Chapter II

“The New Woman” : Feminist Readings of Hardy’s Fiction

Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 and died in 1924. He composed most of his writings between 1871 to 1912. From 1912 till his death, in 1924, he wrote poetry. Hardy was prolific not only as a novelist and a poet but also as a writer of short stories. He began publishing his short stories in periodicals in 1874 and continued to do so for over thirty years. These stories range from the brief narratives of *A Few Crusted Characters* – stories told by the occupants of a carrier’s van as they travelled from Casterbridge to Weatherbury – to the long novella, *The Romantic Adventures of a Milkmaid*. He published the main body of his short stories in three collections, *Wessex Tales* (1888), *A Group of Noble Dames* (1891) and *Life’s Little Ironies* (1894), collecting the remaining stories under the collection titled, *A Changed Man* (1913). A close kinship exists between Hardy’s short stories, his novels and his narrative poems, the plot of many of his short stories would readily expand to fill a complete novel. The stories, therefore, are a condensed and more intense version of Hardy’s world.

In her essay, *Thomas Hardy and Matters of Gender*, Kristin Brady states, “From their first publication, the works of Thomas Hardy have
been explicitly and obsessively associated with matters of gender” (Brady, 104). Indeed, in all his work – fiction or poetry – gender related issues are powerfully and skillfully portrayed. To speak of gender, again, implicitly leads one to the issue concerning sexuality. Judith Butler says, “gender is the performance of sexuality within culture” (Gender Trouble, Preface, xii). It is essential therefore, to trace the shifting permutations of ideas of sexual difference in Hardy’s fiction. According to Elaine Showalter, “To a feminist critic, Hardy presents an irresistible paradox. He was one of the few male novelists, who wrote in what may be called a feminine tradition…” (99). The remarkable heroines of Hardy’s major novels and women of the shorter fiction, (for example Betty Dornell, Dame the First in Noble Dames) speak directly to the women readers. As early as 1878, in The Return of the Native, he spoke about the “Irrepressible New” and nothing can be more irrepressible than “The New Woman.” The Woman Question Debates that ranged on both sides of the Atlantic were complex and points of view 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 raised at the time 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 be attempted, to weave his work into a single whole and throw light on Hardy’s thesis that “Women are Mankind.”

Through the heroes of his novels and short stories, Hardy also interrogated the Victorian codes of manliness, man’s experience of marriage and problems of paternity. Since, “For the [Hardyian] heroes… maturity involves a kind of assimilation of female suffering, an identification with a woman which is also an effort to come to terms with their own deepest selves” (Showalter, 101). 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. Thomas Hardy knew many of the minor women novelists of his day: Katherine Macquoid, Rhoda Broughton, Mary Braddon, Sarah Grand and Evelyn Sharp. He actually worked with the novelist Florence Henniker on a short story, “An Imaginative Woman.” His knowledge of the themes of feminist’s writings in the 1880’s and 1890’s was extensive. Hardy not only commented upon, but in a sense, helped to chart out the future course of feminine fiction, he also understood that the feminine self is essentially a complement of the male self.

The tragic fates of most of his fictional heroines have led many to accuse Thomas Hardy of being misogynist, harshly punishing women for
their open defiance of Victorian social expectations. However, by writing about sexually-charged issues at the time when subjects such as premarital sex, rape, illegitimate children, adultery and divorce were taboo, Hardy challenged his readers to consider the destructive power caused by hypocrisy and double standards, making many to consider him to be among the first feminists. These conflicting perspectives reflect the internal ambiguities of a gifted man torn between wanting to maintain the conservative comfort of the Victorian era while yearning for the more equitable freedom of the Modern era.

Spanning the course of six decades, the literary works of Thomas Hardy note the evolution of the New Woman. From the accepting and submissive Cythera Graye in his first book to the questioning and defiant Sue Bridehead in his last written novel, Hardy documented the growth of the independent woman, as well as, her struggles for acceptance and unconditional love. Though his heroines become stronger and more determined with each novel, Hardy maintains a consistency in their natures indicating an essentialist view. All of his female characters are inherently passive, a trait that makes them vulnerable though not inferior, for example, Phyllis Grove in “The Melancholy Hussar” (*Wessex Tales*). Hardy worked to reconcile his belief of natural difference, of “degree” (*DR*), between the sexes, while advocating for equality between them. A
close examination of the heroines in his major novels, a study on his personal experience, philosophy, and the perspective of a woman who knew him, (his wife, Emma) demonstrate that Hardy did not hate women he abhorred the artifice of contrived relationships. A self-described meliorist, Hardy had hope for a better world but feared that society was leaving itself without a future with its oppressive and unjust treatment of women. Though quiet and reserved in his personal life, Hardy loved intelligent, strong-minded women but feared the potential power of the emerging New Woman figures as much as he feared a world without them.

Though in some ways an advocate for women’s freedom, Hardy believed that sex represents a fate that social reforms and individual assertion can only partly counteract. In his novels of struggle and tragedy, Hardy wrote about women’s strength, intelligence and capability – all essential qualities to female nature – but as an essentialist, he often aligned women’s innate qualities with nature. Saddened and enraged by the hypocrisy of the social standards of the Victorian middle class, Hardy wrote of its damaging consequences to women directly. He also suggested in his fiction, the negative impact of society’s harsh judgement on civilization regarding sexuality, marriage and desire. Decades before Sarah Grand coined the phrase “The New Woman,” Thomas Hardy was
already writing about strong, independent women determined to live on their own terms. The New Woman was not “new” to Hardy, she was the reemergence of a natural phenomenon long suppressed and shackled by the social conventions of Victorian England. As Penny Boumelha notes in her Introduction to *The Woodlanders* (1887), Hardy was no pioneer in the debate on women’s rights and marriage in the Press and Parliament in the 1880’s and 1890’s, but he was certainly part of the dialogue. Because of his willingness to address sensitive issues regarding social expectations and sexuality, Hardy, Boumelha posits, “was soon depicted as a willing conscript in the so called “Anti-Marriage League” of moral sceptics and social critics identified in the 1890’s as crusading conservatives” (Boumelha, xii). Hardy, however, was not against marriage, as against marriage as “an irrevocable contract” – unnatural in the conventions of obligatory unions and repression of innate sexual desire. Boumelha also addresses the “desire” found in Hardy’s novels, “The continual mutability of sexual relationship is driven, it would seem, by instinctive response rather than by emotional (or, still less, legal) commitment” (xvii). She adds,

Character after character experiences desire as a force overmastering individual will... Stunned, mesmerized, dizzied by desire, these characters act under the power of a kind of natural law that at once motivates and undermines
the making and unmaking of their socially ratified relationships” (Boumelha, xvi-xvii).

With the mutability of natural law, Hardy held no firm stance on women’s rights, but wrote primarily on the prohibiting artifice found in Victorian standards. His fictional characters depict a longing for a return to a natural existence in their intimate relationships, with each of his novels unfolding more defined New Women heroines. From Cytherea Graye to Sue Bridehead, the heroines of Thomas Hardy demonstrate women’s re-emergence as independent, thinking individuals, as well as, the destructive consequences created by a society unwilling to embrace a natural phenomenon that cannot be easily controlled or contained. Through his fiction, Hardy offered his women a voice reflecting the anxiety and ambiguity of their changing role in society. One of his most successful heroines, Bathsheba Everdene, best articulates women’s difficulty in expressing themselves. In her effort to dissuade Farmer Boldwood from his marriage proposal as a business transaction in *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874), Bathsheba exclaims: “It is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in a language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs” (308) Similar to Bathsheba’s determination to manage her farm as a single woman, the growth and development of the independent, expressive woman was a gradual process.
Noting Hardy’s awareness of Victorian sensitivities and his novels’ ongoing revisions until the end of his life, Rosemarie Morgan suggests that, Hardy took advantage of the changing attitudes regarding sexual issues over the last two decades of the nineteenth century. In her Introduction to *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Morgan writes that his writing, “tends to empower readers to a sense of omnipotence and, consequently, to an emotional generosity and a compassion for the human struggle in perspective” (xxv). With this approach, Morgan adds, Hardy invited complicity, understanding that it would take more than force and agreement for women to achieve a measure of equality in the growing global economy of an ever-shrinking world. It was a process that would take collaborative effort in multiple concessions from both sexes of all social classes. The evolution and emergence of the “The New Woman” and a sense of female empowerment are common themes in most of Hardy’s fiction, as he was keenly aware of the radically changing world at the end of the Victorian era.

