkage of Hardy’s women with those “primitive” racial and social groups defined by Victorian social theorists. Later, in a consideration of the Wessex setting, Ellis directly articulated this idea:

> It would almost seem that in the solitary lives on these Dorset heaths we are in contact with what is really a primitive phase of society … and those qualities which we have found to be distinctive of his heroines, the absence of moral feelings, the instinctiveness, had a direct relation to the wild and solitary character of their environment (274).

Here Ellis gave expression to the idea, suggested less clearly in many reviews, that Hardy’s construction of gender difference works in terms not of civilized, Christian codes but of post-Darwinian anthropological theories about social behaviour: the “purity” of Hardy’s characters, especially his women, is that of the rural rustic, of the “instinctive” and amoral “primitive” races. It is interesting to note that Hardy was nearer to the essential and authentic Christianity than those who criticized him as a heathen. He, however, did have sympathy for the zest for existence of the human race when it was young: Angel in *Tess* and Sue in *Jude* stated that ancient Greece, not ancient Israel, should have been the source of Europe’s inspiration. Correctly interpreted, this
only implies Hardy’s aspiration for the uninhibited flow of Hellenic life, of a great culture founded on the freedom of thought and feeling, and his regret that Christianity had ceased not only to rejoice in life in accordance with nature but also to regard it as amoral. He felt that Christian morals, if freely chosen, were excellent, and deplored that they had degraded into repressive taboos and customs. Douglas Brown states, that, with so many others, he (Hardy) adhered to firm moral standards and kept his conscience unusually sensitive, but without acknowledging any transcendental cause as the grounds of moral values. His moral feeling is outraged by the indifference of nature to human values. But a profound sense of human responsibility remains.

Hardy’s position in social ethics maybe accurately described as humanism. Like all varieties of nineteenth and twentieth century humanism, it takes its stand on altruistic sentiments as adequate basis, and boldly refuses to connect morality with any material reward. Unlike them, however, Hardy’s humanism is free from all hedonistic elements and treats vicarious suffering as the supreme value. It is in this and his recognition of life as a thing to be put up with, without the consolation of belief in Heaven, that makes Hardy stand out as a Humanist.

Generally speaking, the mid-Victorian writers’ portrayal of their female characters is almost consistent and stereotypical – women’s main
concerns being love, family and home. They adhere to the conventional standards of respectability because any deviation from the set codes of morality will leave a permanent scar on their honour. Even the most resourceful and independent heroines fail to challenge the basic assumptions of the society and live well within the limits of moral and social conventions. However, this does not diminish the importance of those writers work as it consequentially forms the basis of literary feminine writings later in the century. These writers while working under the strict control of Victorian prudery, dared not make their female characters overtly sexual without putting their sound moral characters at risk. The kind of desexualisation can be seen in Dickens women who are affectionate and warm hearted but devoid of any sexuality. He categorizes his women into “types” who are pure, domesticated and affectionate like Biddy in *Great Expectations*, Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*, Florence in *Dombey and Son* and adulteresses like Lady Dedlock, Estella and Edith Dombey. There is, consequently, hardly any overlapping of types who lack an inner complexity found in women characters of late Victorian novelists. Dickens’ women serve only symbolic functions in his major theme which is criticism of the hostile society brought about by industrial capitalism. It is fair to say that, apart perhaps from Dickens, no other novelist writing in English, has appealed
to so many readers for so many different reasons. Dickens’ readers noticed mostly the humour, the social critique and the grotesque elements in his novels, until, Edmund Wilson’s chapter in *The Wound and the Bow* (1941) alerted them to the darker qualities of Dickens’ imagination. In a parallel manner, Hardy’s readers, from his own time till the Second World War, were given to such reactions as delight in rustic manners and dialect and despair at the mechanistic operation of the Universe.

