Chapter III

Matters of Gender in *Wessex Tales* and *A Group of Noble Dames*

Hardy’s texts, it has been observed, like women and dislike them, they depict both pleasure and pain, both arousal and anxiety (Brady, “Matters of Gender”, 104). No one has created more attractive women of a certain class, women whom a man would be more likely to love or to regret loving.

The *Wessex Tales* was Hardy’s first collection of short stories and the stories reflect the experience of a novelist at the height of his powers. Each of these stories has its origin in the village anecdotes but on closer examination, each deals with a situation involving love which is vitiated by life’s ironies and perils and circumstance. The narratives reveal a keen psychological analysis of female behavior within the frame work of social conditioning.

Sally Hall, the heroine of “Interlopers at the Knap” reinforces Hardy’s claim in *Desperate Remedies* – “woman is not undeveloped man.” Sally embodies the spirit of the New Woman and belongs more to the new age than to nineteenth century Britain. She possesses ineffable charm, high spirits, intelligence, perceptiveness and the independence of
a woman who dares to say “No” to the accepted social condition called matrimony.

Charles Darton’s initial response to Sally Hall displays the crippling rhetoric and arrogance of a man towards a woman he considers to be his social inferior. Marrying Sally, according to Darton is desirable because “Sally is comely, independent, simple character with no make-up about her, who’ll think me as much superior to her.” The wiser Japheth John’s reply to this sets the note to the play of the irony in the story. “I shouldn’t call Sally all simple. Primarily because no Sally is; secondary because if some could be this one wouldn’t” (117).

It is Hardy’s description of Sally, however, which prepares us for the woman we grow to admire and like as the story progresses. “Roseate good nature lit up her gaze, her features showed curves of decision and judgment and she might have been regarded without a mistake as warmhearted, quick-spirited handsome girl” (119). Sally displays none of the giddiness and recklessness of a young girl in love but exhibits, throughout the narrative, an understanding about men in general that is uncanny, “young men make such kind promise when they are near you, and forget’em when they go away” (120). This maturity in judgment and behaviour is her strength in crises. Another endearing trait she possesses is a fierce loyalty to her loved ones. This excerpt from a conversation
with her mother and her brother, Phil’s, ill-timed return home reinforces this:

“Could no other misfortune happen to helpless women than this, which will quite upset my poor girl’s chance of a happy life”.

“Nonsense, mother!” said Sally, vehemently, while her face flushed. Charles isn’t the man to desert me! But if he should be and won’t marry me because Phil’s come, let him go and marry elsewhere. I won’t be ashamed of my own flesh and blood for any man in England - Not I” (123).

Charles Darton fails Sally and proves to be a “deserter.” He slighted Sally for “an uncured sentimental world” called Helena, who is also Phil’s widow. It is to Sally’s credit that she rises above her circumstances. Intuitively aware of the undercurrent between Darton and Helena, she pulls herself together and faces the inevitable with dignity. In crises, Sally stands tall, taller than Darton with all his self-professed claims of manliness and infallible superiority. Sally’s independence “made her one of the least jealous women” (127) and totally in line with Hardy’s great heroines, she decisively frees Darton to pursue his renewed interest in Helena: “Yes, you can,’ said a voice, suddenly a third figure stood beside them. It was Sally. “You can, since you wish to”, she repeated, “She no longer belongs to another…my poor brother is dead!” (130).
And Hardy comments: “Her face was red, her eyes sparkled and all the women came to the front” (130). All the woman in Sally Hall, is a tribute to Hardy’s conviction that “Woman is not undeveloped man.” It is Sally who initiates the subsequent turn of events (she does what Darton wishes to but lacked in strength and courage) culminating in Darton’s foolishness: “Why not Sally? I can’t believe it! Young Mrs. Hall! Well…Well where’s your wisdom…she (Sally) was a woman worth having if ever woman was and now to let her go!” (133).

Too soon, Darton realized the magnitude of his error. Helena had been a woman to lend pathos and refinement to a home; “Sally was a woman to brighten it” (134). When Japheth points out after Helena’s death, “Ah Charles you threw a prize away when you let her slip five years ago!” Darton’s reply was “I did – I did!” (138). Throughout his fiction, Hardy seems to be fascinated by one power, respectable, middle class woman had in the nineteenth century Britain, the power to say “No” to a prospective suitor. Sally may be a slight creation against the backdrop of the great Hardyian heroines of the longer fiction, but she asserts her power in an otherwise powerless world by rejecting Darton’s persistent second courtship and offer of marriage. Free from sentimental clap-trap Sally has no regret, “I am quite happy enough as I am, and that’s the end of it.” Her independence is so easily entrenched into her
character that she sees no necessity to explain, “What in truth, I cannot explain – my reason, I will simply say that I must decline to be married to you” (139). Her stance is not one of evasiveness or coyness. The decision is born out of her own sense of worth – the worth of a woman who does not need marriage to complete her happiness.

“Ah- then you despise me, Sally!”
“No” she slowly answered, “I don’t think you quite such a hero as I once did-that’s all. The truth is I AM HAPPY ENOUGH AS I AM AND DON’T MEAN TO MARRY AT ALL. Now may I ask you a favour, sir?” She spoke with an ineffable charm, which, whenever he thought of it, made him curse his loss of her as long as he lived.
“To any extent”
“Please do not put this question to me anymore. Friends as long as you like, but lovers and married, never!” (141).

The story ends with Hardy’s comment, “notwithstanding the solicitation her attraction drew upon her, Sally had refused several offers of marriage and steadily adhered to the purpose of leading a single life” (141).

“Interlopers at the Knap” then, is a gentle exploration of the feminine psyche and the ability of a woman to cast her refusal of matrimony in a positive form. The remarkable courage and determination of Sally Hall to assert her independence by choosing to lead a single life, reveals the sensitivity and deep understanding that Hardy had about the power of a woman.
In “The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion” Hardy’s compassionate treatment of Phyllis Grove, the hapless heroines, reveals the author’s keen interest in the limitations that class, nationality and language place upon a woman of the nineteenth century Britain. Phyllis Grove courted humility and modesty till she died “with the unfortunate result of inflicting an injustice upon her memory” (29).

The narrative opens with a meaningful emphasis on the “seclusion” embraced by Phyllis’ father, and the narrator remarks, “If her social condition was twilight, his was darkness. Yet he enjoyed the darkness while her twilight oppressed her” (30). The young girl’s isolation and lonely existence inevitably paves way for the tragedy that follows; Phyllis became so shy that “if she met a stranger anywhere in her short rambles she felt ashamed at his gaze, walked awkwardly and blushed to her shoulders” (30). Surprisingly, Phyllis was discovered by an admirer, Humphrey Gould, a bachelor neither young nor old, neither good looking nor positively plain. The interest, though of a mild type, culminated into an engagement between the two. The society could not condone such a match considering the fact that though penniless, Gould belonged to an old local family respected in the country. Unequal marriages in those days were not merely considered to be an
infringement of convention but rather a “violation of the laws of nature.” Phyllis being socially inferior to Gould stood in awe of the colourless Humphrey Gould. Hardy comments, “She did not love him in the true sense of the word” but “had a genuine regard for him” (34). Due to his pecuniary condition, Gould postponed the union between the two. Thus, weary of a boring and lonely life, the arrival of the York Hussars transforms her world dramatically. She falls in love with one of the German Hussars although already betrothed to Humphrey Gould. Her first glimpse is from atop a fence:

She was sitting up here one day, listlessly surveying the pasture without, when her attention was arrested by a solitary figure walking along the path. It was one of the renowned German Hussar and he moved onward with his eyes on the ground and with the manner of one who wished to escape company…On nearer view she perceived that his face was marked with deep sadness. (32)

The foreigner’s face haunted Phyllis, “its aspect so striking, so handsome and his eyes were so blue, and sad and abstracted” (33). After the brief first meeting others followed. That Matthaus Tina was a foreigner did not stop the two kindred souls from falling in love with each other. Their love blossomed and crossed all barriers of language, region and culture. Hardy elaborates “whenever the subject became too delicate, subtle, or tender for such words of English as were at his command, the eyes no doubt helped out the tongue and – though this was
later on – the lips helped out the eyes” (33). This acquaintance though rash, developed and “like Desdemona she pitied him and learnt his history” (33). Matthaus Tina, however, suffered from what he called “home-woes,” a yearning to return home to his mother and his “dear fatherland.” His plan to desert the regiment and take Phyllis with him, “to my own country, and be my wife there, and live there with my mother and me,” (36-37) places Phyllis at the crossroads. The details he frames to her enquiries left no doubt in Phyllis’ mind of the feasibility of the undertaking. But she was appalled at the same time by the wildness of the adventure. Banished to Dr Grove’s sister’s house, on discovery of her relationship with a foreigner, Phyllis acutely felt the lack of female company in her life. There was absolutely no one she could turn to for advice. Presented with a life-changing decision, she becomes poised on the threshold of a flight with only two possibilities-she could fly away towards freedom unfettered by the morals of an unsympathetic society or plunge helplessly down to be defeated by a system she can never fight against. But tethered as she was to the constraints of the society she lived in, Phyllis unlike Sally or Herminia lacked the courage to change her destiny. She was overwhelmed by the constructs of gender and identity, love and duty. Hardy remarks, “But the courage which at the critical instant failed Cleopatra of Egypt could scarcely be expected of Phyllis
Grove” (40). Maybe, if Matthaus had been less honourable and Phyllis more daring, their future would have taken a better turn. But years of filial subjection to a father’s insensitive and selfish tyranny, leaves Phyllis with little resolve to change her destiny. Matthaus and his friend embark on a dangerous journey home, while Phyllis succumbs to a misplaced sense of duty to Humphrey Gould. He had returned and gifted her with a “very handsome looking glass.” Phyllis accepted the gift and decides to honour her betrothal. “She was in that wretched state of mind which leads a woman to move mechanically onward in what she perceives to be her allotted path” (41). Ironically, she discovered, too late, that Gould wanted to set her free because he had fallen in love with another woman. Matthaus Tina was arrested and executed for infraction of military protocol and Phyllis is condemned to a lonely life of spinsterhood in the very “Twilight” that she had found so oppressive as a young girl. While spinsterhood in Sally Hall was an act of defiance, in Phyllis Grove it is a social condition that she had to adhere to due to lack of choice.

“Fellow-Townsmen” is a tale that invites a close study of man-woman relationships to the extent to which social conditions influence gender roles. Hardy begins with individuals, proceeds to couples and conventional love triangles, then reverses the process. This structure
echoes earlier works and anticipates *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Jude*.

Barnet, the successful flax-merchant and the struggling young lawyer Downe, were “fellow burgesses of the town which lay beneath them, but though old and very good friends, they were differently circumstanced” (72). Barnet was the richer man but this fact was never perceptible in his manner towards his friend. Yet Barnet envied Downe’s thriving marriage and home. He expresses sadly, “You are a fortunate fellow, Downe,” Barnet continued as mother and children disappeared from the window to run to the door. “You must be happy if any man is. I would give a hundred such houses as my new one to have a home like yours” (73).

To preserve peace in the household, although unsuccessfully, he builds “Chateau Ringdale,” so christened after a certain Lord Ringdale his wife once had a fancy for. The bitterness Barnet feels about his own lack of domestic bliss is compounded by a return home to a wife “who was nowhere to be seen.” He sits down to a lonely meal, the picture of Downe’s family imprinted on his mind. It was natural then, in such moments, for his mind to drift back to “a certain pleasing and gentle being whose face would loom out of the shades at such times as these.”
“I wonder if she lives there still” (75) he thinks. These words uttered by a miserable Barnet immediately prepares us for Lucy Saville.