The modern era ushered in new ideas of technology and industry along with new perspectives on personal relationships. Perhaps, no “new” concept was more challenging than that of the New Woman. Promoted as a political agenda by women’s rights advocate and novelist Sarah Grand in 1894, “The New Woman” was a phrase used to describe a
woman who stood socially, politically and educationally equal to men. It was a term that caused much concern and debate in both England and the United States, in the late nineteenth century. The term “New Woman” was coined by the writer and public speaker Sarah Grand in 1894 (*The New Woman as an Imperialist Feminist, 271*). It soon became a popular catch-phrase in newspapers and books. The New Woman, a significant cultural icon of the fin de siècle, departed from the stereotype typical Victorian woman. She was intelligent, educated, emancipated, independent and self-supporting. The New Women were not only middle-class female radicals, but also factory and office workers. As Sally Ledger wrote that the New Woman was a very fin-de-siècle phenomenon. Contemporary with the new socialism, the new imperialism, the new fiction and the new journalism, she was part of cultural novelties which were manifested in the 1880s and 1890s.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the New Woman ideology began to play a significant part in complex social changes that led to redefining gender roles, consolidating women’s rights, and overcoming masculine supremacy. The discourse on gender relations took place alongside developments in labour relations (increased feminization of the labour force), divorce legislature, education for women, single motherhood, sanitation and epidemiology as well as female consumer
culture. The New Woman soon found advocates among the aesthetes and decadents.

The New Woman, a tempting object of ridicule in the press and popular fiction, was generally middle-class, and New Women include social reformers, popular novelists, suffragists, female students and professional women. The contemporary satirical representations of the New Woman usually pictured her riding a bicycle in bloomers and smoking a cigarette. Lyn Pykett has observed the ambivalent representations of the New Woman in the late-Victorian discourse:

The New Woman was by turns: a mannish amazon and a womanly woman; she was oversexed, undersexed, or same sex identified; she was anti-maternal, or a racial supermother; she was male-identified, or manhating and/or man-eating or self-appointed savior of benighted masculinity; she was anti-domestic or she sought to make domestic values prevail; she was radical, socialist or revolutionary, or she was reactionary and conservative; she was the agent of social and or racial regeneration, or symptom and agent of decline [Richardson and Willis, xii].

The New Woman phenomenon found an interesting representation in late Victorian fiction and anticipated various discourses of a new womanhood in the twentieth century. Grand’s work focused on the ideal of the New Woman and the responsibility of the higher social classes in maintaining the power of the British Empire. Though she addressed the double standards prevalent in the society with regards to moral codes, she
upheld the responsibility of women to raise healthy children who would serve their country and the British Empire. Motherhood, it must be observed, is an important topic in Hardy’s fiction as well, and most of his heroines are future mothers or would have been if they had survived an oppressive social environment. Bathsheba (FMC), Betty Dornell (Noble Dames), Lizzy (Wessex Tales) are few strong women characters of Hardy’s fiction that lived to find happiness in marriage. Hardy had described Bathsheba as “the stuff of which great men’s mothers are made. She was indispensable to high generation, feared at tea parties, hated in shops and loved at crisis” (FMC, 333) and the same description is applicable to the other independent women in his fiction as well. Hardy is aware that it took more than womanhood to be “a great man’s mother.”

While Hardy steered clear of political involvement and the feminist activists, Grand aligned women’s duties with national responsibility, undermining much of her feminist ideals. Unlike Grand, Hardy had no feminist agenda, only a respect for strong women and disgust for a world that suppressed their individuality. He seldom mentions political or national identity in any of his works and though his stories are set against rural England he never propagated the Empire. He lived to see the rise and the decline of the English rule; steeped in the Victorian ideals, yet he demonstrated an acceptance and deep understanding of the expectations
of human nature in modern times. In an evolutionary discourse of their own, each of Hardy’s novels and tales grew progressively more revealing from *Desperate Remedies* to *Jude* and from the *Wessex Tales* to *Life’s Little Ironies* – highlighting the hypocrisy and futility of the era’s double standards and conventions that were detrimental to the growth of woman.

Havelock Ellis, noted social reformer and expert on sexuality, wrote an analysis of Hardy’s work in 1882 when *Two on a Tower* was first published. Ellis observes that Hardy’s first work revealed such a profound understanding of the female psyche that many readers, even critics, believed the author to be a woman. He wrote,

> The minute observation, the delicate insight, the conception of Love as the one business of life, and a singularly charming reticence in its delineation, are qualities which, if not universally characteristic of woman’s work in fiction, are such as might with propriety be attributed to it – at all events from a ‘priori’ standpoint (*From Marlow to Shaw*, 230-231).

Ellis added that women, specifically George Eliot, Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte, had authored the most influential modern works in English fiction of the era. Reviewing the attributes of Hardy’s characters from his first published novel, Ellis commented on the evolution of the characters, particularly the female protagonists, acknowledging that while not evil, they had something of the supernatural about them – a fundamental element of nature that could not be controlled. To Ellis,
Hardy’s insight into the female psyche made the author not only an artist but a psychologist as well. He noted that Hardy’s heroines share characteristics with Shakespeare’s “Undines of the earth” and referred to them as simple, charming “untamed children of nature” (234). He stated that it was their “demonic” element that prevented them from being too good which is “precisely that which saves from ever being very bad” hence giving them an “instinctive self respect, an instinctive purity” (234). The untamed element of a child of nature is embodied in most of Hardy’s female protagonists. He cited Bathsheba Everdene as an example of one who “Simply observed herself as a fair product of Nature in a feminine direction” (FMC, 6), as also the same young woman who “was going to be a governess once, you know, only she was too wild” (FMC, 25). In Ellis’ first analysis of Hardy’s work, he predicted that the author would continue to write, pursuing the vein of comedy found in The Hand of Ethelberta. He could not have foreseen that Hardy would later write of an adulterous heroine of “instinctive purity,” subtitling his novel A Pure Woman Faithfully Represented, followed by a novel of two people living out of wedlock and the tragic murder/suicide of their children. Nevertheless, Ellis remained supportive of Hardy’s sympathetic depiction of women and revisited Hardy’s works in 1896, following the publication of Tess of the D’Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure. While
there was no comedy in either of the novels, Ellis was not disappointed. He lauded both works, calling Jude “the greatest novel in England for many years” (274). He added that the book demonstrated “a fine self-restraint, a complete mastery of all the elements of an exceeding human story” (275). He blasted Hardy’s critics for accusing him of writing with sexually-charged sensationalism, exclaiming that previous works once regarded as scandalous, such as Jane Eyre, Tom Jones and Madame Bovary were later revered as indispensable novels of classic literature. Ellis also commented on the evolution of Hardy’s writing: “The progress of his art has consisted in bringing this element of nature into ever closer contact with the rigid routine of life, making it more human, making it more moral or immoral. It is an inevitable progression” (278). Acknowledging the author’s genius, Ellis was among the first to recognize Hardy’s contribution to the feminist movement and the creation of the New Woman.

Hardy’s portrayal of strong independent women defying Victorian constraints and conventions in their struggle for recognition and freedom, caused another contemporary critic to join Ellis in his favourable commentary of the author’s works. In his book, Thomas Hardy: The Critical Heritage (1970), R.G. Cox includes Coventry Patmore’s observations regarding Hardy’s portrayal of the New Woman. Ironically,
the author of *The Angel in the House*, which depicts the ideal wife and mother, as selfless and devoted, believed there was something positive in Hardy’s rebellious heroines. Cox observed that Hardy held the unconventional opinion that an entirely proper and pure Victorian woman was not necessarily fulfilled, for, by denying her negative emotions she risked inhibiting her potential to fully embrace love. Patmore wrote that

> It is in his heroines, however, that Hardy is most original and delightful……each has the charm of the simplest and most familiar womanhood, and the only character they have in common is that of each having some serious defect, which only makes us like them more…..he [Hardy] is too rich in human tenderness not to know that love never glows with its fullest ardour unless it has something dreadful to forgive (148).