The common characteristics, visible in the late Victorian novelists, are that their women were educated, well read and had a shocking frankness about sex. They were against marriage as an institution for the constraints it places on human freedom. But the journey for these women seeking individual happiness in a society that was yet to awaken fully to their needs was extremely difficult and daring. Mental breakdowns, madness and suicides were the common penalties these women had to pay for their attempts at emancipation. The novelists spoke for the feminist cause but at the same time showed how difficult it was for women to free themselves completely from the practices and conventions, which have conditioned them for many generations. After arriving at the ideals of freedom and equality, these heroines are made to suffer from a sense of weary disillusionment leading them to finally surrender to convention. But unlike the early Victorian writers, these
novelists never offer an endorsement of this surrender. Instead they depicted the hollowness of a social system that has failed to accommodate the women in their quest for freedom. Thomas Hardy, too, made a pioneering effort to demolish sexual taboos in literature. In his novels, he rejected the literary female stereotype and its oversimplified image of women without sexual or inner conflicts. There is an open indictment of double standards of sexual morality and marriage as an institution in his last novels – *Tess of D’Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1896). In their revisions of the female stereotype and sexual explicitness, Hardy and the other late Victorian novelists, initiated a tradition which led directly to D.H. Lawrence and his “quasi-mystical celebration of sexuality and personal relationships” (Stubbs, 58).

Feminist criticism is deeply concerned with the ways in which the experience of being male or female in a particular society is reflected through the literary imagination. It is possible to detect in Hardy residual signs of sexist thinking. But notwithstanding such indications of the influence upon him of his time and place, his sensitive portrayals of women and his use of their dilemmas as reflectors of his judgement on life have long been factors in Hardy’s reputation. As for Hardy, full selfhood takes in more than the stereotypical qualities of one sex. In all his works sympathy characterizes his portrayal of members of both the
sexes, be it Tess and Sue or Henchard and Jude and Showalter believes that Hardy perceives sex-traits to be psychological in origin and not the exclusive properties of one sex over the other. This significantly demonstrates a break in Victorian thinking. Hardy has gained a reputation of showing considerable sympathy towards his female characters, yet despite his apparent sympathy for women, not all who say Hardy is great on women say he is kind to them. Kathleen Blake, for example, argues that he often presents female characters who are weak, changeable and in the wrong. In her opinion, Hardy is also distressingly quick to generalize from woman to women, while the man is allowed to represent himself (Blake, 725-726). Feminist criticism has always been concerned with books and literature, and as Peter Barry points out, feminist critics were quick to realize the importance of questioning the images of women presented in literature. Since the representation of women in literature also provided the role models which indicated to both men and women what constituted acceptable versions of the feminine. Feminists have understandably wanted to challenge the ways in which gender has been represented in literature. Needless to say, according to Barry, critical attention has been given particularly to books written by male writers (Barry, 121). But Hardy, allows his women to
speak for themselves as individuals, instead of viewing them simply as representatives of class gender.

Hardy is often maligned by feminist readers for his portrayal of women who are punished for their refusal to submit to the patriarchal law. However, far from reasserting anti-feminist notions of women and womanhood, Hardy uses his heroines to challenge the patriarchal structuring of a society that does not recognize women’s words, women’s passion or women’s possibilities. Bathsheba, Tess and Sue confront the issues of language, sexuality and marriage from a feminist perspective and force the reader to recognize the artificiality of the systems which uphold man as the centre of a society in which woman is other. Given their own voices, with which to express their feelings and desires, these three heroines speak out against the sexist language, the stereotype of the “pure” woman, and the necessity of marriage; and though they are eventually silenced, their voices have been heard, and the reader must recognize their right to speak and to live independent of the bounds of patriarchal law.