The meeting between the two in Lucy Saville’s apartment uncovers a sad tale of love and remorse. Our first impression of Lucy is, of one who possesses a quiet demeanor and an aura of calmness, which is highly admirable in one so young. The untimely death of her father has forced Lucy to eke out a meager income from the sale of floral paintings which she sketches at night in poor light. Barnet is genuinely concerned about Lucy’s hard work and deep regret is outlined in his countenance. But Lucy has accepted the necessity of work and dignity, the same dignity that is evident in her initial response to Barnet’s unexpected presence in her room. Hardy beautifully describes the change from a preoccupied expression into that of “a reserved, half-proud and slightly indignant look” on her face. To Barnet’s allusion to her past she coldly replies “When I think of the circumstances of our last meeting, I can hardly consider it kind of you to allude to such thing as our past – or, indeed, to come here at all.” Time has helped Lucy to stoically and calmly accept Barnet’s marriage to “a woman of whose family even you might be proud” (77-78). Beautiful, young, intelligent and dignified she stands as a painful reminder to Barnet of all that he could have had but
lost due to his own foolishness. Lucy is a symbol of “Women (who) accept their destiny more readily than men” (A Pair of Blue Eyes).

Barnet, the refined, well-educated, liberal minded young man, cannot accept the present state of affairs as readily as Lucy. He is broken by the realization that he had lost domestic bliss because of “ambition… no it was not ambition, it was wrongheadedness.” The helplessness of the situation wrings out of him a confession that he wanted to see her as “an old and good friend, not to mince matters, to visit a woman I loved.” Lucy’s stance remains firm. Though visibly shaken, by Barnet’s confession, she reasserts her moral stance. When Barnet left her to marry another, Lucy did not fall apart but relied on logic and her innate power of reasoning to accept what she considered to be inevitable, “Everything was so indefinite, and feeling your position to be much wealthier than mine, I fancied I might have mistaken your meaning. And when I heard of the other lady… I thought how foolish I have been and said nothing” (79). Barnet could only say, “Then I suppose it was destiny – accident – I don’t know what that separated us, dear Lucy. Anyhow, you were the woman, I ought to have made my wife – and I let you slip, like the foolish man that I was!” (79). Almost in tears Lucy answered with gentle solitude,
It is a very common folly of human nature you know, to think the course you did not adopt must have been best … My family was so much poorer than yours, even before I lost my dear father, that – perhaps your companions would have made it unpleasant for us on account of my deficiencies (79).

What Lucy voices in the extract quoted above, is the malady of her times. The unequal marriage – the fact that she was poorer in comparison with Barnet – would never have worked. Maybe, in the face of the differences inherent in their social and financial backgrounds, love alone would not have been able to sustain the relationship. So, she gently urges Barnet to “make it up” with his wife and to leave her at once.

Barnet replies “I will” and walks out her door only to converge with Charlson, a surgeon about town, who owed him money. But Charlson had a little too much of “brazen indifferentism in his disposition to be altogether a desirable acquaintance” (81). If Barnet had been indecisive about obeying Lucy’s injunction, what Charlson says next, compels him to obey it to the letter for her sake.

“I’ve had a dream”, repeated Charlson who required no encouragement. “I dreamed that a gentleman, who has been very kind to me, married a haughty lady in haste, before he had quite forgotten a nice little girl he knew before, and that one wet evening, like the present, as I was walking up the harbor-road, I saw him come out of that dear little girl’s present abode” (81).
Gentlemanly and honourable to the core, Barnet observes Lucy now and then from afar but never seeks her out again. He yearns to help her but is constrained by his marital status. So he watches, he loves and longs for Lucy from a distance.

Ironically, the boating trip which was intended to bring Mrs Downe and Mrs Barnet close enough for the former to “find out what ruffles” the latter, ended in a tragic accident. Mrs Downe is drowned and floated out to the sea while Mrs Barnet lies apparently lifeless in her own house under medical hands, but there is no certain result. Charlson, the attending physician, with something of a mockery (for the man was aware of Barnet’s domestic relations) says, “I have just come down … we have done everything but without result. I sympathize with you in your bereavement” (88). A lesser man than Barnet, would have dutifully expressed sorrow, while inwardly become sufficiently elated by the freedom that has come so unexpectedly. But he went back to the bedroom and stood there regarding his wife’s silent form:

She was a woman some years older than himself, but not by any means over-passed the maturity of good looks and vigour. Her passionate features, well-defined, firm and statuesque in life were doubly so now: her mouth and brow, beneath her purplish black hair, showed only too clearly the turbulency of character which had made a bear-garden of his house … (88).
Puzzled by the lack of completeness in “the expression which he had been accustomed to associate” with the dead, Barnet places his hand on her chest and feels the faint beat of her heart. Barnet was faced with a dilemma:

Barnet had a wife whose presence distracted his home; she now lay as in death; by merely doing nothing – by letting the intelligence which had gone forth to the world be undisturbed – he would effect such a deliverance for himself as he had never hoped for, and open up an opportunity of which till now he had never dreamed. Whether the conjuncture had arisen through any unscrupulous, ill-considered impulse of Charlson to help out of a strait a friend who was so kind as never to press him for what he was due could not be told; there was nothing to prove it, it was a question which could never be asked. The triangular situation – himself – his wife – Lucia Saville – was the one clear thing (90).

Barnet’s honesty and strength of character in his crisis raises him to heroic proportions. Although he did not love the woman who was his wife, he applied himself vigorously to restore her to life. Later he bitterly mused, “my wife was dead, and now she is alive again.” But this same woman, whom he had gratuitously restored to life and made union for him with another impossible, on regaining her full health leaves him for London. Her departure did not arise from jealousy or any personal behaviour of his at all for her “concern was not with or his feelings, as she frequently told him; but that she had in a moment of weakness thrown herself away upon a common-burgher when she might have
arrived at and possibly brought down, a peer of the realm” (92). Barnet surrenders to a lonely existence, yet he was happier at this period than could be expected. His wife’s estrangement provided him with the time to reflect on what might have been if he had claimed Lucy when there was “no bar in their lives.”

Meanwhile, Lucy is now employed as a governess in Downe’s home (a position Barnet had secured for her in secret). Time passes and fate lurks in the darkness, ready to strike another blow to Barnet’s life. His wife dies in London but just as he falls on his knees in thanksgiving, a letter arrives for him from Downe. Barnet is free “at last” but Lucy has just exchanged marriage vows with Downe. “Impulse in all its forms characterized Barnet” and he rises to his feet and slowly walks to the church. “A feeling of sudden proud self-confidence, an indocile wish to walk unmoved inspite of grim environments plainly possessed him … it was creditable triumph over himself” (103). This observation made by the narrator clearly highlights the essence of Barnet and looks forward to Michael Henchard. Thwarted once again, in his desire to marry the woman he loved, he holds his head high and heroically blesses a union that was so painful to him. He disposes of all his property and sells his house to Downe. After a lapse of twenty one years and six months, Barnet returns – “a staidish gentleman with grey hair.” Lucy is now a
lonely widow and Barnet pays her a visit. This final meeting between Barnet and Lucy contains the experience and powerful psychological insight that characterizes Hardy’s great tragedies. That human relationships more often than not, are destined to end in tragedy, is evident from the outcome of this meeting. Barnet proposes marriage to Lucy, who, even though enlightened about the depth and intensity of his feelings for her in the course of their conversation, hesitates to consider a second marriage.

“Lucy” he said, “Better late then never. Will you marry me now?” She started back and the surprise which was so obvious in her wrought ever greater surprise in him that it should be so …“Why”, she added, “I couldn’t marry you to the world”, “Not after all this! Why not?” “It is – I would – I really think I may say it – I would upon the – rather marry you, Mr. Barnet, than any other man I have ever met, if I ever dreamed of marriage again. But I don’t dream of it … I have not the least intention of marrying again” (112).

The subdued and tender humorousness that characterizes Barnet, on such occasions in early life, did not desert him now. He leaves Lucy with a pleasant “goodnight”. After his footsteps have died upon the road, the widow pondered his speeches. She finally sees in Barnet what circumstances had blinded her to for so long – his urbanity, his philosophical acceptance of her rejection, his gentlemanly attitude. He was, she decided heroic and grand and began to feel the stirrings in her heart of “an interest in Barnet precisely resembling that of her early
youth”. That he had continued loving her for so long prompted her to seek him out at the Black Bull Hotel, only to discover that he had left with no forwarding address. Lucy resolves sorrowfully, to wait for his return. The tale ends with “She did wait – years and years – but Barnet never reappeared” (114).

“The Distracted Preacher,” the finest tale in this collection, is a longer short story divided into seven sections. Unlike the other tales, it has two endings – one, in adherence to the accepted conventions, dated April 1879 and the other inserted at a later date, by the author, in the form of a “Note” (dated May 1912).

“The Distracted Preacher,” though a comic tale, addresses the problems faced by a woman like Lizzy Newberry nee Lizzy Simpkins, in coming to terms with her dual personality and life. Described as “a widow - woman,” she is the “irrepressible new” woman, a delightful creature reminiscent of Bathsheba, Herminia and other kindred Hardyian heroines. The tale, thus, becomes an exploration of a woman torn between conventionality and the radical possibility of exerting independence by pushing against the limits set by a male dominated society. Beautiful and seductive (without any apparent effort) impulsive and daring, she captures the heart of the Wesleyan minister, a lonely young fellow, called Stockdale:
Before Stockdale had got far with his meal, a tap sounded on the door behind him, and on his telling the enquirer to come in, a rustle of garments caused him to turn his head. He saw before him a fine and extremely well-made young women with dark hair, a wide sensible, beautiful forehead, eyes that warmed him before he knew it, and a mouth that was in itself a picture to all appreciative souls (144).

With an “expression of liveliness,” she has come to check out her new boarder, because she wanted to “see if (he) was looking good.”

The Lizzy that Stockdale gradually falls in love with, is a woman whose presence plays havoc with his great senses and whose absences completely drives him to distraction. Mischief, tinged with genuine concern, prompts her to cure his cold by making “the inland man, the son of a highly respectable parents and brought up with a single eye to the ministry” (146) to venture out into the night to “steal” some rum from one of the barrels hidden by certain strugglers of Nether Moynton. Stockdale is appalled by his introduction to the dark side of the new Parish he was assigned to guide spiritually. His “innocent ignorance” and strong sense of duty contrasted sharply with Lizzy’s nonchalance “Well I have never particularly thought it as a duty; and, besides, my first husband … used to know of their doing, and so did my father, and kept the secret. I cannot inform infact, anybody” (148). So, Stockdale succumbs to the temptation, sips the rum and is instantly recovered from the cold.
Again, he discovers, to his puzzlement, that she had an annoying habit of “biding upstairs in bed because ‘tis her way sometimes.” When she does appear he was honoured with meeting her several times one day. On these occasions, “There was something in her smile which showed how conscious she was of the effect she produced, though it must be said that it was rather a humorous than a designing consciousness, and savoured more of pride than of vanity” (151). This mild coquetry continued for, “Being in her own house she could, after vexing or disappointing him of her presence, easily win him back by suddenly surrounding him with those little attentions when her position as his landlady put it in her power to bestow” (151). The relationship seemed to be in an advancing state when Stockdale learns that Owlett, Lizzy’s cousin, had spoken to her about matrimony. This confession prompts Stockdale to press, most fervently, for a commitment from Lizzy:

“Let it be Yes or No between us Lizzy, please do!” And he held out his hand, in which she freely allowed her own to rest but without speaking.