Like Ellis, Patmore believed that it was in their failure to adhere to conventions that Hardy’s female characters are most human, most natural, most likeable. However, not all contemporary critics shared Ellis’ and Patmore’s positive perspectives on the women in Hardy’s works. In fact, most of the reviews regarding his later works were unfairly negative, such as the conservative Mrs. Margaret Oliphant’s article titled *The Anti-Marriage League* in the 1896 edition of *Blackwood’s Magazine*, printed one year after Hardy’s last novel. She asserted that Hardy’s male characters are victims of “seductions of sirens” and “remorseless ministers of destiny, these determined
operators, managing all of the machinery of life so as to be secure in their own way” (Cox, 260). Oliphant expanded further, “We rather think the author’s object must be, having glorified women by the creation of Tess, to show after what destructive and ruinous creatures they are, in general circumstances and in every development, whether brutal or refined” (Cox, 260). Oliphant’s critique of Hardy’s works was typical of the Victorian society’s rigid social code: women should be subservient to men, submissive and compliant; a deviant woman becomes a siren taking control of “the machinery of life.” Therefore the New Woman figures were to be feared and avoided – if not destroyed. Through Oliphant reflected the opinion of the majority concurrent at that time, perspectives on the role of the New Woman in society were slowly changing. People began to reconsider where they stood on the Marriage Question and the role of women in general: and, Hardy’s heroines were part of the process.

Of all the British novelists of the twentieth century D.H. Lawrence inherited much of his passionate imagination from Thomas Hardy. Lawrence’s sensual writing is directly derived from Hardy’s vivid descriptions of women and landscape. Lawrence himself acknowledges in The Study of Hardy (1914), his longest and most serious work of criticism, that Hardy was his master and the principal influence. He wrote several essays on Hardy and was an admirer and staunch defender of his
fiction. Lawrence was also the first to point to the dichotomy between instinct and intellect in Hardy’s fiction. He considered Hardy to be a “modern” writer because he believed that Hardy’s vision of life did not belong to the nineteenth century for Hardy created a modern metaphysics which reflected his awareness of the tragedy of human existence. In addition, Lawrence saw Hardy’s fiction as a valuable interpretation of sexuality. Lawrence never completed *The Study of Thomas Hardy*, which was published posthumously in 1936 by Edward Mcdonald in *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D.H. Lawrence*.

It will be interesting to study at this juncture the differences and similarities in attitude between Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence on the question of gender. To Lawrence, “via media to being is love and love alone.” He was wholly against the gender stereotyping of his time and had his own concepts of maleness and femaleness which differed from the accepted conventional concepts of “masculine” and “feminine”. In the, *A Study of Hardy* he says “… the Male, the Love, the Spirit the Mind, the Conciousness … the Female, the Law, the Soul, the Senses, the Feelings” (Lawrence, 221). Although, Thomas Hardy had a similar, post-modern willingness to disrupt binary constructions of gender and sexuality, his stance was, “It is difficult to frame rules which shall apply to both sexes …” (*A Pair of Blue Eyes*, Ch. 27). His New Women had the
ability like Ethelberta in *The Hand of Ethelberta* (11Ch. 33), to stand there “as a person freed of her hampering and inconvenient sex, and by virtue of her popularity, unfettered from the conventionalities of manner prescribed by custom for household womankind ….” Robert Langbaum observed that Lawrence in *The Study* partly misreads and rewrites Hardy’s novels as a way of arriving at his own art; nevertheless, the roots of Lawrence’s views of life are very similar to Hardy. Like Hardy, Lawrence transcended the conventional view of man in Victorian fiction and created elemental men and women as characters. He possessed a cosmic mind and evoked the mysterious bonds between human existence and natural universe, in his fiction. Lawrence revived in British fiction of the early twentieth century, an awareness of the natural, which was emphasized by Hardy in his novels, short stories and poems. As John Paterson observed in *Lawrence’s Vital Sources: Nature and Character in Thomas Hardy* (1977):

If Hardy was dear to Lawrence, it was because he rehabilitated not only Nature as a source of mystery and miracle, but Man himself. By restoring the ancient heavenly connection between the human creature and the natural world around it, by establishing what Lawrence called “the true correspondence between the material cosmos and the human soul”, Hardy sought like Lawrence after him, to make the human character more wondrous and surprising than traditionally realistic novelites had dreamed of in their philosophies.
In his *Study of Thomas Hardy*, Lawrence continued some of Hardy’s favorite themes: the dichotomy between nature and civilization, “flesh and spirit,” emphasizing the duality of human existence. Endorsing Hardy’s negative analysis of modernity, he also investigated the unconscious mind and sexuality of both men and women. Unlike Hardy’s tragic and passive protagonist, Lawrence’s “positive” characters are dynamic, autonomous and self-conscious representing as they do their author’s values. They are hardly susceptible to external circumstances and develop their selfhood fully in their search for a new life. The Lawrentian natural universe, however, is quite similar to Hardy’s: humans are united with nature by primeval bonds that the modern industrial culture attempts to destroy; that the rapidly expanding industrialization of England was an evil which deprives men and women their personal freedom and instinctive life. John Alcorn notes that Lawrence inherits Hardy’s despair over the mechanical deadness of modern institution. Lawrence discovered in Hardy’s fiction a new approach to man and nature, an organic connection between them, the duality between “flesh and soul” and the deprivation of the inherent freedom of the human nature by social and religious conventions and expectations. For both Hardy and Lawrence, human life is split between a conscious rational essence and an unconscious biological (natural)
existence. Lawrence’s view of life, like Hardy’s is shaped by his belief in
the biological aspect of life that predetermines all human actions. He
formulated his philosophical ideas in six essays tilted *The Crown* (1915),
where he referred to Hardy’s dualistic imagery. His idea of personal
freedom was synonymous with self-realization. Man, to him, was
disabled by escape from nature and acceptance of the modern industrial
civilization which imposes arbitrary laws and artificial order
incompatible with the laws of nature. It was only through sexual
relations, based on the authentic union between man and woman, that
people can regain their dignity and life. Physical experience becomes the
basis of all values and mutually fulfilling love can convey a sense of
purpose in human existence. It is only through love that one can achieve
a higher degree of authenticity of existence and a fuller, well-realized
selfhood. Lawrence insisted on the absolute necessity for an individual
human being to achieve the metaphysical fulfillment of his/her instinctive
nature. Sexual love, to him, leads to freedom from the shackles of a
dehumanized and impersonal civilization. Inspired by Hardy’s new and
open treatment of sex and the unconscious, he however, rejected Hardy’s
pessimistic and tragic vision of man. *The Study of Hardy* enables
Lawrence to present his own views of life and sexuality. Sexual love is,
for Lawrence, the most important existential experience which has been
notoriously neglected or misinterpreted by earlier writers. Hardy was perhaps the first British novelist to deal frankly with sexual experience. Both authors derived inspiration from the Wordsworthian concept of nature but also found a new dimension to it. Robert Langbaum observed that Hardy and Lawrence sexualize Wordsworth’s living landscape. It should also be added, that Lawrence inspired by Hardy, was one of the first British male writers, who viewed women as autonomous individuals and not as a sex or class. The most implicit theme Lawrence took from Hardy and continued in his major fiction is the figure of the New Woman with all her sexual radicalism and Freudian ego.