The questioning of ideology, confining women to their traditional role, took a serious turn by the end of the nineteenth century. Women owe this, not only to the thinkers and the legislators at that time, but also the novelists and writers who spearheaded the attack on the system and
institutions responsible for constraining the freedom of women as individuals. With the growing popularity of French realists – Balzac, Flaubert and Zola – a deeper probing into the psychological depths of women characters began. A comparative relaxation in the terms and conditions set by public libraries and family magazines also contributed to this development and progress. Major writers like Hardy, Meredith and Gissing dealt with the women-related issues with renewed fervour and freedom. They were also associated with the “New Woman” movement, in that, they portrayed women characters crossing the boundaries set by a patriarchal society. The achievement of this kind of literary freedom, in the Victorian English novel, was a gradual process. The early Victorian novelists, as pointed out earlier, more or less endorsed the feminine conventional ideals of marriage and maternity. Women who stayed in sexual relationships before and after marriage were condemned and punished by these novelists with suffering and death. Even the novelists who portrayed women as sexual victims could not dispense the final retribution. In fact, sexuality in itself was considered dangerous and unnatural in any woman of this Age. The domestic ideology of homely virtues stressed on the divine-like qualities of a woman – her emotional sensitivity, selflessness and dislike for the sensual aspect of life. The sexual appetite in a man was accepted as
normal and natural, and their sexual promiscuity was generally ignored by the society, whereas, a woman falling prey to sexual passions was condemned as a prostitute or a fallen woman. Other than the assumptions that fostered different sexual moral standards for men and women, there was another set of codes, for conduct, for different classes of women – the prostitutes and the ladies. The contradiction is presented in Victorian literature through the use of images connoting a chaste virgin or a femme fatale whose sexuality threatens the existing social order. The ideology based upon these double standards placed enormous pressure on the women who repressed their natural instincts. Restrictions were placed on a woman’s access to sexual knowledge – books dealing with sex were banned and censored. The novel found readership chiefly among women for its domestic themes and appealing medium, as compared to other genres like drama and poetry. The price of books being high for middle-class readers, the novel was published in a serialized form in periodicals and magazines or was bought by private lending libraries. The fear of censorship curbed the writers’ freedom to expression. Any mention of sex or representation of morally dubious characters was highly objected to. This judgement was based upon the assumption that women, being weak and vulnerable members of the society, were more likely to be affected or contaminated by sexual knowledge. Hardy and other late
Victorian novelists broke free from these constraints through their ability to create unconventional women characters. Female sexuality and psychological depth was explored and presented in bold terms to the reading public. This marked the growth and development of the English novel in leaps and bounds.

One of the chief characteristics of Hardy’s work is the dominance of women characters. His deep sympathy for women lies in the emotional rendering of their suffering and struggle in society, passing through the transitional phase from conventionalism to modernity. D.H. Lawrence observes the tragedy in Hardy’s novels is associated with the fate of the individuals revolting against the society’s conventional standards of behaviour. Women in Hardy’s novels struggle to achieve self-fulfillment in a society deeply entrenched in the concept of male superiority and female submissiveness.

Hardy’s novels are love stories, dealing with the eternally mystifying relationship of the sexes. Love is the dominating motive in Hardy’s stories – love conceived as a blind, irresistible storm. The major novels of Thomas Hardy are all love stories – the men and women who suffer this passion in its extremity become representatives of the human race. Hardy’s picture of love is lyrical. Exquisitively, he sounds the different notes in its scale – the peaceful, idyllic love of Dick and Fancy;
the faithful, enduring, hopeless love of Gabriel Oak and Marty; Eustacia’s searing passion. To Hardy, love was a woman’s whole existence. He took the old fashioned view of women. He stressed their frailty, sweetness, submissiveness, coquetry and caprice. Even when they are fault, he presents them with a tender chivalry. Arabella in *Jude the Obscure* is the only hateful woman in Hardy’s books. For the most part, Hardy treats women with sympathy – the sufferings of Tess, Elfride, Marty, Bathsheba are touched with a peculiar pathos. In Hardy’s view, love at first sight does not very much help in making life happy. Marriages that are the result of love at first sight generally end in unhappiness. The problem of marriage and love is best illustrated in *Tess* and *Jude*. In *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Hardy countenances the possibility of love based on affection and on mutual involvement in a joint enterprise. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Henchard suffers disappointment in love, in business, in friendship and in the affection of his daughter. Hardy’s character in his attitude towards his art was on the one hand cavalier and on the other serious and dedicated. He says, “in a work of art it is the accident which charms, not the intention; that we only like and admire.” And he makes his theory explicit in a comment which he made in August 1881, “Art is changing of the actual proportions and order of things, so as to bring out more forcibly than
might otherwise be done that feature in them which appeals most strongly to the idiosyncrasy of the artist” (Personal Writings, ed. Harold Orel, 1967). More than any other English novelist, he is addicted to placing his characters in doorways, reflecting them in mirrors and pools. R.A. Scott-James aptly remarks, “His real creative work shows a steady progression from perception of an individual to perception of the universal.”