“You may be my sweetheart, if you will.” “Why not say at once you will wait for me until I have a house and can come back to marry you?”

“Because I am thinking – thinking of something else,” she said with embarrassment. “It all comes upon me at once, and I must settle one thing at a time” (153).

Lizzy’s hesitation stems from a fierce loyalty she has towards Owlett and the men (the smugglers of Nether Moynton) she refuses to
endanger or to put them into the hands of the custom-men, although they use her premises sometimes to hide the tubs. That the “distracted preacher,” has also won her heart cannot be doubted, but she had other obligations to fulfill before she can make any promises to Stockdale. His discovery, by accident, of the story behind “The Mysterious Great-Coat,” takes the relationship between the two, to another level. Stockdale had begun to notice a certain irregularity in the life of his fair landlady, “For a week or two she would not be visible till twelve at noon, perhaps for three or four days in succession; and twice he had certain proof that she did not leave her room till half-past three in the afternoon” (154). Following this unexplained, strange behaviour, she usually looked pale and tired. Stockdale fondly attributed it to ill-health but was flippantly informed by Lizzy that it was “pure sleepiness” and nothing else. So they continued as indefinitely affianced lovers:

Stockdale persuaded himself that his hesitation was owing to the postponement of the ordained minister’s arrival, and the consequent delay in his own departure, which did away with all necessity for haste in his courtship, but perhaps it was only that his discretion was reasserting itself, and telling him that he had better get clearer ideas of Lizzy before arranging for the grand contract of his life with her. She, on her part, always seemed ready to be urged further on that question then he had hitherto attempted to go; but she was none the less independent and to a degree which would have kept from flagging the passion of a for more mutable man (158).
This state of affairs would have continued indefinitely had Lizzy’s great secret remained unrevealed to Stockdale. The unraveling of her nocturnal adventures, by then, has become inevitable.

It all started with a mistake committed by Martha, the maid, in leaving a “long, drab great-coat” and a pair of breeches in Stockdale’s room. He correctly identified them as belonging to Lizzy’s dead husband but was totally unprepared to see Lizzy airing and dusting them, outside, one morning. Stockdale opened his bedroom window and looked out, and Mrs. Newberry turned her head, “Her face became slowly red; she never looked prettier or more incomprehensible.” The fact, that, the tails of the great coat bore “fresh pedestrian splashes” was noticed by him and he broke out in cold sweat at the apparent deception of his beloved. A week later, at night, he saw a form, attired in clothes which Lizzy had been brushing, vanish around the top of the stairs. A few moments later, rushing into Lizzy’s room, he found it unoccupied. He realized that the man he had spied earlier was none other than Lizzy – “It was she; in her husband’s coat and hat.” Following her, along a torturous route to the sea, he found her eavesdropping into a conversation between some men about “luggers” and “Owlett’s share.” He immediately concluded that “my darling has been tempted to buy a share by that unbeliever Owlett …… Oh it will be the ruin of her” (163). He ran back, to the house, to
await her arrival. In the powerful and poignant scene, that followed, between the two lovers, we are led to witness the clash between two personalities who come from two entirely different worlds. Stockdale is painfully forced to face a reality that was totally alien to him. Lizzy, however, the New Woman, is not ashamed to be caught “partly in man’s clothes …. I have got my own dress under just the same – it is only tucked in” (164). Firm and resolute, she will not be influenced by Stockdale’s tender attempts to persuade her to change her ways. “I must do my best to save the run,” she said, getting rather husky in the throat, “I don’t want to loose my venture. I don’t know what to do now. Why I have kept it so secret from you is that I was afraid you would be angry if you knew” (165). She is torn between love for Stockdale and loyalty to Owlett and the men she had known all her life. Nor could she give up, too easily, the call of adventure that is in her blood – “it is in my blood, and I can’t be cured.” The dilemma here, for Lizzy, is not about making choices but about loosing her freedom and independence and the “joie de vivre”. She explains it with frank candour: “My father did it, and so did my grandfather, and almost everybody in Nether-Moynton lives by it, and life would be so dull if it wasn’t for that, that I should not care to live at all” (166).
Stockdale, realizes then, that fascinating though Lizzy was she was not cut-out to become a minister’s wife. So he contemplates, sadly, “If I had only stuck to father’s little grocery business, instead of going into the ministry, she would have suited me beautifully” (166).

Unable to give her up, he follows Lizzy and meets with her “nocturnal friends.” The easy camaraderie that exists between Lizzy and the men plunges him into further depression. It would only be natural, he concluded, judging by shared “tastes and pursuits”, for Lizzy to answer “Owlett’s long standing question on matrimony in the affirmative”. He decides to make one last effort to win her away from this nocturnal crew to correctness of conduct and a minister’s parlour in some far-removed inland country.

Lizzy’s adventure reaches its climax in the great search at Nether-Moynton’s. The minister is duly chastened by the realization that when Latimer and the king’s officers came to the village there was no male villager in sight – his faithful congregation were all involved - in the illegal runs. In this play of wits, the villager wins, each running away with his own share, Latimer and his men needed to be rescued by the bewildered minister. After the excitement has died down, Stockdale attempts, for the last time, to persuade Lizzy to give up “this business” for love’s sake. Lizzy replies: “Don’t ask that,” she whispered. “you
don’t know what you are asking. I must tell you, though I meant not to do it. What I make by that trade is all I have to keep my mother and myself with” (186).

Though stunned by this revelation, Stockdale relentlessly continued,

“What is money compared to a clear conscience?” “My conscience is clear. I know my mother but the king I have never seen. His dues are nothing to me. But it is a great deal that my mother and I should live.” “Marry me, and promise to give up. I will keep your mother.” “It is good of you,” she said, moved a little. “Let me think of it by myself. I would rather not answer now” (187).

The confrontation latent in individuals with conflicting principles is brought to the fore here. Stockdale wants Lizzy to conform to his way of life – a life where a woman’s surrender of identity and personal interests for the sake of a man is taken for granted. Matrimony, in nineteenth century Britain, does not necessitate any change in a man while the total upheaval of a woman’s life is deemed to be natural and expected. Lizzy, a woman who has resisted and survived, the limitations imposed upon her by her gender, defiantly and courageously stands up against this injustice. Indeed, hers is the voice of the new woman, against the belief that a woman is never supposed to have any occupation of sufficient importance and that it is her ‘duty’ to give it up at the “first claim of social life”. So Lizzy says passionately, “I cannot do what you
wished … it is too much to ask. My whole life ha’ been passed in this way” (187).

Stockdale, the stereotypical male of his time, cannot accept, and fails to comprehend a woman as modern as Lizzy. Firmly entrenched in a paternalistic society he cannot meet Lizzy half-way. So he says quietly, “Then Lizzy we must part. I cannot go against my principles in this matter, and I cannot make my profession a mockery. You know how I love you and what I would do for you; but this is one thing I cannot do” (187).

Lizzy lashes out, in an outburst that is at once poetic and passionate. She strikes at the hypocrisy prevalent in her time. Lizzy is expected to “give this business up” for Stockdale but he “cannot” give up his profession for her. So she bursts out:

“But why should you belong to that profession? I have got this large house; why can’t you marry me, and live here with us and not be a Methodist preacher anymore? I assure you, Richard, it is no harm, and I wish you could see it as I do, we only carry it on in winter; in summer it is never done at all. It stirs up one’s dull life at this time O’ the year, and give excitement, which I have got used to now that I should hardly know how to do without it. At nights when the wind blows, instead of being dull and stupid, and without noticing whether it do blow your or not, your mind is afield, even if you are not afield yourself; and you are wondering how the chaps are getting on …. And have hair-breadth escapes from old Latimer and his fellows, who are too stupid ever to really frighten us, and only make us a bit nimble” (187).
Stockdale is adamant that they part ways and Lizzy says bitterly, “You never loved me.” From the start, it is obvious that Stockdale’s resolution had been to either change or bring Lizzy to follow his principles or part ways. His failure to effect this change lies in himself and not in Lizzy. His inability to embrace Lizzy’s life and to come to a deeper and fuller understanding of what completes her as a woman reveals the weakness and myopic vision of the young man. Lizzy is an extraordinary woman who finds the fullest expression of herself in the business that is so distasteful to someone like Stockdale. Hence, she is ready to forfeit all for the pleasure of living life on the edge. Lizzy, then, Hardy’s greatest creation in Wessex Tales is a valediction of the strong, new women.

The first ending to the story, is Hardy’s compromise with what is acceptable and conventionally correct. Disappointing, though it is, it ends with a union between Stockdale and Lizzy. Two years have passed before Stockdale returns to find Lizzy a changed woman, defeated by the system she had fought so bravely against. Highly inconsistent with the image of Lizzy, as depicted throughout the narrative, she admits that she had been wrong all along: “I have suffered for it. I am very poor now, and my mother has been dead these twelve months” (190). She is a shadow of her
former self and as expected Stockdale happily takes her “away from her old haunts to a house that he has made for himself in his native country”.

It ends with an image of Lizzy religiously studying her duties as a minister’s wife with “praiseworthy assiduity.” “It is said that in after years she wrote an excellent tract called *Render unto Caesar; or the Repentant Villagers* with an introductory story about her own experiences. As ludicrous, as this sounds, the ending must have satisfied many moral and conventional readers of that time. But, Hardy, dissatisfied and discontented with the compromise he had made inserts a “Note” to the tale, thirty years later – this is the satisfying second ending to the tale about a strong, beautiful and daring young woman:

But at this late date, thirty years after, it may not be amiss to give the ending that would have been preferred by the writer to the convention used above. Moreover, it corresponds more closely with the true incidents of which the tale is a vague and flickering shadow. Lizzy did not, infact, marry the minister, but – much to her credit in the author’s opinion – stuck to Jim the smuggler, and emigrated with him after their marriage an expatrial step rather forced upon him by his adventurous antecedent. They both died in Wisconsin between 1850 and 1860.

* A Group of Noble Dames* (1891), another collection of short stories portray the lives of ten Women as narrated by members of a Wessex Field and Antiquarian club, who are ensconced at an inn after a rainstorm delayed their outing Thomas Hardy described the contents of *A Group of
Noble Dames as “I may say it is to be a Tale of Tales – a series of linked stories – of a somewhat different kind from the mass of my work of late” (Letters VII, 113). These stories are placed in “a contrapuntal structure” so that “with a few exceptions, each story can be seen as a re-patterning or ironic refutation of the ostensible moral of the one preceding it” (Brady, 53)

In his Preface, dated June 1896, Thomas Hardy elucidates that the narratives contained in this collection have been derived from “the diagrams on pages of county histories” of the “pedigrees of country families.” By transforming “this dryness as of dust” into a palpitating drama through a careful comparison of dates alone, the framework of the motives, passions and personal qualities of these extraordinary Dames, most of the stories have “arisen and taken shape.” These “curious tales of fair dames, of their loves and hates, their joys and misfortunes, their beauty and their fate” offer a rich quarry for a study of the gender matrix in Hardy’s shorter fiction.

Dame the First, “the First Countess of Wessex” is a tale narrated by the local Historian. The dame, Betty Dornell, was married off at the tender age of twelve, in a little White Frock, which was carefully preserved at King’s Hintock Court as “a testimony to the small count taken of the happiness of an innocent child in the social strategy of those
days, which might have led, but providentially did not lead, to great unhappiness” \textit{(Noble Dames, 9)}.