In 1927, Arthur Symons, in A Study of Thomas Hardy, also emphasized the importance of sex as the principle of life in Hardy’s fiction. Sex is manifested in the world as Nature which is often in conflict with man-made laws. The problems of gender, male and female sexuality in Hardy’s fiction are treated by Hillel Daleski in Thomas Hardy and Paradoxes (1997). Daleski argues that Hardy’s treatment of sexual relations is at the centre of his work. In his treatment of sexuality, Hardy went beyond his Victorian predecessors. Daleski also pointed out that Hardy’s, strikingly modernist techniques align him with the great modernists, such as Joseph Conrad, James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence and reveal him to be their inventive fore runner. Other studies devoted to
Hardy’s view of sexuality include Ruth Milbert Kaye’s *Thomas Hardy: Myths of Sexuality* (1983), and Terence R. Wright’s *Hardy and the Erotic* (1989).

D.H. Lawrence observes that, tragedy in Hardy’s novel is “associated with the fate of the individual revolting against the society’s conventional standards of behaviour” (Steels, 21). 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 liberation reveals a steady growth in his outlook from a feminine to a feminist stance. The earlier novels, beginning with *Desperate Remedies* (1871), Hardy’s first published novel, including *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 according to accepted stereotypical models. But as he advanced in his career, he grew more and more confident and unmindful of the prudery of the Victorian reading public. Likewise, his women characters became increasingly independent, self-assured and liberal in the broad sense of the term.

Cytherea Graye, the heroine of *Desperate Remedies* is immature, dependent and vulnerable. Her selection of Aeneas Manston, the murderer of his first wife, as her husband is based on her immature
sexual response to his masculinity and a desire to find economic security through marriage. Her sexual consciousness is depicted in the scene where the mere touch of her clothes with Manston’s coat, makes her feel threateningly overpowered by his sexuality. Though Cytherea’s sexuality is never shown in the light of Arabella’s, “the female animal” (Jude) yet Cytherea stands as a woman yet to grow independent with education and natural instinctive awareness. Fancy Day, in Under the Greenwood Tree, designed on the pastoral genre, is drawn on the stereotypical model – she is vain, fickle, egotistical and weak-willed individual. As Penny Boumelha points out, she has been reduced, for most part of the novel, into an “object status.” She is referred to as “a comely…prize” (44) and later as a “bunch of sweets” (146) Fancy seems to share the view of herself as an object of desire or jealousy. She is fastidiously concerned about her clothing and appearance. As Hardy generalizes in his next novel, A Pair of Blue Eyes,

Every woman who makes a permanent impression on a man is usually recalled to his mind’s eye as she appeared in one particular scene, which seems ordained to be her special form of manifestation throughout the pages of his memory (67).

Elfride Swancourt, the central character, of A Pair of Blue Eyes indulges in infantile emotionalism, capriciousness and fickleness especially in the first part of the novel during her fairy-tale affair with
Stephen Smith, the young architect. Though she grows more serious and sensible in the later part during her affair with the intellectual Knight, yet she remains lacking in self-confidence. Her timidity and lack of courage, the result of her social conditioning, is depicted in her failure to be explicit to Knight upon his suspicions of her sexual “purity.” Bathsheba in the early part of *Far From the Madding Crowd* is first seen as a maiden blushing to herself in a hand mirror witnessed secretly by Gabriel Oak. This is an inference to her vanity, her coquetry and impulsiveness, traits that will be explored later in the novel. But she is undoubtedly an improvement upon Cytherea Graye, Fancy Day and Elfride, in that she is presented as one of the most independent and resourceful Hardyian heroines, anticipating Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure*. She displays a remarkable degree of administrative capability and is completely free from any self-consciousness in the presence of the men folk to whom she issues a warning not to think “because I’m a woman I don’t understand the difference between bad goings on and the good” (133). We immediately recall Sue Bridehead’s sexless and neutral behavior with men which alarmed the conservative Victorian society. The same kind of independence and resourcefulness is seen in Ethelberta in *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1876), who takes on a masculine role and ably guards her husband’s estate as Lady Mountclere. Even Paula Power, the owner of
her father’s medieval castle, in *A Laodicean* (1881) is remarkably capable in the managing the renovative schemes of the castle.

The vanity, fickleness and immaturity of these early heroines is replaced by the selflessness and maturity in the later ones by the time Hardy reached the middle period of his career as a novelist. In *Two on a Tower* (1882), Viviette’s seriousness in love relations with Swithin, the astronomer, prompts her to demonstrate an unusual degree of selflessness. As the Lady of the Manor, she pays towards the purchase of his telescope, and, later when she suffers a financial setback following the death of her husband, she postpones her marriage to Swithin to enable him to avail of the annuity set by his dead uncle to pursue his studies. In Vivette, Hardy is exploding the myth of a woman as a “sorceress” who enchants men and lays trap on their way to great careers. Rather than hinder Swithin in his exploitations as a scientist, she proves instead, to be his mentor and provides him financial and moral support. Her selflessness and self-control can be found later in Elizabeth Jane. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), Elizabeth Jane is thoughtful, wise, quiet and reflective. Other than being a reliable interpreter for the readers (for most of the major incidents in the novel are related from her point of view) she also becomes the spokesperson of Hardy’s philosophy. Her practical approach to life leading to the self integration of her personality
is what ensures her survival amidst many struggles and dark circumstances. The next trend, in the growth of Hardy’s heroines is self assertion and non-conformity. Grace Melbury becomes the central female consciousness in *The Woodlanders* (1887), where Hardy attempts to confront the issue of sexuality and marriage at a deeper level. Grace marries the wrong man – Fitzpiers, just as Bathsheba the flamboyant soldier – Troy. But whereas Bathsheba’s marriage to Gabriel Oak is facilitated by the death of Troy, Grace’s situation is complicated by the premature demise of Giles Winterborne, the right man, and her inability to seek divorce, forcing her to make peace with a repentant Fitzpiers. Grace’s unconventionality lies in her courage to disregard the marriage bond once she discovers her husband’s infidelity. Although she hopes to divorce her errant husband, legally, yet her matured moral sense has already divorced Fitzpiers from her mind long before the “miraculous appearance” of the divorce law in Hintock village. As Gail Cunningham points out, the divorce law is not something that would suddenly shake Grace out of her old convictions about the sanctity of marriage rather it is “a convenient way of regularizing a situation which her developing moral awareness has already approved” (Cunningham, 92). As she tells Giles, “…not that I ‘feel’ bound to anyone else after what has taken place - no woman of spirit could” (354). Grace, like Sue Bridehead (*Jude*) is made
to conform at the end of the novel. She rejoins Fitzpiers as Sue returns to her former husband, Phillotson. However, the tragic intensity of the unsuccessful marriage with all its pain and turmoil is less emphasized in *The Woodlanders* than in the later novel. But enough hints are provided as to the future unhappiness of the couple. The realistic ending of the novel, other than throwing responsibility on the character, reflects the weakness of the social system. Tess, the protagonist of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891) has been condemned by many critics for the passivity she displays in crucial events her life, beginning with the death of her horse, Prince to her own death by hanging. The apparent passivity in Tess, a result of her upbringing, cannot overshadow her moments of self assertion, where her voice coincides with the voice of the author. To Alec’s clichéd, “That’s what every woman says…”, Tess’ spirited response is, “Did it never strike your mind that what every woman says, some woman may feel?” (125). Later after Angel’s desertion, she reacts against Alec’s unreasonable behavior, by passionately hurling the glove by the gauntlet, “heavy and thick as a warrior’s” (411), directly on his face, until the “blood starts oozing from his mouth” (411). Nor does she tolerate Angel’s categorization of her as a peasant, after her confession on the wedding night, she retorts, “I am only a peasant by position not by nature” (302). Tess rebels against the prevalent conventions by changing
from virgin to unmarried mother and from deserted wife to a man’s mistress. By murdering Alec, she finally breaks free from the tangled mess of circumstances in her life – this act of defiance becomes her victory and immediately establishes her individuality. Finally she selects her place of surrender and stretches out on the oblong slab of Stonehenge. In *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Sue Bridehead is the most emancipated Hardyian heroine, who boldly takes up the issue of personal freedom to a new level – involving freedom in the choice of lovers, as well as, in the most private matters of sexuality and marriage. In her total disregard for the formal and conventional aspects of the marriage system, she seems to echo the author’s beliefs: “What tortures me so much is the necessity of being responsive to this man, whenever, he wishes…the dreadful contract to feel in a particular way in a matter whose essence is its voluntariness” (273-74). Much before Sue attains legal separation through divorce from Phillotson, she decides to live with her lover, Jude, without a legal contract or sexual relations. Her unusual sexual restraint is not indicative of an inherent frigid nature but is a projection of her sense of selfhood and fear of being reduced to a “womanly, category.” At ease in the company of men, she has no fear of them and is without feeling “as most women are taught to fee in their presence” (201-202). Her ultimate breakdown, at the end of the novel, in accordance with the
pattern adopted by the contemporary New Woman writers, is not a sign of any gender-based weakness of mind and will but a result of coercive social forces affecting the personal lives of many individuals, at the time.