These relationships between the sexes are not marred by internal jealousies and rivalries, class differences and economic circumstances but also by gender-based concepts and ideologies present in the society. In this manner, the basic structure of these love stories incorporates in itself some of the polemic elements that highlight the weakness of such narrow beliefs and concepts. There is no contradiction between the idea of romance and social class being in the same group. It can be claimed that Hardy employed romance to put a spot light on one of the society’s imperative illnesses – class consciousness. Given that his works represent the historical stages in Hardy’s career, it can be claimed that the social element is highly emphasized upon from the beginning of his career as a novelist till he gave up writing novels. Closely associated with the subject of love are the subjects of marriage, sex and divorce, which Hardy dwells upon, though less emphatically in the earlier novels than in
the later ones. A chronological study of Hardy’s novels from the point of view of his presentation of the major women characters and his attitudes to the issues concerning women and their emancipation reveals a steady growth in his outlook from a feminine to a feminist stance. The earlier novels, beginning with *Desperate Remedies* (1871), *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873) and *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), to some extent deal with women characters portrayed in the light of accepted stereotypical models. But as Hardy advanced in his career, he grew more and more confident of his vision and less and less mindful of Victorian prudery. Likewise, his women characters became increasingly independent, self-assured and liberal in the broad sense of the term. Thus, Hardy’s portrayal of women in the light of his drift to the feminist stance with closely linked to the growing sympathy for the women who are victims of the patriarchal system of society. A close analysis of Hardy’s novels and collections of short stories, made in the context of the Victorian Age, reveals that what Hardy wrote was daring enough for a writer who never wished to be called a propagandist. It was the time when even a slight drift from the portrayal of the female stereotype was unacceptable to the public. What is remarkable about Hardy’s skill is that despite working under pressure
and constraints imposed upon a writer by numerous restrictions, he was able to make his views clear without jeopardizing his career as a novelist.

It is Havelock Ellis, after all, who was attracted to Hardy’s supposed primitivism and who, some twenty years later published a book on Sexual Inversion, and this strange conjunction, once again draws attention to the complex relationship Hardy’s texts bear to a whole range of cultural discourses that continue to shape our constructions of sexual difference. For this reason alone, readers in the twenty first century will no doubt persist in reading the works of Thomas Hardy for their conflicted and contradictory engagement with matters of gender in Victorian England.

To this day the Victorian era is known for its prudish attitude towards sexuality, the double standard of morality and the inferior position of women. Consequently, the twentieth century has labeled the age as the age of repression. Although the marital rights of Victorian women gradually improved towards the end of the century, they continued to be far from equal to men, where matters such as custody of children, divorce or property were concerned. As to the double standard, while the Victorian regarded male sexuality as an innate quality, it was unacceptable for women to show signs of erotic longing, and therefore, passionate women were invariably deemed immoral. Although the
Victorian sexual mores seem moralistic and repressive, it was at the end of that very period that sexuality became a focus of public attention like never before. Thomas Hardy, an eminent novelist of the era, showed keen interest in the ongoing discussion about marriage, sexual relations and the “Woman Question,” and it can be argued that this interest can be detected in his novels, particularly in the last two. The views and ideas he presented in them, however, were considered too liberal and scandalous by the contemporary readership, and they caused a tremendous public uproar. As a result, Hardy gave up writing fiction, and *Jude the Obscure* remained his last novel before he turned to poetry.

Through the decades that have followed Hardy’s writing career, he has attracted millions of readers with a variety of critical opinions, continually opening new perspectives. Hardy thus remains, and will continue to remain, the focus of critical interest. In a tribute to Hardy on his eighty-first birthday, over hundred years paid homage to this great master, Irving Howe reports thus:

In your novels and poems you have given us a tragic vision of life which is informed by your knowledge of character and relieved by the charity of your humour… We have learned from you that the proud heart can subdue the hardest fate in submitting to it… In all that you have written you have shown the spirit of man, nourished by tradition and sustained by pride persisting through defeat.