The marital disquiet that existed in the Dornell household, centred in more than one occasion, upon the future of Betty. While his wife desired to unite Betty, at a very young age in matrimony to a man of over thirty, Squire Dornell, rightfully so, resisted her as vociferously as he could. The battle of wills that ensued, between the Squire and his wife, springs from a relationship that had deteriorated over the years due to the differences in their social background. Embittered by the constant reminder of his humbler roots and tired of her “air and graces” \textit{(11)}, Dornell regularly leaves his wife’s house to stay in the countryside in his own ancestral home, Falls Park, whiling his time in gambling and drinking - He was unhappy when near his wife, he was unhappy when away from his little girl; and from this dilemma there was no practicable escape \textit{(12)}. The predicament of the Squire reflects, to a certain degree the turmoil that inevitably arises out of unequal marriages, regardless of gender, in the rigid Victorian society. The inferior partner always suffers from an emotional vacuum which corrodes all attempts to fill it outside the domestic life. The unavailability of divorce stretches the pain and frustration infinitely and the individual is left hollow and drained of the
“joie de vivre”. What heightens the tragedy of such marital incompatibility is the interminable suffering of the innocent off springs.

Betty, as is usually the case, becomes the silent sufferer torn between her mother’s ambitions and her father’s fierce protectiveness. She often “cried herself to sleep”. Though Betty was marriageable, in the views of those days, she was too young to fall in love. Not with standing this, though “a child not yet thirteen,” she is married off to Stephen Reynard, a man in all likelihood to have a title granted to him before long. Due consideration must have been given to this fact by Mrs Dornell, hence, prompting her to consent to this “premature union” behind her husband’s back. It was however, agreed upon, that the couple was in no way to meet until five to six years have passed. Heartbroken for his child and embittered by his wife’s action, Dornell hereafter, adopted the life of a recluse in Falls Park. Meanwhile, Betty left school at the age of seventeen and returned to King’s Hintock. Her marriage to Reynard, which had taken place on a cold, clear March day, was like a dream to her:

…the London church with its gorgeous pews and green- baize linings, and the great organ in the west gallery – so different from their own little church in the shrubbery of King’s Hintock Court – the man of thirty, to whose face she had looked up with so much awe, and with a sense that he was rather ugly and formidable: the man whom, though they corresponded politely, she had never seen since: one to
whose existence she was now so indifferent that if informed about his death, and that she would never see him more, she would merely have replied, ‘Indeed!’ Betty’s passions as yet still slept [23].

These “passions” however were soon awakened by her father’s free views and constant animadversions (especially the ones about Charley Phelipson, “a lad a couple of years her senior”). Untutored in love and still fleetingly aware of romance Betty’s imagination started to wander in the direction of Phelipson blissfully ignorant about the social ramifications of such an attraction towards someone other than the vague shadow of a man she was actually married to.

“Did you see how the sound of his name frightened her?” he presently added. “if you didn’t, I did, Zounds! What a future is in store for that poor little unfortunate wench o’ mine! I tell’ ee Sue, ‘twas not a marriage at all, in morality and if I were a woman in such a position, I shouldn’t feel it as one. She might, without a sign of sin, love a man of her choice as well as now as if she were chained up to no other at all. There, that’s my mind, and I can’t help it. Ah, Sue, my man was best! He’d have suited her.”

“I don’t believe it,” she replied incredulously – “You should see him; then you would. He’s growing up a fine fellow, I can tell ‘ee”. “Hush! Not so loud!” she answered, rising from her seat and going to the door of the next room, whither her daughter had betaken herself. To Mrs Dornell’s alarm, there sat Betty in a reverie, her round eyes fixed on vacancy, musing so deeply that she had not perceived her mother’s entrance. She had heard every word, and was digesting the new knowledge (23).

As the adults continued warring, Betty was growing up, soon, Dornell noticed Betty stealing, interested glances at Phelipson during
dinner and mistook it for obedience to his earlier directive to her: “Sting your mother’s conscience, my maid!” he whispered. “Sting her conscience by pretending you are struck with Phelipson and would ha! loved him, as your old father’s choice, much more than him she has forced upon ‘ee!” (25).

Betty’s interest in young Phelipson grew and the so-called “counterfeit love” became real – she was as love struck as any Rosalind. However a letter arrived from Reynard, intimating a proposed visit. The news hit Betty hard and she cries out brokenly: “Oh, I wish – my dear father were here! I will send to him instantly!” She broke off abruptly, and falling upon her mother’s neck burst into tears, saying, “O my mother, have mercy upon me – I do not love this man my husband!” (31). Betty’s cry is a sinister reminder of the plight of every young woman in nineteenth century Britain – young girls who have been compelled into early marriages with complete strangers who were older but titled and socially desirable. Feelings of love and sexual attraction were suppressed by the force of parental authority and little consideration was given to the emotional, mental and physical well-being of the daughter. She was as worthy as the man she was married to and any disobedience inadvertently led to shame and dishonor upon her household, a burden too horrifying to be taken lightly. Submission, therefore,
became the easier way out. But not so with Betty. The desperate measure she adopted to thwart Reynard’s claim upon her, reveals a strength of character that is admirable as well as piteous in its futility. She kisses Nanny Priddle, a convalescent from small-pox, a dreaded disease in those days, so that, “I might take it, and now I shall have it, and he [Reynard] won’t be able to come near me” (35). Left to herself, in quarantine, Betty brooded on her misfortunes until young Charley Phelipson came to her rescue. Stealing away from her room, she rides off with him “for Reynard’s on the way.”

The effects of Betty’s rebellion on Dornell is electrical – he revives momentarily from his illness, to shout in triumph: “What – Betty – a trump after all? Hurrah! She’s her father’s own maid! She’s game! She knew he was her father’s own choice! She vowed that my man should win! Well done, Betty:- haw! haw! Hurrah!” (55). Where upon, exhausted he falls back in his bed and dies before dawn.

Betty’s reckless and desperate ride with Charley ends disastrously. She discovers that Charley’s love is “skin deep,” too shallow to withstand the horrors of smallpox. His horror foils all pretences of a romantic elopement and Betty, staunch and chastened returns home only to be confronted by the very man she was running away from. Sixteen years her senior, Reynard is mature enough to be compassionate about
her sickness and daring enough to claim “a deliberate kiss full on her mouth,” with total disregard to his own health. Reynard’s kiss arouses in Betty an awe of the man and an excitement at his hardiness. She
did not deny that Stephen had shown her kindness, forbearance even magnanimity; had forgiven her for an errant passion which he might with some reason have denounced, not withstanding her cruel position as a child entrapped into marriage ere able to understand its bearings (57).

Betty had “sprung from girl to woman in one bound.” Mrs Dornell however, on the death of her husband suddenly awoke to his many virtues and set about “delaying Betty’s union with her husband which she had formerly combated.”

This remorseful, perhaps selfish, volte-face by her mother led Betty to meet with her lawful husband clandestinely until the intimacy of those meetings could no longer be hidden when her figure became noticeably different. Owing to her rebuffs, Reynard had grown to be truly in love with Betty in his “mild, placid, durable way,” in a way which:

…upon the whole, tends most generally to the woman’s comfort under the institution of marriage, if not particularly to her ecstasy (59).

Mrs Dornell was appalled by the obvious result of her daughter’s trysts with Stephen but Betty’s spirited reply to her admonitions is: But,
my dearest Mama, you made me marry him! And of course I’ve to obey him more than you now (63).

 Providentially, for Betty, her married life was happy. They settled down, had numerous children and Betty became the countess of Wessex. Hardy ends the tale with: “Such is woman; or rather (not to give offence by so sweeping an assertion) such was Betty Dornell” (66).

 Dame the Second, “Barbara of the House of Grebe,” is narrated by the old surgeon. These two stories (The First Countess of Wessex and Barbara) form a natural contrast; in the first, a young girl is not allowed to marry a man of her choice but eventually finds happiness with the husband her mother had arranged for her, whereas in “Barbara”, the heroine does marry her chosen one but finally ends up with the husband of her family’s choice and finds “only a very ambiguous love” (Ray, 95).

 Lord Uplandtowers’ interest in Barbara sprang “more from an idea than any real passion” (68). This opening statement in the narrative strikes the keynote to this tale of cold calculative cruelty that is unleashed upon a woman of a mild and tender, though shallow, nature. Her initial unreciprocity is ultimately overpowered, into mindless submission by the sheer force of Uplandtower’s evil mind. When he disclosed his resolve to marry her, to a friend, the latter’s remarks shed light on Barbara’s character: “You’ll never get her—sure: you’ll never get her! She’s not
drawn to your lordship by love and as for thought of a good match, why, there’s no more calculation in her than in a bird” (69).

If Betty Dornell, like all Hardyians heroines attempts to control her destiny by defying those who threaten her happiness, Barbara’s elopement with Edmond Willowes, however, reveals the myopic vision of a lady prompted into action more by romantic notions than by depth of feeling. In her letter to her parents she states that:

…she had taken this extreme step because she loved her dear Edmond as she could love no other man, and because she had seen closing round her the doom of marriage with the Lord Uplandtowers unless she put that threatened fate out of possibility by doing what she had done (74).

Barbara’s elopement with Edmond has brought shame and dishonour to her family because of social issues rather than moral ones, the obvious disparity in the social status of the young couple portends doom and tragedy. To marry beneath one’s social standing in the nineteenth century Britain tantamounts to sacrilege – a woman will never recover from the censure and reproach that follows such a union. Edmond, on the other hand, in spite of his good looks and honest nature could not boast of his blood which was: “…of no distinction whatever, whilst hers, through her mother, was compounded of the best juices of ancient baronial distillation” (75).
Little did Barbara know that her “love” will be severely tested with the passage time and that she will fail miserably. Barbara had married below her station and this “disgrace” was felt keenly by her parents. Edmond is an honest man of an honest father but he is unsuitable for Barbara, in her parents estimate, because he is ill-educated. The snobbery of the time is closely examined in this tale, for the desire to redress Edmond’s “flaw” will eventually lead to the tragedy that causes endless woe and suffering to their beloved daughter. Hardy’s description of the descending scale of happiness experienced by the young couple in London, reveal the author’s deep insight into the complexity of the man-woman relationship:

In the meantime the young married lovers, caring no more about their blood than about ditch-water, were intensely happy - happy, that is, in the descending scale, which as we all know, Heaven in its wisdom has ordained for such rash cases; that is to say, the first week they were in seventh heaven, the second in the sixth, the third week temperate, the fourth reflective, and so on;...a lover’s heart after possession becomes comparable to the earth in its geologic stages...first, a hot coal, then a warm one, then a cooling cinder, then chilly... (76).

The contrite pair soon returned to Chene Manor House, after being assured, by Barbara’s parents, of a pleasant welcome. The Grebes been credibly informed that “an ancestor of plebeian Willowes was once honoured with intermarriage with a scion of the aristocracy who had
gone to the dogs” (77). In a matter of a few weeks Edmond was sent with sufficient funds, to travel a year on the continent in the company of a tutor till he became “polished” inwardly and outwardly to the degree required in the husband of a lady like Barbara.

Barbara, according to Kristen Brady, is an “infantile woman” incapable of nurturing feelings deep enough for abiding love. Willowes’ absence could not sustain the thrill of sexual experience and her passion for him cools down rapidly – “Edmond’s letters were as affectionate as ever, even more affectionate, after a while, than hers were to him. Barbara observed this growing coolness in herself…it troubled her so much that she prayed for a warmer heart” (80).