Hardy’s portrayal of women in the light of his gradual drift towards the feminist stance is closely linked with his growing sympathy for the women who are the victims of the patriarchal system of society. This sympathy for these victims is synonymous with his criticism of the male characters who are unable to free themselves from the constraining mores and codes of Victorian society. The male assumption of physical, social and intellectual superiority causes them to misunderstand and misinterpret women’s character and behaviour, causing immense suffering to these women. Hardy’s firm conviction was that the sexes should complement and not destroy each other because after all “women are mankind.” Hardy’s attack on the double standards for men and women, as propounded and propagated by the prevalent Victorian ideology can be traced back as early as in A Pair of Blue Eyes. In the 1912, Preface to the novel, Hardy writes that the novel “exhibits the romantic stage of an idea which was further developed in a later book” (48). This seems to be a subtle reference to the character of Angel Clare who bears a resemblance to Henry Knight, in his intellectual advancement and the concept of a woman’s “purity” as approved by the
society. While admiring Knight’s intellectual qualities, Hardy also disparages the traits of jealousy and suspicion inherent in his character. The author condemns Knight’s hypocrisy and in doing so ridicules the typical Victorian male attitude towards women in:

It is a melancholy thought that men who at first will not allow the verdict of perfection they pronounce upon their sweethearts or wives to be disturbed by God’s own testimony to the contrary, will once suspecting their purity, merely hang them upon evidence they would be ashamed to admit in judging a dog (399).

In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy has drawn the character of Eustacia Vye, one of the most passionate of Hardy’s women characters, with deep sympathy and emotional intensity. With her appetite for life and a desire to escape the monotony of the Heath, Eustacia presents a contrast with her lover and husband, Clym Yeobright. They are dissimilar in aspirations and attitude to life and Hardy says, “… take all the varying hates felt by Eustacia Vye towards the heath and translate them into loves and you have the heart of Clym” (232). Clym is a product of nineteenth century with all its complexity of Christian, scientific and philosophical ideas. He is an idealist, who dreams of ennoblement for the Egdon people by providing them with spiritual thoughts. He is a “do-good-er”, as R. Heilman points out, an enforcer of good on to others. He returns to his native place in order to relive the harmony he enjoyed as a
boy but Hardy reminds us of its futility, as observed by Mrs Yeobright as he cuts furze, Clym seemed like “a mere parasite of the heath” (339). His rigid idealism and obsessive attachment to his mother (viewed as the oedipal complex by some critics) crushed Eustacia’s dreams of venturing out into the outside world to escape the monotonous existence in the Heath. Finally, he holds her responsible for his mother’s death, and his words, “How bewitched I was! How could there be any good in a woman that everybody spoke ill of” (395), echo Angel’s words to Tess after her confession: “You were one person, now you are another” (298). The failure of Eustacia’s romantic dreams become a comment on the invalidity of the prevailing sexual ideology that forces women to confine themselves to purely personal and emotional sources of satisfaction and to seek fulfillment through marriage. Lady Constantine or Viviette in the beginning of the novel, Two on a Tower, is shown to be suffering from the same kind of ennui as Eustacia does. Viviette’s husband, Sir Blount Constantine, while leaving on a hunting trip to Africa, leaves instructions for her to keep decorum and chastity, the norms least observed by him in a foreign country. The double standards, Viviette is instructed to adhere to, wins the sympathy of the reader and author alike. Her attachment to Swithin runs deeper than his for her. His comparative indifference can be attributed to his scientific nature bearing the “cruelty of natural laws”
(309) which contrasts with Viviette’s devotion and selfless love for him. When he returns, after a gap of three years doing research in astronomy, he finds that years of suffering have taken a toll from her outward beauty, and in his shock at her condition he rejects her. When he recovers, almost instantly, Viviette’s heart is broken and she dies in his arms. Hardy is critical of Swithin’s reaction to Viviette’s withered charm:

Yet to those who had eyes to understand as well as to see, the chastened pensiveness material beneath, than ever her youth had done…Unhappily for her, he had now arrived at an age whose cannon of faith it is that the silly period of a woman’s life is her only period of beauty (307-308).

Even, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the promising personality of Elizabeth Jane suffers at the hands of Henchard, who at the beginning of the novel, behaves as a typical patriarchal father. Later, when real affection is felt by him, Henchard’s thoughts are – “he might get to love her as his own – if she would continue to love him” (282), that renders love as an exchange of mutual affection. Grace Melbury (*TW*), like Elizabeth Jane, is a victim of her father’s ambitions to marry her off to a man of a higher social position than himself, and in doing so he hopes to secure her future. He belongs to a group of countrymen who consider refinement and culture to be the attributes of only those belonging to the upper class in society. His paternal obsession with the economics of life makes Grace a mere chattel or an investment that should yield profit.
Indeed, he is responsible, to a certain extent, in Grace’s selection of Fitzpiers as her husband. Grace’s responsibility lies in falling for his outward glamour, as Bathsheba does for Troy. Fitzpiers is, in fact, an intellectualized version of Troy and Grace can be said to be a better-educated Bathsheba with country roots. Hardy draws the character of Fitzpiers with the least degree of sympathy. In fact, the author condemns his amorous pursuit in strong terms,

The love of men like Fitzpiers is unquestionably of such quality as to bear division and transference. He had indeed once declared...that on one occasion he had noticed himself to be possessed by five distinct infatuations at the same time. If this were true, he differed from the highest affection as the lower order of the animal world differs from advanced organism, partition causing not death but a multiplied existence (265).

In *The Woodlanders*, Hardy brings the issue of divorce for the first time in his novels. Both Grace and her father hope to amend her wrong marriage to Fitzpiers through an altogether new concept of divorce law in the village of Hintock. Hardy seems to be referring to the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 which was greatly biased against women. When Grace and Giles anticipate their future union through the possibility of divorce, Hardy comments on the ignorance of these simple folks, as to the rigour and complexity of the new law. He writes, “To hear these two Arcadian innocents talk of Imperial Law would have made a humane
person weep” (354). When Melbury finally understood the tenets of the new law it was clear that Fitzpiers is innocent as he has committed adultery but not an additional criminal act of rape, sodomy or cruelty, hence divorce cannot be granted to Grace. Hardy is disgusted by the double standards of legal judgment which fails to bring relief and justice to the suffering women and men trapped in a deadening and miserable relationship.

If in *The Woodlanders*, the couple look to the legal system to solve their problems, in his last two novels, Hardy goes a step further. He believes that the personal issues of marriage and sexuality cannot be solved by an outside agency and that sexual morality must be treated as a private and not a public matter. Therefore, the characters of *Tess* and *Jude* move beyond prescribed rules and regulations to discover their inner, instinctive nature. By calling Tess a “Pure woman,” Hardy challenges the idea of female purity and the hypocritical moral standards practiced by the upholders of the Victorian society and legal system. Therefore, Tess insists on being recognized and accepted for herself and not some ideal of womanhood perpetuated by an inflexible society: “I thought Angel, that you loved me-me, my very self !. She cries out in despair” (298). In his last novel, Hardy’s heroine, Sue Bridehead with her honest and free spirit, becomes a victim of the conventional codes of
morality and religion. Her attempts to lead a spontaneous and “instinct led” life according to a personal code of morality destroys her. In contrast, Arabella, the coarse, “female – animal” survives because of her ability to hang on to the “letter” of the moral code of conduct framed by a patriarchal society, despite violating its “spirit”. Sue is an honest woman untouched by artificiality and the art of dissembling, so unlike Arabella, the intricacies of social life have no effect on her nature. Nor does she use her sexuality towards personal gain. Conventions accommodate the superficially compliant Arabella but oust Jude and Sue who attempt to lead honest lives. Hardy uses Arabella to mock “the supposed morality of the unusual sexual arrangement;” while, Sue is Hardy’s symbol of the emancipated woman – both morally and sexually.