Horrified by this discovery, Barbara urges her husband, whose face and physical appearances have faded into a blurred past, to send her a portrait of himself. Her limited capacity to feel connected to Edmond her stunted emotional growth and average intelligence, led Barbara to believe that a copy of her husband’s face would revive her earlier infatuation and justify her desire to be faithful to him. This request serves to underscore the shallowness of Barbara’s character and prepares the reader for the imminent drama that will unfold with tragic consequences. Barbara is a pathetic but accurate representation of many women of her times – women who lacked the vision and will power to break-out of the
suffocating influence of a deadening society that prohibits them to express their freedom through the right to love and to be loved unconditionally. Even the most feeble attempts made towards an acknowledgement and expression of their sexuality is ruthlessly stamped out by an unseen but accepted code of behaviour that lurks in the shadows. Barbara’s emotional immaturity makes her an easy victim of the rigid patriarchal society existing then.

A fire broke out in the theatre, and Edmond Willowes was fearfully burnt when he heroically entered the blazing tornado to save two senseless sufferers of this terrible catastrophe. Ironically, Willowes escapes death under the effective ministration of skilful surgeons; he however loses his good looks:

Lady Grebe blurted out what Sir John and Barbara had thought, but had too much delicacy to express “Sure, ‘tis mighty hard for you, poor Barbara, that the one little gift we had to justify your rash choice of him – his wonderful good looks – should be taken like this, to leave ‘ee no excuse at all for your conduct in the world’s eyes…well, I wish you’d married t’ other – that do I!” (83).

To escape the uneasy self-stultification within her, Barbara seeks refuge in the cottage that had been prepared for Edmond’s return. Escapism does little to strengthen her for her disfigured husband’s imminent arrival home, instead, it renders her vulnerable to the evil design of the rejected suitor who is watching the turn of events in
malicious delight. While Edmond satisfies all the qualities of a conventional hero, Barbara lacks “the stuff of which great women are made of” (*Far From the Madding Crowd*).

She has been enamored by Edmond’s handsome, good looks and once these were gone she is incapable of delving deeper to find the intrinsic good qualities he possesses. He returns – romantically assured of the “divine” nature of her love only to discover that Barbara is not only repelled by the disfigurement to his face but could barely contain the tremors of revulsion that coursed through her body:

The poor lady stood beside him motionless save for the restlessness of her eyes. All her natural sentiments of affection and pity were driven clean out of her by a sort of panic; she had just the same sense of dismay and fearfulness that she would have had in the presence of an apparition. She could no how fancy this to be her chosen one – the man she had loved; he was metamorphosed to a specimen of another species. “I do not loathe you,” she said with trembling. “But I am so horrified – so overcome! Let me recover myself. Will you sup now? And while you do so may I go to my room to – regain my old feeling for you? I will try…yes, I will try!” (91).

Barbara runs away to recover from the “spectacle” her beloved had become and when she has recovered sufficiently, she braces herself to confront him again in the early morning light, for “by daylight she had less fear than in the dark” (92). But to her dismay, her husband was long gone. Edmond’s sensitive nature had been dealt a mortal blow by his
beloved’s reaction and the note he left behind sums up the depth of his anguish:

MY EVER BELOVED WIFE – The effect that, my forbidding appearance has produced upon you was one which I foresaw as quite possible. I hoped against it, but foolishly so. I was aware that no HUMAN love could survive such a catastrophe. I confess I thought YOURS DIVINE: but, after so long an absence, there could not be sufficient warmth to overcome that too natural aversion. It was an experiment and it has failed. I do not blame you; perhaps, even, it is better so, Goodbye. I leave England for one year. You will see me again at the expiration of that time if I live. Then I will ascertain your true feeling; and, if it be against me, go away forever (EW, 93).

Barbara, at this point, was immediately filled with deep remorse. She made enquiries as to his whereabouts, not out of love but from a sense of duty. Her love spurred on in the early days by passion and sexual discovery has flickered out into a dogged and obsessive sense of wifely-duty. Barbara can never be the celebrated New Woman; she is too weak and shallow to rise above centuries of entrapment and enslavement. Instead, the immaturity she displays at the beginning of the narrative becomes her own worst enemy. Hardy, did not leave her tale out of the collection because she depicts like the other Dames the strengths as well as weaknesses of the countless women who lived in nineteenth century Britain. Women, like Barbara, became easy prey to cold, cruel and calculative men like Uplandtowers. Thus, in the second half of the
narrative, while Uplandtowers can be seen as the villain, Barbara becomes the hapless victim of her own emotional deficiency. Her marriage to this titled man, her parents’ first choice, by the way, makes a mockery of all that she shared with Edmond Willowes:

But human hearts are as prone to change as the leaves of the creeper on the wall, and in the course of time, hearing nothing of her husband, Barbara could sit still unmoved whilst her mother and friends said in her hearing, “well, what has happened is for the best”. She began to think so herself; for even now she could not summon up that lopped and mutilated form without a shiver, though whenever her mind flew off to her early wedded days, and the man who stood beside her then, a thrill of tenderness moved her, which if quickened by his living presence might have become stronger (94).

But he did not come again and soon she gave him up for the “man of silence, of irresistible incisiveness, of still countenance” (95) who soon makes his move. In a passionless manner, once it was certain that Edmond Willowes would never return, Uplandtowers effortlessly succeeds in making Barbara his wife. Hardy comments, “Barbara did not love him, but hers was essentially one of those sweet-pea or with-wind natures which require a twig of stouter fiber than its own to hang upon and bloom” (96).

Soon, Barbara’s inability to love him and the dim hope of a successor irritated rather than hurt Uplandtowers and he subjected her to constant reproaches and insults, which she endured in painful silence.
The belated arrival of Edmond’s statue (a replica of his former good looks) rouses in Barbara’s lonely heart a renewed passion for the man she had wronged and lost. So, she embraces the cold statue in “silent ecstasy and reserved beatification” (100), as she should have done a warm-blooded Edmond, had he been alive. “On discovery, Uplandtowers” perversity rises to the fore, as he methodically sets out in an evil and cruel way to divert Barbara’s passion for Edmond to himself. He disfigures the statue in exact copy of the way Edmond Willowes had looked after the accident (from a painting he had procured of this man’s looks). Relentlessly and cruelly, he forces Barbara to look, repeatedly, on the maimed statue until she finally collapses, all thought of Edmond Willowes driven away from her in benumbing terror. “Another dose or two and she will be cured”, he said to himself—this reveals the inhuman capacity for sadistic pleasure that Uplandtowers possesses. The upshot was however:

…that the cure became so permanent as to be itself a new disease. She clung to him so tightly, that she would not be willingly out of his sight for a moment. She would have no sitting-room apart from his, though she could not help staring when he entered suddenly to her...till at length, her very fidelity became a burden to him, absorbing his time, and curtailing his liberty and causing him to curse and swear (110).
So, Barbara lived on in complete submission and “obsequious amativeness” (111) towards a perverse and cruel man and bore him no less than eleven children in the years that followed.

Barbara’s Tale emphasizes the wasted life of a lady whose existence “might have been developed to a much higher purpose but for the ignoble ambitious of her parents and the conventions of the time” (110). Before she could mature into a young beautiful woman, her right to decide her life was cruelly wrested out of her hands, first, by her ambitious parents and then by a man who never loved her. The conventions of the time have successfully reduced what could have been a promising life into the diseased life of the woman we see at the end of the tale. Barbara’s tragedy is of a woman who realizes the true worth of her beloved only after his death. This has been stressed by the Sermon delivered upon her death by the Dean of Melchester, who dwelt upon the “folly of indulgence in sensuous love for a handsome form merely, and showed that the only rational and virtuous growth of that affection were those based on intrinsic worth” (112).

Dame the Third, “The Marchioness of Stonehenge” is a story which “afforded an instance of the latter and better kind of feeling, his heroine being also a lady who had married beneath her” (113). So rigid were the social prejudices and social divisions in those days, as pointed
out earlier, that to dare to love below one’s status was tantamount to a blatant violation of the law of the land. Hardy’s deep understanding of the predicament of his female characters is acutely felt in each line of his tale.

Caroline, the lady of the tale, possessed unparalleled beauty: “… a lady whose personal charms were so rare and unparalleled that she was courted, flattered and spoilt by almost all the young noblemen and gentlemen in the part of Wessex” (114).

After the novelty of these attentions had worn-off, Caroline soon grew bored and turned her regard “netherward, socially speaking” (114). She centered her passionate affections on the clerk’s son – a plain-looking young man with humble birth and no position at all. Spurring her on, was the knowledge that Milly, the village lass, already loved this young man although he returned her attentions in a good natured and harmless manner. It did not take long for the young man to reciprocate the advances made by the lady who had all the art of love at her fingertips. Throwing caution to the winds, they could no longer disguise their growing attachment to each other. Caroline knew she would never be allowed to marry him but to renounce him altogether was equally painful to her. They decided to marry in secret. The private ceremony over, they became lovers although their meetings were covert and unknown to the
outside world. So they continued, for a while, lost in the golden glow of sexual love. The young man’s reverence and love for the lady grew but she soon experienced the first stirrings of discontent:

To be sure, towards the latter part of that month, when the first wild warmth of her love had gone off, the lady Caroline sometimes wondered within herself how she, who might have chosen a peer of the realm, baronet, knight; or if serious minded, a bishop or judge of the more gallant sort who prefer young wives, could have brought herself to do to a thing so rash as to make this marriage, particularly when, in their private meetings, she perceived that though her young husband was full of ideas and fairly well read, they had not a single social experience in common (116).

The relationship soon ended abruptly. One night after a serious altercation, the agitated young man, in a moment of clarity, realized that “cold reason had come to his lofty wife.” His weak heart succumbed to a severe cardiac arrest and was instantly cold and dead. She tried to revive him but failed. Faced with the bizarre situation, the affrighted lady’s first thought was self preservation. So she dragged his stiff body back to his cottage:

“Oh, why, why, my unfortunate husband, did you die in my chamber at this hour!” She said piteously to the corpse. “Why not have died in your own cottage if you would die! Then nobody would know of our imprudent union and no syllable would have been breathed of how I mismated myself for love of you” (118).

A riot of feelings played havoc with Caroline’s heart and mind at this juncture – much as she grieved for her dead husband she also felt a
sense of freedom – “This thought of immunity from the social consequences of her rash act, of renewed freedom, was indubitably a relief to her, for, as has been said, the constraint and riskiness of her position had begun to tell upon the lady Caroline’s nerves” (118). She had loved the young man but after the first warmth of passion had worn off, cold common sense reinstated itself in her heart and her love became “mean and shamefaced under the frost” of social conventions. Had he lived on, what had appeared to be strong and sturdy would have deteriorated to pain and bitterness. Caroline lacked the moral fibre to stand up defiantly against a society that forbade an earl’s daughter to love and marry the son of a clerk. Hence, her relief on his timely demise, which in many ways released Caroline from the ultimate confrontation with the inevitable – the system that was definitely more powerful than she could ever be. But, Caroline’s woes did not end so favourably or painlessly.

The young man’s corpse was discovered and the cause of death certified as cardiac arrest. But after the funeral, “it was rumoured that some man who had been returning late from a distant horse-fair had seen in the gloom of night a person, apparently a woman, dragging a heavy body of some sort towards the cottage-gate …” (120). The beautiful and ingenious Caroline had to adopt a new strategy towards concealment and
regretted that she had not been forthright from the start. So using the considerable influence she had over her father’s estate she sought out Milly, the village lass, in furtherance of her plan to protect her reputation. By then, she was ashamed of her mad passion for her late husband and even wished she had never met him.

The first meeting between Caroline and Milly underscores not only the social differences between two women who had loved the Clerk’s son but also the difference in the way they had loved him. One had won him in secret and was ashamed of their brief interlude, the other had never had him for her own but no longer wished to live because he was gone. As the lofty Caroline stood beside the humble Milly vividly etched before us is the contrast between them. Society has successfully clipped the wings of one beautiful creature and maimed her for life, but is, simultaneously, defeated by a humble plain-looking village lass whose liberty to love enhances her intrinsic beauty and clothes her with a power that title and wealth can neither eclipse nor take away. Caroline outlined her plan to the simple Milly, and with the right amount of pressure as lady of the estates, was able to transfer her own position to the latter. The transformation that came over Milly as she placed Caroline’s wedding ring on her own finger is poetically narrated in the Tale: “But from that moment the maiden was heart and soul in the
substitution. A blissful repose came over her spirit. It seemed to her that she had secured in death him whom in life she had vainly idolized; and she was almost content” (123).

Milly’s “so-called confession” was declared and as the news of her little romance spread, there was not a single soul who doubted her story. Clothed in her widow’s garb, Milly took to her new role with little consideration to the fact that her young life could be tarnished forever by her assumed widowhood. She seemed so possessed, psychologically, with a spirit of ecstasy at her position that her state was almost envied by many young girls of the village. Lovingly she attended the graveyard of the man she had loved and lost and won again in death by subterfuge. In witnessing Milly at the graveyard one day, Caroline could not still the sharp pain that had shot through her, at the scene, and Hardy comments: “… it showed that a slumbering affection for her husband still had a life in Lady Caroline, obscured and stifled as it was by social consideration” (125).

This smooth arrangement however did not last long. One day in the graveyard, Caroline, pale and agitated confronts Milly. The confrontation reemphasizes the obvious disparity in character between the strength of the “impressionable and complaisant” village girl and the weakness of the lofty lady abiding by the rules of an inflexible system.
Caroline attempts to forcibly snatch back all that she had willingly transferred to Milly in another bid to protect her fragile reputation. If in the first meeting Milly is coerced into assuming the title of a widow, this time she will not part with it simply because Caroline is carrying the unassuming villager’s child:

But there is a limit to the flexibility of gentle-souled women. Milly by this time had grown to the idea of being one flesh with the young man, of having the right to bear his name as she bore it; had so thoroughly come to regard him as her husband, to speak of him as her husband, that, she could not relinquish him at a moment’s peremptory notice (126).

She speaks out, against this haughty, presumptuous lady and all that she represents, in a voice that is clear and honest:

“No, no,” she said desperately, “I cannot I will not give him up! Your ladyship took him away from me alive, and gave him back only when he was dead. Now I will keep him! I am truly his widow. More truly than you, my lady! for I love him and mourn for him and call myself by his dear name, and your ladyship does neither” (126).

Unprepared for this remarkable force of conviction and strength in a girl she had always disdained as her inferior, Lady Caroline made one last attempt to plead her questionable cause: “Oh, this precipitancy – it is the ruin of women! why did I not consider and wait! Come give me back all that I have given you, and assure me you will support me in confessing the truth!” (127).
The metamorphosis of the village lass is perfected at this point in the narrative. Faithful in love, free and fearless, she is the author’s celebration of the essence of femininity at its most brilliant. She reminds the reader of all the true Hardyian heroines who refuse to be intimidated by rank or wealth and in reasserting her freedom as a woman who chooses who to love, Milly soars head and shoulders over her privileged counterpart who lives constantly in fear of social censure. Trapped and fettered, the Lady Caroline becomes another willing victim to the conventions of her time. While Lady Caroline sinks into nothingness, Milly rises higher and higher – and so, she declares convincingly and passionately:

“Never, Never!” persisted Milly, with woe-begone passionateness, “look at this headstone! Look at my gown and bonnet of crape – this ring: listen to the name they call me by! My character is worth as much to me as yours is to you! After declaring my love mine, myself his, taking his name, making his death my own particular sorrow, how can I say it was not so? No such dishonor for me! I will outswear you, my lady; and I shall be believed, my story is so much likely that yours will be thought false” (127).

The two women who had nothing in common and who would have never come together because of the great social divide between them were once again united to address the new problem – since union at this point was their greatest strength. Lady Caroline disappeared and Milly followed her only to return a year later with an infant in her arms. A
comfortable little allowance settled on her and her child for life by a seemingly kind and generous benefactress enabled Milly to move away from her village into a cottage of her own.

Lady Caroline, once reassured that her scandalous past would never resurface to haunt her, lost interest in Milly and her little boy. She married a nobleman, many years her senior, and led a placid, childless life until his death. Milly, on the other hand, with no increase in the allowance from Caroline slaved and labored hard to raise the young boy into a fine gentleman. She became extremely ambitious on the boy’s account and made many material sacrifices to give him a good education. So the boy became a young man and soon enlisted in a cavalry regiment. His “exceptional attainments, his manly bearing, his steady conduct, speedily won him promotion which was furthered by the serious war in which this country was at that time engaged” (129).

Milly, is Hardy’s image of an ideal wife and mother. Her “imagined marriage becomes for her a living truth” (Brady) and her faithfulness to the memory of her beloved reveals the depth of feeling she is capable of. Hence, her devotion to the son she did not give birth to, drew consistency from the same spring that fed her love for his dead father. As she nursed, tended and cared for her son the reality of her love increases as she directs it to a living object. Caroline’s love, on the other
hand, remained sterile, stemming as it did from self-absorption and self-gratification. So, when the young man’s unaided advancement came to his corporeal mother’s attention her maternal instincts and maternal pride were immediately reawakened. One day when the troops passed her in marching order, she saw her son – “in the finest of the horsemen, [she] recognized her son from his likeness to her first husband” (130). The sight of the fine young man intensified the maternal instincts that had lain dormant in her for so long and “she repented of her pride in disclaiming her first husband more bitterly than she had ever repented of her infatuation in marrying him” (130).

She resolved, as she had done twice before in the past, to confront the woman, whom she regarded jealously as a usurper of her son’s affection. With fierce determination she set out to meet Milly and reclaim her son. She felt confident that as a peeress of the realm, a mere cottager could afford little competition to her son’s affection. A great irony lies in her “continued inability to recognize the failure of social position to win human affection” (Brady). She blindly surmised that her title and position could easily win her son away from Milly as she had done his father many years before. The excerpt given below brings out in one brilliant stroke the triumph of genuine, warm, human love over the power of cold, sterile conventions:
“Flesh and blood’s nothing!” said Milly flashing with as much scorn as a cottager could show to a peeress, which in this case, was not so little as may be supposed. “But I will agree to put to him and let him settle it for himself”.

“That’s all I require,” said Lady Stonehenge. “You must ask him to come and I will meet him here”.

The soldier was written to, and the meeting took place. He was not so much astonished at the disclosure of his parentage as Lady Stonehenge had been led to expect, having know for years that there was a little mystery about his birth. His manner towards the Marchioness, though respectful, was less warm that she could have hoped. The alternatives as to his choice of a mother were put before him. His answer amazed and stupefied her.

“No, my Lady”, he said, “Thank you much, but I prefer to let things be as they have been. My father’s name is mine in any case. You see, my Lady, you cared little for me when I was weak and helpless; why should I come to you now I am strong? She, dear devoted soul [pointing to Milly], tended me from my birth, watched over me, nursed me when I was ill, and deprived herself of so little comfort to push me on. I cannot love another mother as I love her. She is my mother and I am her son.” As he spoke he put his manly arm around her neck with the tenderest affection.

The agony of the poor Marchioness was pitiable. “You kill me!” she said, between her shaking sobs. “Cannot you- love – me - too ?”

“No, my Lady. if I must say it, you were ashamed of my poor father, who was a sincere and honest man, therefore I am ashamed of you”.

Nothing would move him; and the suffering woman at last gasped, “Cannot – oh, cannot you give one kiss to me- as you did her? It is not much – it is all I ask – all !”

“Certainly,” he replied.

He kissed her coldly, and the painful scene came to an end” [131-132].
So, the Marchioness of Stonehenge died of a broken heart – a heart that till the end felt the pain of rejection but not the logic or truth behind that rejection. The denial of her son’s love made her crave, all the more, for it. She died embittered, broken and lonely – a product of the social system she had given everything up to please, and, in the bargain lost everything else that mattered.

Dame the Fourth, “Lady Mottisfont” is another tale juxtaposed with the previous “to make a pair of tales about unwanted children which reach opposing conclusions about the endurance of adoptive love” (Ray, 109). The female characters seem at first to fall into stereotyped moulds and to correspond in type to Milly and Lady Caroline. Philippa, the gentle daughter of plain Squire Okehall, “is an amiable girl willing in her simplicity to love another woman’s child as her own.” The Italian Countess is a woman of great beauty and accomplishment who has given up her child for the sake of convention, but who still longs for the offspring of her passion. It appears at first sight that, as in “The Marchioness of Stonehenge” the adoptive mother has a more durable affection than the natural mother, but the two stories finally refute each other. The very moral which the preceding story had so dramatically pointed is contradicted by “Lady Mottisfont” in which parental affection is seen as a selfish need easily gratified by replacement.
In the romantic town of Wintoncester, Sir Ashley Mottisfont asked the plain looking Philippa to be his second wife. Attached to this proposal is her consent to mother a fifteen months old infant. Philippa, an ecstatic, heart thumping maiden, could not understand how she has deserved to have sent to her such “an illustrious lover, such a travelled personage, such a handsome man” (135). The pair were soon married and till the middle of the story Philippa is reminiscent of Milly in the preceding tale. Deeply and joyfully she took to the role of adoptive mother for the child - proving that at times motherhood is more of an emotional bond than a biological one: “She watched the little foundling as if she had been her own by nature, and Dorothy became a great solace to her when her husband was absent on pleasure or business … “Dear me – I forgot she is not mine!” (137).

This state of bliss and idyllic happiness was soon threatened by the arrival of the countess. Her apparent beauty of “the fully developed kind”, her continental manners and her ready wit overwhelmed Lady Mottisfont. Sick at heart, she realized that Sir Ashley and herself were so rural on comparison but she possessively asserted that Dorothy belonged to her when the Countess intimated her interest in the little girl, “But you can’t! She’s mine!” (143).
It did not take long, however, for Philippa to trace Dorothy’s lineaments to the Countess and Sir Ashley: “She had seen there not only her husband’s traits, which she had often beheld before, but others, of the shade, shape and expression which characterized those of her new neighbor” (144).

Upon this discovery, Lady Mottisfont upbraided her shortsightedness, and miserably saw herself as an intruder between these two. The pain she felt was deep but she lacked the spiritedness of stronger women to confront her husband with the truth:

If there was a single direction in which the devoted and virtuous lady erred, it was in the direction of over – submissiveness. When all is said and done, and the truth told, men seldom show much self-sacrifice in their conduct as lords and masters to helpless women bound to them for life, and perhaps (though I say it with all certainty) if she had blazed up in his face like a furze - faggot, directly he came home, she might have helped herself a little. (144)

Lady Mottisfont suffered quietly and hoped that Dorothy would never be taken away from her. By degrees, the two families became friendly, with Lady Mottisfont secretly envying and admiring the beautiful Countess till she decided that she “did not mind the propinquity.” But the crisis was building up and it exploded, precipitated by accident. The countess saved Dorothy from serious harm when a wall under construction collapsed suddenly. Just before the incident Philippa
had declared to her husband with conviction, “But she’s mine!” Afterwards, however, she seemed less certain about her claim. The conversation she had with Dorothy supported her new found conviction:

“Mamma – you are not so pretty as the Contessa, are you?” She said at length. “I am not, Dorothy.” “Why are you not, mamma?” “Dorothy where would you rather live, always, with me or with her?” The little girl looked troubled. “I am sorry, mamma; I don’t mean to be unkind; but I would rather live with her; I mean, if I might without trouble, and you did not mind and it could be just the same to us all, you know” (148).