The marriage-question is another issue that concerned Hardy. Not against marriage in itself, he has presented instances of happy marriages in his works of fiction. What he protested against is marriage as an irrevocable contract and a system of overregulations that stifle the growth and individuality of those involved. This view is connected with the contemporary feminists’ debate on the futility of the marriage system that suppresses women and keeps them in marginalized position of wives and mothers. Thus, in Desperate Remedies Cytherea is saved from a recklessly wrong marriage to Aeneas Manston by the timely interference
of her brother Owen Graye and her lover Edward Springrove; Bathsheba, (FMC) finally makes the right choice after Troy and Boldwood, by marrying the man best suited for her, Gabriel Oak; in *The Woodlanders* as noted by Boumelha there is a multiplicity of involvement, marital or non-marital, of characters with more than one partner, thereby challenging the “exclusivity and irrevocability” of the marriage contract. In *Two on a Tower* Viviette’s sexual relationship with Swithin outside marriage (theirs was invalidated) undermines the sanctity of marriage. This looks forward to Sue’s sexual relations with Jude without any legal or formal contract. The novel is suffused with anti-marriage sentiments conveyed either through dialogues or through the general observation of the omniscient narrator. To Sue, marriage is “a sordid contract based on the inheritance of land and money by children making it necessary that the male parent should be known” (270).

Thomas Hardy was a great novelist and poet, and his work in both genres still generates a remarkable degree of interest among his readers. Though not always an even writer, Hardy’s consistency of vision and imagination reveals a “mind print” that is distinctive. His *Life* shows his love of stories, collecting in his diaries a wide variety of the local tales, some comic, some sad but all offering glimpses of insight and coherence that is so peculiar to his work. In these stories too, as in the poems and
novels, he reveals his concern about the principle of life, inclusive of civilization and manners, sex and sexuality, marriage and relationships. His shorter fiction may not have the weight of his major novels but they posses something of their flavour. Hardy is recognized as an accomplished and compelling short fiction writer and in some ways these stories are superior to his novels. Largely on account of their narrower focus and lack of digression, the shorter fiction of Hardy is a product of its time slotted into a cultural matrix that can never be recreated. *Wessex Tales* reflects in its narrative details the social, economic and cultural diversity of Dorset life. Although “pastoral” (Brady) in setting, these tales allow the reader to re-examine the “life-process” of his own time in terms of the universals that unite Wessex and the present. *The Three Strangers* with a pastoral setting in history, subject matter and narrative points of view is a fitting introduction to *Wessex Tales*. Set against the universal conflict between man and nature is that between Shepherd Fennel’s generosity and his wife’s frugality, and – more fundamentally – that between the rural man’s sense of justice and the urban man’s sense of law. “The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion”, exposes the limitations that gender places upon a woman and its implications for man–woman relationships. Phyllis Grove, the young heroine, of this short story, is weary of a boring life but the arrival of the York Hussars
transforms her world dramatically. She falls in love with one of these German Hussars, Matthaus Tina although she is already betrothed to Humphrey Gould. Her choice or lack of it, finally leads to the tragic end where Matthaus is executed and Phyllis Grove settles to a lonely life as a spinster. Phyllis’ isolated position in a rural society, her suffering and subsequent surrender to her circumstances reveal the tragedy inherent in a young woman’s life due to the limitations imposed upon her by class and gender. “The Distracted Preacher” and “Fellow Townsmen” are moving and poignant tales of man–woman relationships. They reinforce what Hardy claims in Desperate Remedies, “Woman is not undeveloped man.” Darton in “Interlopers at the Knap”, says of Sally, “she was a woman worth loving if ever woman was.” But Sally’s final words, to him, are: “I don’t altogether despise you… The truth is, I am happy enough as I am; and I don’t mean to marry at all… please do not put the question to me anymore. Friends as long as you like but lovers and married never!” (141). She becomes Hardy’s celebration of strong independent women who exercise their right to say “No!” in clear, distinct terms. In “Fellow Townsmen,” Hardy begins with individuals, proceeds to couples and the conventional love triangle, then reverses the process. This structure echoes earlier works and anticipates The Mayor of Casterbridge and Jude the Obscure. Barnet presents a character who
incorporates within himself, some of the private crises which can exist even within such a small and integrated world as Wessex. “Fellow Townsmen” and “Interlopers at the Knap”, form a thematic unit in Wessex Tales. Both are accounts of alienation, and their chief male characters, in failing to make proper marriage choices demonstrate their inability to know themselves and prove that even masculine ideals can be problematic. “Fellow Townsmen” ends with – “She did wait – years and years – but Barnet never reappeared.” “The Distracted Preacher” is basically a love plot which also raises general moral issues. Even in their initial flirtations, Stockdale and Lizzy approach each other in ways that reflect their respective moral outlooks. This pre-Victorian clergyman, despite the conventionality of his values, is a rather likeable character on account of his healthy sexual instincts. Lizzy’s deepest instincts are enjoyment of life and fidelity to her local heritage. She is calculating and confident of her own motives, while he, although equally calculating, perceives a tension between his sexual desires and his role as a minister. While Stockdale is consistent in his arguments but not in his actions, Lizzy is firm in her illogical convictions. Lizzy, is Hardy’s most enduring woman character in the Tales because she embodies the spirit of the New Woman – bold, unconventional, loyal and confident of her own desires and sexuality.
A Group of Noble Dames (1891) another collection of short stories portrays the lives of ten woman as narrated by male members of a Wessex Field and Antiquarian Club, who are ensconced in an inn after a rainstorm has delayed their outing. These narratives highlight the extent to which conventions influence gender roles and the man-woman relationship. They are serious studies of issues that concerned Hardy all his life – marriage, relationship, sexuality and the role of a rigid social system in influencing these essential human concerns. A Group of Noble Dames has interesting links with Hardy’s earlier work. The book is one of his many attempts, beginning with The Poor Man and the Lady, to portray the fascination and the difficulty of sexual alliances that cross class boundaries. It also has common themes with Tess of the D’Urbervilles, the novel immediately preceding it. As Hardy himself suggested in 1892, the dames have a kingship with Tess, despite their different circumstances: “One often notices in the woman of position the same transparency of passions, the same impulses, the same gentle, candid femininity that you meet with in dairymaids. The higher or the lower you go, the more natural are the people – especially the women” (Blathwayt, 240). Like Tess, the dames are different from other women in their purity and intensity of feeling, and their lives represent the natural reaction of human beings placed in extreme circumstances. “Both
the *Dames* and *Tess* are equally critical of those who romanticize noble lineage, while revealing equivocal feelings toward old titled families, feelings Hardy may himself have shared” (Brady, 52). The focus of these stories is on the women and the damage inflicted upon them by the clash between convention and sexual passions. They are the victims of the social rules, of men and sometimes even of their own prejudices. Each noble dame tries to make a marriage that will allow for the fulfillment of her desires and affections within the framework of a society which requires in a husband education, social accomplishment, inherited wealth and title. Differences in class both attract and repel lovers, and, youth and beauty stand in opposition to age and rank. The book also presents children as victims of the class considerations and conventions of the day. Legitimate children stand above illegitimate, male above female and all are viewed in terms of title and inheritance. *A Group of Noble Dames* portrays more children than found in any other work by Hardy, maybe, because the dames themselves remain children throughout their lives due to the sheltered, cold, upbringing that lacked guidance and did nothing to nurture maturity. In other words, these dames like Tess are more “sinned against than sinning” and more likely to be controlled by the restrictions of their birth than to influence others. The method adopted by Hardy to organize these stories impresses upon the reader both the extent and
diversity of unhappiness possible in a society which cherishes birth over human qualities. The first and last stories in *A Group of Noble Dames*, are the only ones with truly “happy” endings. Each of the others is a perversion of the convention where a man and a woman finally discover each other and live happily ever after. The first two and the last two stories portray desperate elopements, while the middle six depict the various ways in which the family as a unit can be destroyed or damaged by class pressures with few exceptions, each story can be seen “as a repatterning or ironic refutation of the ostensible moral of the one preceding it” (Brady, 153).

Hardy’s views of contemporary fiction as a new form of tragedy contributes to the structure, tone and narrative technique of the stories in *Life’s Little Ironies* (1894), in which small episodes are seen as tragic and in which social conventions play a major role in working out the destiny of the characters. This does not imply that Hardy’s stories are deterministic, but rather to point out that whereas in classical and Shakespearean tragedy, character is the main mover of the tragic action, here the catastrophe is reached by the dramatic interaction of persons and society, of character and environment. Hardy had written in his Notebook in 1889: “That which socially, is a great tragedy, may be in Nature no alarming circumstance” (*EL*, 286). Whether directly or indirectly, the
general themes of all the stories in *Life’s Little Ironies* involve the failure of marriage as an institution for formalizing and stabilizing sexual relationships and the destructive effects of social ambition on family life. In most of the stories, these concerns are merged. Charles Raye, for example, will suffer professionally, because of his marriage to an illiterate woman, while sexual desire and ambition are inextricably linked in the personality of Joanna Phippard. Even those characters who do not marry – Randolph Twycott and the Halborough brothers – reflect their position as children of an unequal match between their parents. In these cases, the socially ambitious parent has planted the seeds of his or her own desire for wealth and respectability in the child who in turn must, to achieve this aim, reject and destroy the other surviving parent. But, for all this, *Life’s Little Ironies* is not a didactic tract seeking to inspire a reform of marriage laws but can be best described as “an impassioned depiction of man’s inevitable failure to impose order upon the chaos of his being” (Brady, 156).

In “An Imaginative Woman,” Marchmill falls in love with a poet she has never met. Resenting the man she is married to, she fantasizes about the young poet in whom she sees a kindred spirit. Ironically, the young poet, Trewe, commits suicide and the letter he leaves behind reads – “…perhaps had I been blessed with a mother or a sister, or a female
friend of another sort tenderly devoted to me, I might have thought it worthwhile to continue my present existence. I have long dreamt of such an unattainable creature…… the imaginary woman…” (25). Ella’s grief is poured out into these words: “O, if he had only known of me – known of me – me! ……O, if I had only met him-only once…” (26). She dies soon after being delivered of her fourth child. Two years later, her husband discovers a lock of hair and a photograph of the deceased poet among her possessions. When he sees a strong resemblance of his youngest son to the dead poet, he murmurs: “I’m damned if I didn’t think so” and promptly rejects the innocent child. This story addresses an immediate contemporary problem: the tendency of Victorian marriages in all classes, to be made with no considerations of “tastes and fancies, those smallest, greatest particulars,” but rather out of the compelling “necessity,” believed by many women, of “getting life-leased at all cost” (4). This consequently leads to misery, deception and lack of fulfillment in marriage. “On the Western Circuit” depicts the agony of a woman (Mrs Harnham) who, limited by the inavailability of divorce in her time, loses the man she loves and remains shackled for life to one she does not. Marriage to an aging wine merchant has left Edith Harnham lonely and sexually unawakened, until she meets Raye, her maid servant’s lover. Suddenly aware of her sexuality, she falls passionately in love with Raye
and pours out her secret fantasies into the letters she writes to him under Anna, her servant’s name. So she muses dreamily – “She wished she had married a London man who knew the subtleties of love making as they were evidently known to him who had mistakenly caressed her hand.” The story ends on a poignant note with Raye crying out, “Well to think of such a thing as this! Why you and I are friends-lovers-devoted lovers by correspondence” (135), and resigning himself to a life of misery with his illiterate rural maiden whom he had married thinking her to be the scribe of the letters that had won his heart. Divorce was not only expensive but unacceptable under these circumstances, and Raye returns to London and Edith to her husband’s cold house. Edith’s – “Ah – my husband – I forget I had a husband,” is how the tale ends (137). “A Tragedy of Two Ambitions” and “A Son’s Veto” examine the harmful effects that insidious ambition has on a family and the individual’s well-being. The obsessive desire to rise socially and the compulsive struggle for acceptance, in both tales, leads to immense suffering and tragedy in the lives of the Halborough brothers and Randolph Twycott’s mother, Sophy. Hardy’s deep understanding of human nature and its inevitable clash with conventional norms, mores and class prejudices, is conveyed through these stories about social ambition. “For Conscience’s Sake” takes a look at the honourable principle of conscience and inverts it by undermining
its practicality. In this story Leonora is the unconventional image of a wronged woman – financially secure, respectable, dignified, and spirited – she is Hardy’s vindication of the free resourceful New Woman. Through this story, Hardy ridicules the attempt to right a wrong for conscience’s sake and to justify what is not moral by a conventional action. In the end, an act of conscience only leads to “the reward of dishonourable laxity” (74).

On the title page of Life’s Little Ironies, Hardy makes a distinction between the Tales of the first part of the volume and the Colloquial Sketches which fall under the heading of A Few Crusted Characters. The term “sketch” obviously refers to the limited scope and length of the narratives and “Colloquial” points both to the presence of the first-person narrators and to the casual tone in which they speak. Ernest Baker has called A Few Crusted Characters a comic antidote to the somberness of the first half of Life’s Little Ironies. But the term “comedy” is inadequate for these anecdotes. Though the tone is humorous there is a serious underside to it. As Samuel Hynes has said, the humour in these sketches is not “a form of entertainment but a way of enduring the inevitable.” The subject matter of A Few Crusted Characters covers the main events of life – birth, marriage and death. An important element in the cycle is the process of courtship and marriage which constitutes the
central drama of rural life. In the story of “Tony Kytes, the Arch Deceiver” we discover a motif of entangled love relations between Tony and three young women from his village. In the brief span of one day Tony had to choose his future bride among three equally desirable women. The story presents two conflicting attitudes towards sex: the male desire to marry all women with no complications and the female inclination to competition and exclusiveness. Though both attitudes are potentially absurd, they however convey the truth about human nature. Tony’s final choice, the timid quiet Milly, was not his desired, first choice, Hannah Jolliver. The deception he engages in, during his wild courtship of the three women, results in the loss of the only women he really desired to marry. “The History of the Hardcomes” takes a more sober look at marriage and presents two pairs of lovers who despite their higher social standing are not unlike Tony in their fluctuating sexual preferences. The lively sexual atmosphere of a country dance leads to an impulsive changing of partners between two engaged couples. After marriage the members of the original couples are again drawn to each other. Stephen and his cousin’s wife wrapped up in a state of irrational sexual oblivion are carried off to sea and drowned, while James, after a few years marries his cousin’s widow, who was also his first choice before the country dance. A close scrutiny of both sections of Life’s Little
Ironies reveals that in actuality both deal with the same fundamental human problems. Shadrach Jollife’s confusion about sexual choice anticipates that of Tony Kytes; deception in love is found in both “Tony” and “On the Western Circuit”; clerical hypocrisy is a subject of “The Son’s Veto”; “The Tragedy of two Ambitions” and “Audrey Satchel”; female jealousy leads to tragedy in “To Please his Wife” and “The Winters” and “The Palmeys”; and the irrational side of sexual instinct lures Car’line Aspect and the Hardcomes, alike, away from domestic happiness. “A Changed Man”, Hardy’s last short-story volume was published in 1913 and consists of individual pieces that lack thematic unity but are precious for their insights into life. The first story, “A Changed Man”, raises questions about marriage, fidelity and social responsibility and dismisses them as insignificant in the face of the tragedy of human suffering due to the outbreak of the cholera epidemic. “Alicia’s Diary” examines sexual jealousy and envy, and the deceit, arising from these emotions, leading to death and tragedy. “The Waiting Supper” with its recurrent pattern of evasion and delay reveals its concern with the class prejudices and its negative impact on man-woman relationship. The apparent disparity in social standings between Nicholas and Christine led to a habitual postponement of marriage, until even when the prevailing circumstances had changed, the two still could not
reach upon an agreement to marry. Selina’s odd predicament in “Enter a Dragoon” displays typical Victorian attitude to sex and marriage. In “A Mere Interlude”, Baptista Trewthen, a common woman who finds herself in uncommon circumstances, is forced into marriage by social and economic pressures. The story narrates her struggle to find happiness and when she finds it in the end, it is not sentimental but borne out of experience and knowledge of human suffering. Therefore, a serious study of Thomas Hardy’s short fiction reveals 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 and an instinctive purity that foreshadow not just Tess but Sue Bridehead as well.