This self - woman hid her broken heart from her husband and went about her duties in a woeful and pensive mood. Soon enough, “Dorothy changed her mother and her home” and left for London with the Countess. The loss affected Philippa deeply and even pushed her to take her own life by jumping into a pool. Sir Ashley rescued her from near death and she soon recovered. Her husband’s stern reproof was accepted in meekness by this woman who but for a brief glimpse initially, had nothing in common with the vital, spirited Milly. She changed her position completely only after she became pregnant. She could finally respond to the Countess as an equal, with whom she no longer needed to compete: “I am not a beggar any longer,” she said with proud mystery. Whereas Milly defied Lady Caroline’s power by clinging to her adopted child, Philippa responded to the Countess by forsaking the young
Dorothy. Philippa’s rejection of Dorothy was prompted by the birth of a male heir who usurped her place by both his legitimacy and his sex. The birth of her son changed many things in Philippa’s view the most important “was that of no longer feeling Dorothy to be absolutely indispensable to her existence.” The Countess imminent re-marriage, made it impossible for her to keep Dorothy. The child was abandoned to her adoptive mother who in turn no longer had place for her. The Lady Mottisfont’s cold reason was: “I cannot argue, dear Ashley. I should prefer not to have the responsibility of Dorothy again. Her place is filled now” (153).

As surprising as Phillipa’s change of heart, was the assertiveness of her tone. The oversubmissive wife had been transformed into a woman of authority. She refused to acknowledge Ashley’s right to share in a decision concerning the future of his child and he accepted her dictum with an acquiescence that had formerly characterized her. “Philippa’s about - face is more believable if the early remarks about her character are regarded as a conscious glossing over of those aspects of her personality that later cause her to reject Dorothy so heartlessly. An ‘ecstatic’ and ‘impulsive’ temperament, after all, is quite capable of a complete transferral of affection” (Brady, 68).
It is illuminating to look at Philippa in terms of the aristocratic world into which she had married. In *A Group of Noble Dames* the nobility regarded children as first and foremost inheritors of their parents’ titles and wealth. They were the “Little ambassadors of the familiar and the expected” (as one feminist described them late in the century). There is little room for illegitimate children in the scheme of things, and daughters were valued chiefly by the social and financial status they contracted through marriage. Philippa had entered this world unable to understand how a gentleman of Lord Mottisfont’s stature could deem her worthy enough to be his wife. Later, she was overwhelmed by the Countess’ and beauty, her graces and her knowledge of the world. Phillipa’s lack of familiarity with the glamour of the aristocracy led her to assume too readily its most unattractive aspect: A callous disregard for the happiness of those of inferior rank. She became cold-hearted and even cruel, caught up like many others, in the artificial and superficial world that she had so warmly embraced. “The Sentimental Member tells a most unsentimental story with an ending that, far from romanticizing aristocratic values, exposes their failure to nurture normal human affections” (Brady, 69).

Dorothy was raised by a kind cottage-woman and finally married a respectable road-contractor and in the heart of this “worthy man of
business” the poor girl found “the nest which had been denied her by her own flesh and blood of higher degree” (155).

“The Lady Icenway”, Dame the Fifth in the earlier edition, is a tale “about a woman hoping to use her bigamous first husband to produce a fake heir for her second.” But, according to Martin Ray, Hardy edits the end of the story to turn it into a “sentimental story about a woman wishing that she had stayed free to re-marry her first husband.” Kristin Brady states:

“The Lady Icenway” continues to explore the various aberrations that can exist in marital and parental affection when they are subject to the conventions of upper class life, and the complications that accompany the inheritance of wealth and title. When the central concern is disposing of ones property by producing a “Lineal successor,” the sexual act becomes a practical means to a necessary end rather than an expression of love or passion. This attitude towards sex can produce such cold men as Uplandtowers and Icenway, who marry merely to produce an heir. The women who emerge from the same context display different types of dislocation, ranging from Barbara’s deranged servility to the selfishly possessive yet inconsistent passions of the Marchioness of Stonehenge and Lady Mottisfont. The Lady Icenway is still another variation of the type, and moves a step closer to complete subsuming of natural affection by pride and position (69).

Both Martin Ray and Kristen Brady have identified the problem faced by a woman like Maria Icenway, who, is struggling to adhere to the conventions of her time. The production of a “Lineal successor” being the sole aim of the institution of marriage at that time, failure to do so
usually resulted in embittered and long drawn legal battles over property and title rights. Maria’s acute consciousness of her insulated social position, power and convention, dominates her actions throughout the narrative and debilitates, any capacity in her for warm, natural affection. She is, we can say, a typical product of her times.

We are introduced to her as a young woman of many talents and “exceeding great beauty” combined with an imperious temper and an arbitrary mind. As an orphan, raised by an old uncle, she was left very much to herself and her experience of the world was not as expansive as her demeanour suggested. She was not prepared for the exotic foreigner who entered her life. He was a Dutch, visiting the house of a neighbouring landowner. After the first chance meeting, a tender feeling sprang between the two and the amorous foreigner could little conceal the effect Maria had on him. Maria was thrilled by the sense of power she experienced in the face of his unabashed adulation of her person and beauty. The intimacy grew and the two were married before they left together to sail across the ocean to their new home in a foreign land. But her happiness was shortlived. Anderling’s sudden constraint and depression a few days into the journey led to a startling confession – he had made an unfortunate marriage to a woman of scandalous reputation in his youth, though long since separated from her, made his current
situation a bigamous one. Tearfully and with passionate embraces, he begged Maria’s forgiveness and entreated her not to leave him. Maria’s reaction to his shocking revelation shows a remarkable psychological strength in one so young and inexperienced:

Thereupon the spirit of this proud and masterful lady showed itself in violent turmoil, like the raging of a nor’west thunderstorm – as well it might, God knows. But she was of too stout a nature to be broken down by his revelation, as many ladies of my acquaintance would have been … “I put it to you,” says she, when many useless self-reproaches and protestations on his part had been uttered – “I put it to you whether, if any manliness is left in you, you ought not to be exactly what I considered the best thing for me in this strait to which you have reduced me?” (160)

She then requested him to allow her to return her home and declare him dead at sea. He readily acquiesced to her suggestion, springing as it did from the great love he bore towards her. He endowed her with bonds and jewels before she set sail on the next ship back to England. She reached home safely and apprised only her uncle about her fake widowhood. The humiliating experience which would have destroyed weaker women sadly turned an otherwise beautiful, strong young girl into a cold, proud and ambitious woman. Her pride intact she then proceeded to protect it at any cost in a way which “…though she had been innocent of wrong, [her] pride was of that grain which could not
brook the least appearance of having been fooled, or deluded, or nonplussed in her worldly aims” (161).

She led a quiet life, gave birth to Anderling’s son and was respected by all as a widow of quiet dignity and reserve. No hint, however, is given in the narrative of any maternal affection she may have borne towards her son. Instead, she plotted, coldly and calculatively to accept the addresses paid towards her, by a man of noble birth and title, though much older than herself. She discerned in re-marriage, “a method of fortifying her position against mortifying discoveries” (162). So determined was Maria, in securing her position and honour in the social hierarchy, that she gave little consideration to the fact, that, by marrying Lord Icenway, without disclosing her past, she was committing the very same adulterous act of bigamy that she had accused and left Anderling for. The deception complete, she left her uncle’s home once again, to live with her second husband in a region where she was unknown.

The reappearance of Anderling, momentarily, threw Maria off-balance but she quickly recovered her steely composure and her self-possession which by then, were the dominating traits in her; this cold lady remained unmoved. She discovered that he could no longer ignite the passion she once had for him and so she coldly informed him about her re-marriage to a man – “an excellent man of ancient family and
possessions, who had given her a title, in which she much rejoiced” (163). In the presence of such a passionless statement of the fact, Anderling’s ardour cooled down rapidly and his heart withered within him, yet loving her the way he did, he gallantly, if sadly, agreed to leave her again. The obvious changes wrought in her character over such a short period time shocked him deeply. He had returned expecting to find her waiting for him, [he had informed her about his return through a tender epistle], after witnessing the certain death and burial of his first wife in Quebec. All his hopes and romantic vision of reunion with his family were dealt a harsh blow by Maria’s position and so the honourable gentleman departed “much sadder in his heart than on his voyage to England” (163).

Not a word passed from this close-mouthed Lady, about her encounter with Anderling, to her noble unsuspecting husband. Although she had dismissed her first husband peremptorily enough, yet now and then, she would study the child of her “so-called widowhood” to discover how many traits of his father he possessed. This action does not display any strong maternal bond with the child but rather underscores the mother’s obsession with self-preservation and social honour. So completely had she subsumed all natural and human feelings of warmth and affection, in her quest for honour and social acceptance, that Maria
had forgotten how to be normal or tender or cheerful. On one winter’s
day, Anderling returned but it was plain from his appearance that all was
not well. He disclosed to Maria how he had gambled away all his fortune,
after her rude and cruel dismissal. Yet this time he had returned not for
her sake but for “one thing in the world” that remained his - his son. The
intrusion was borne out of a deep yearning to look upon his child and to
be acquainted with him. To this appeal, the lady demurred on condition
that their past remains concealed. The haughty severity which had
become part of her character and which her elevation to the rank of
peeress “had rather intensified than diminished” (165) comes across in
this meeting with the broken-hearted Anderling. Her cold indifference to
her child and his father is contrasted sharply with the genuine affection
Anderling felt for the son he had hitherto never met and the woman who
had ceased to love him. His warmth and capacity to love sharpened
Maria’s total lack of feeling - her coldness and inability to love. She
resembled an automaton programmed to protect what she had achieved in
terms of social position, at whatever costs. This lady was never stirred by
maternal affection, as seen in Lady Caroline and the Countess, and her
actions are dictated only by a heightened and consuming sense of self-
preservation and self-aggrandizement. If the system could boast of
success it is Lady Icenway.
Anderling, however, becomes the hapless victim of the world represented by Maria and as the tale progresses the reader’s sympathy is swayed towards him. An honourable man, whose only mistake was a rash and reckless marriage in his youth, he stands above Maria in character and principle. To him, honour, meant an inner integrity without any regard to formalities, to Maria it was an outward show acknowledged by the peers. For him the contract of marriage was the means of acquiring license to follow one’s passion; for Maria it was not a means but an end.

The scene, where Anderling met his child for the first time, is at once tender and piteous. His love for his son is described in terms more genuine – uncluttered by the language of any convention – than his adulation for Maria:

The unfortunate father, whose misdemeanor had recoiled upon his own head in a way that he could not have foreseen, promised to adhere to her instructions, and waited in the shrubberies till the moment when she should call him. This she duely did about three o’clock that day, leading him in by the garden door, and upstairs to the nursery where the child lay. He was in his little cot breathing calmly, his arm thrown over his head, and his silken curls crushed into his pillow. His father, now almost to be pitied, bent over him and a tear from his eye wetted the coverlet …. He kissed the child without waking him, turned, gave him a last look and followed her out of the chamber… (166)

But this remedy for his sadness at being a stranger to his son had the effect “of intensifying the malady” (167), for it earlier he had loved
his son vaguely and imaginatively he “now became attached to him in flesh and bone as any parent might” (167). But his chivalrous respect for Maria held him back from disclosing his identity to his son. He suffered mournfully and eventually offered himself for the post of gardener to Lord Icenway before the lady knew anything of the matter. Silently, from a distance, he pensively studied the traits and movements of his son. For two years he was nothing than “the gardener” to the youngster though once or twice the boy said, “The gardener’s eyes are so sad! Why does he look so sadly at me?” (168).