After the publication of Tess in 1891, Hardy was asked to become the Vice-President of the women’s Progressive Society, a position he politely declined. While he valued women, he held no aspirations to promote their political agenda. This was a source of contention with his wife, Emma, who remained active in the Suffragist movement until the end of her life. In 1894, she wrote to her friend Mary Haweis that her husband’s interest in women’s suffrage was “nil” and that he cared only about the women he invented (Tomalin, 251). Hardy’s wife was dissatisfied with his participation in the Women’s Movement, though she
acknowledged that he cared very deeply for his fictional heroines. Regardless of his personal motivations on society, women and nature, the work of Thomas Hardy was used as an argument in the Women’s Rights Movement. Feminists of the era used his literary works to influence viewpoints regarding marriage laws, divorce proceedings, suffrage, and equality in education and career opportunities. As his contemporary biographer, H.C. Duffin noted in 1937, it is not Hardy who treats his women cruelly, but life as Hardy saw it. What Hardy could do for women he did – he made them full of beauty, interest, fascinating and lovable qualities of all kinds, he gave them great parts to play, and let them (generally) play those parts well. His estimate of woman is high, but tempered and conditioned by keen observation of the realities round him… Hardy is no misogynist, but a true lover in very deed (Duffin, 238). A more recent biographer, writing at the onset of the Women’s Rights Movement during the Civil Rights era on 1967, Irving Howe, shared Duffin’s view on Hardy. He observes, that Hardy was “endowed with a precious gift: he liked women” (108). Howe asserted that it was Hardy’s affection for women that made him an early feminist. Feminist critics in the 1970s cited the works of Thomas Hardy in support of women’s emancipation. Mary Jacobus attributed Hardy’s compassionate identification with his heroine with an authorial allegiance to a living,
breathing, sentient woman [which] evades external standards of judgement (321). Jacobus added [on Tess] that Hardy does not attempt to portray Tess as being far more than what she is; he does not idealize her, but rather, he humanizes her not hesitating to portray her as having feelings of intensity leading to passion and murder. Tess is not to be criticized for her needs but rather her needs should be recognized as natural, and Hardy presents her with clarity and without judgement. Jacobus also made a similar observation about his depiction of Sue: “Hardy is imaginatively generous towards both sides of the struggle but as always, his most intense feeling is for the loser…Sue’s tormented consciousness haunts us more than Jude’s bitter oblivion” (324). Feeling most intensely for the “loser” might place Hardy as an advocate for women in the Women’s Rights Movement, both in his time and in the Civil Rights Era of the twentieth century. In 1979 for instance, Rosalind Miles agreed about Hardy’s concern for women. She wrote that, heartsick at the world’s cruelty, or worse, indifference, Hardy solaced himself by creating feminine softness and constancy. He found a recurrent consolation in rendering with loving exactness, through the mediation of these imaginary women, the sensations of the cast away. This assertion does not entirely align with feminist ideals, but it recognizes Hardy’s awareness of women’s struggles; he made them human and depicted their
needs and passions as natural rather than destructive creations. Though Jacobus and Miles joined Ellis and Patmore in perceiving Hardy’s writings as advocating for women, more recent feminist readers disagree with the view.

Within the range of approaches labelled “feminist criticism” and “gender studies” we can list a number of publications which refer directly or indirectly to Thomas Hardy’s view of sexuality and gender relations. A feminist reading of Thomas Hardy’s major and minor fiction has produced results quite different from the ones we have been accustomed to in traditional criticism. The difference consists in the centrality accorded to female characters, their status, roles and functions in society. Feminist criticism usually reveals the search for autonomy and selfhood of the female protagonist. Penny Boumelha’s *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form* and Pamela Jekel’s *Thomas Hardy’s Heroines* (1986) are analytical studies of Hardy’s female characters. More than a century after Hardy’s last published novel, Boumelha disagrees with his male contemporary critics when she calls attention to what she refers to as Hardy’s “sexist pattern” and asserts that *Tess* demonstrates “an unusually overt maleness in the narrative voice.” Even more scathing than Boumelha’s observations is the perspective of Emma Tenant who compares Hardy to a Minotaur in wait
to devour his victims. Rosemarie Morgan in *Women and Sexuality in the Novels of Thomas Hardy* (1988) discusses his treatment of female characters. Hardy’s portrayal of women including the so-called “Fallen Woman” was generally sympathetic. Morgan states: “Hardy relished the company of women and expressed no reservations about their powers, mental, intellectual, sexual, emotional, psychic, but he was not drawn to the liberal feminism of the day” (xiv). Although traditional criticism generally saw Hardy’s women as passive victims of both man and circumstances, Morgan’s view is that they were quite strong physically and psychologically. Rosemarie stresses on “the physicality” of Hardy’s women and maintains that while critics reviled the voluptuousness of these women, Hardy kept firmly to his practice of celebrating the life of the senses and most importantly of presenting the voluptuous woman, the sexy woman as neither dumb nor loose in morals. She emphasizes, “Hardy, then in presenting Victorians with female models who did not conform to the stereotypes, not only offended against proprieties but also threatened the status quo, hitting at the very structure and foundation of society itself” (xii). To her, Hardy’s platform remains consistent and forth right: “the world that denies autonomy, identity, purpose and power to women, is to be, on his terms, the loser” (xvi). More recent publications from the feminist perspective include Patricia Ingham’s (ed)

The radically differing assessments of women’s studies regarding Hardy’s writing demonstrate the paradoxes of a man who seemed strangely aloof yet keenly aware of societal expectations and women’s struggles to align their roles with their natures, at the end of the Victorian era. Perhaps earlier feminists were encouraged by any indication of an author’s sympathy to women, while more modern feminists are not satisfied with anything less than complete and total empowerment for women. These extreme views of Hardy’s work, spanning the course of more than a century, reflect the ambiguities of the author himself. He has
been called misogynist as well as advocate for women, a constant commentary that is reflective of the title of Claire Tomalin’s biography of Hardy – *The Time Torn Man*. A self-described meliorist, Hardy was also an artist, craftsmen, naturalist, evolutionist, essentialist, a man who loved women as much as he seemingly feared them. He lived in the time of Flux and was exposed to many new ideas that he combined with his own life experiences and personal outlook to form a vision of how things should and would be. As Sue Bridehead sums up her reasons for marrying Phillotson in her confession to Jude, “when people of a later age look back upon the barbarous customs and superstitions of the times that we have the unhappiness to live in, what will they say!” (*Jude*, 187).

Though he attempted to project himself as a modernist, Hardy often remained trapped in gender assumptions as evident in the way women are presented in his work of fiction. The tragic endings of his last two novels beg the question of Hardy’s comfort level with the New Woman figures he presents in *Tess* and *Sue*. While narrative revenge is a common argument against Hardy, he was not a misogynist, he was an essentialist, hopeful that the women could improve their roles in society but convinced that it was not possible for them to escape their nature, the fundamental element of their being that made them passive and therefore, vulnerable. It seems that the inner contradictions of the New Woman, as
well as the differing attitudes towards Hardy in literary criticism, reflect this unresolved tension between biological destiny and free will.