Lord Icenway, meanwhile, complained excessively and roughly of his fate to her – the inability of Maria to give him a linear successor, “All will go to that dolt of a cousin! he cried. I’d sooner see my name and place at the bottom of the sea!” (169). Always an opportunist, Maria decided to visit Anderling in his hut, to use him to fulfill an ambitious desire to produce an heir for Lord Icenway. But Anderling was too ill to oblige her. Her seemingly “softening heart” was shocked at his condition, not out of compassion, but because she regretted his inability to carry out the role for which she had selected him. Anderling died and a stained glass tribute to his memory was erected by Maria in the name of “his grieving widow.” She regretted the passing away of Anderling not because she loved him but rather because his utility was not obvious soon
enough for her to take advantage of it. Her final words with Icenway reveal all the absurd implications of her supposed grief:

“Tis a very odd thing my lady, that you could oblige your first husband, and couldn’t oblige me.”
“Ah! If I had thought of it sooner!” she murmured.
“What?” said he.
“Nothing, dearest,” replied Lady Icenway (171).

“Squire Petrick’s Lady” is not directly concerned with an aristocratic or upper-class family as are the other stories in *A Group of Noble Dames*. Narrated by the Crimson Maltster, it opens with an apology for his heroine’s lack of title, “it never having being his good fortune to know many of the nobility,” (171-172). But the Malster’s apology is not Hardy’s, for the story is important precisely because its characters are not noble. Appropriately located at the centre of the volume, it portrays the extent to which the common man can be corrupted by the romantic illusion he has of his social betters, the aristocracy. For both the noble man and the commoner this illusion is destructive because their victims are children born into a society which confuses their lineage with their humanity.

Although Squire Petrick possessed as much wealth as many aristocrats, he still considered them to be socially superior because of their wealth, prestige and physical and mental attributes. This line of reasoning caused him to disregard his natural paternal instincts and spurn
his own son. Throughout the story, his fluctuating feelings for his child reflected his confused and contradictory attitudes towards his own background. After being led to believe, by his delusional wife’s dying confession, that Rupert was not his son but the offspring of a titled man – Petrick, unperturbed, embraced the idea that his son had an aristocratic father with a sense of absurd pride. His love for Rupert became a silly adulation for the boy’s presumed roots. His son’s supposed illegitimacy became transformed into nobility and shame to honour, giving him reason to bond with the child he had initially ignored after his wife’s death.

Finally, he was “unmanned” by the fact that his wife had never betrayed him with another man and the question he puts to his baffled son becomes an absurd expression of his own position, torn as he was between his natural affection and his beliefs in the superiority of noble blood: “Why cannot a son be one’s own and somebody else’s likewise!” (163).

Dame the Seventh, “Anna Lady Baxby” is a departure from the earlier stories in that the issues addressed here are not about childhood but of loyalty to family, spouse and country.
“The Lady Penelope,” Dame the Eighth, narrates the tragic life of a beautiful lady who “had been done to death by a vile scandal that was wholly unfounded” (209).

She is described as “a lady of noble family and extraordinary beauty,” (196) and that “her beauty was so perfect, and her manner so entrancing, that suitors seemed to spring out of the ground” (197). Due to her highly visible position in society she could never transcend the natural mistakes of her adolescence, her only fault being the “unseemly wantonness” and precipitancy that characterize youth. Her famous roguish quip – “have patience you foolish men! Only bide your time quietly, and, in faith I will marry you all in turn” (198) – to three gallant suitors, Sir John Gale, Sir William Hervey and Sir George Drenghard, with gossip and communal elaboration, ominously, began to shape her life and fulfill itself as a prophecy.

In course of time the position resolved itself and the beautiful Lady Penelope chose to marry the eldest of the three Knights, Sir George Drenghard owner of a big mansion and a pleasant man. But after a few months Drenghard died “of his convivialities” and left Lady Penelope alone as mistress of his house. Time passed, the second Knight came courting – John Gale. Subsequently, her marriage to Gale in part a response to the manipulative appeals of her jesting friends that she live
out her “careless speech,” became dangerously distorted when it moved outside her circle of friends. At a deeper level, her second marriage was a frustrated response to her preferred lover, Sir William Hervey’s reticence and hesitancy in approaching her – an expression of her pique – “at the backwardness of him she secretly desired to be forward” (180). So, Lady Penelope married the second Knight, just as William discovered her preference for him and was hastening to declare his “unaltered devotion” to her. On learning the sad truth he left abruptly.

But Lady Penelope’s marriage to John Gale proved to be an unhappy one. He soon revealed a disposition to retaliate upon her for the trouble and delay she had put him to in winning her. Subjected to constant cruel, verbal attacks Penelope lost her “mettlesome” spirit and wept “sorely.” William’s unexpected visit, while Gale was ailing, confirmed the genuineness of the affection shared by the third knight and the lady. Amidst her “churlish” husband’s insults, Lady Penelope realized: I began at the wrong end of them,” she murmured. “My God – that did I !” “What ?” said he. “A trifle,” said she, “I spoke to myself only” (203). He died a forthnight later.

After this, Penelope, decided to wait for the return of Sir William, for by then, she “had been cured of precipitancy.” He did return and soon the pair, destined to be together from the start, were finally united in
marriage. But Penelope’s happiness and bliss was short-lived. The
rumours started again, but this time grew more sinister by implication:

“Surely,” they whispered, “there is something more than chance in this!” … Then they pieced together sundry trivial
incidents of Sir John’s illness, and dwelt upon the
indubitable truth that he had grown worse after her lover’s
unexpected visit; till a very sinister theory had been built up
as to the hand she may have had in Sir John’s premature
demise (206).

Sir William overheard these rumours and it was unfortunate that he
believed them. Instead of confronting Penelope with the accusations and
clearing up the air, he carried his knowledge within himself and then
departed – a man who in a few days seemed to have aged prematurely.
When the truth behind her husband’s departure reached Penelope’s ears,
she was appalled. A fatal combination of Penelope’s precipitancy, the
community’s gossip and William’s inaction and subsequent departure
reduced Penelope from a “brave and buxom damsel” to a woman
“dwindled thin in the face,” whose rings “fall off her fingers” and whose
arm hang like the “flails of the threshers.” She died soon after, still
protesting her innocence: “They suspect me of poisoning him, William!
But, oh my dear husband, I am innocent of that wicked crime! He died
naturally. I loved you – too soon; but that was all” (208).
A physician, who had attended the late Sir John, on hearing about the rumour arrived in Casterbridge and attested, on medical evidence to the fact that Sir John had died from natural causes.

Lady Penelope’s story reveals the destructive power of gossip and the weaknesses apparent in a man she had loved the most.

“The Duchess of Hamptonshire,” Dame the Ninth, re-examines the questions raised in the first two stories of Noble Dames like Betty Dornell and Barbara Grebe, Emmeline – a girl of “sweet and simple nature” – is forced into marriage by a parent who places wealth and social prestige over affection and sexual passion. But Emmeline’s story differs in that the two suitors in her life fail to fulfill her sexual and emotional needs.

The Duke of Hamptonshire is depicted as a cruel and selfish husband who had “never before considered what an important part those specimens of womankind had played in the evolution of the Saxelby race” (213). After the marriage, Emmeline’s distress and unhappiness was evident to all. The reason being, besides her unhappy marriage, her true affections for the young Reverend Alwyn Hill. Her life became – “worse than death” (215). Treated cruelly by an indifferent, cold and perverted husband she pleads with Alwyn to take her away from the Duke’s castle:
“You must not go away with me,” he said. “Why?” “It would be sin”. “It CANNOT be sin. For I have never wanted to commit sin in my life; and it isn’t likely I would begin now, when I pray every day to die and be sent to Heaven out of my misery!” “But it is wrong, Emmeline, all the same”. “Is it wrong to run away from the fire that scorches you?”

(217)

But, Alwyn, adhering stubbornly to his principles refused to rescue Emmeline from her torturing husband’s hands. Alwyn, too, failed Emmeline and this failure represents a subtler form of egoism. The men in this story are typical of the patriarchal attitude towards women in nineteenth century England. While the Duke was a typical product of his time, in his display of male arrogance and insensitivity, Alwyn possessed moral perceptions that were subtle and socially conscious, he placed social and moral law – or rather the appearances of conforming to them – above Emmeline’s well-being and happiness, even after knowing that the Duke was ill-using her. In his moral rigidity, youthful beauty and general fastidiousness, he foreshadows the typically hypocritical Stockdale in “The Distracted Preacher” and when these attributes assumed a more sinister form – Angel Clare in Tess.

Emmeline’s death, was therefore caused as much by a state of grief and frustration at being left alone, defenseless and fearful, with the Duke, as by the rigours of her journey. Her final plea to Alwyn: “O, if you only knew how much to me this request to you is – how my life is wrapped up
in it, you could not deny me” (197) becomes both an anticipation of her fate as well as an expression of her despair. Ironically, Alwyn unwittingly buried Emmeline during his journey on the Western Glory, and became to some degree responsible for her death.

“The Honourable Laura” published in 1881, is a fitting last story for A Group of Noble Dames because of its happy marriage achieved after years of penitential suffering. This optimistic conclusion parallels the ending of “The First Countess of Wessex.” It also represents references to tricycles and railway stations making the story “more modern in [its] date of action” (206) than the previous narratives. As Brady maintains, “this late nineteenth century setting points to the similarities rather than the differences between past and present: as in the earlier centuries, the heroine’s fate is decided by the men who lay claim to her (she does not even know of the duel). Her predicament is a version of that of the other noble dames – here expressed in the contemporary mode of stage melodrama. But because no explanation is given either for Laura’s transgression or her sudden turn from pouting tantrums to mature contrition, the story remains an unsatisfactory conclusion to the collection as a whole” (84).

In Wessex Tales and A Group of Noble Dames, Hardy presents a picture gallery of hauntingly beautiful women, whose very essence is
highlighted by a masterstroke of their creator. Painted with a profusion of colours, bold mixed with darker shades, Hardy’s portraits depict the nature of woman in all her glory and shame, boldness and timidity, arrogance and humility, rebellion and submission and her misery and happiness. In the *Wessex Tales* we meet Phyllis Grove, the image of a simple woman, suppressed by a tyrannical father and whose seclusion and isolation leads to an inability to chart out her own destiny; in Lucy, we see, a confidential, quiet woman whose firm moral stance (the rejection of the attentions of her remorseful but married former lover) elevates her to a moral position higher than that of her male counterpart, Barnet; Sally is a symbol of the power of the New Woman to say “No” to matrimony and go on to lead a fulfilling life as a single woman; and Lizzy, with her high spirits, loyalty to her lineage, strength, boldness and resourcefulness becomes Hardy’s valediction of the essential qualities of a woman and foreshadows the heroines of his major novels – Bathsheba, Eustacia, Tess and Sue Bridehead. In *A Group of Noble Dames* we encounter the rebellious, lovable Betty Dornell; the timid, emotionally immature Barbara; Lady Caroline, a woman torn between sexual love and conventional ambitions; the delightful symbol of motherhood, Milly; the insensitive ability to replace an adoptive child by her own, in Lady Mottisfont; the delusions of the Squire’s Lady leading to a serious
questioning of the common man’s adulation of the aristocracy at the cost of natural affection for one’s own child; loyalty to family, spouse and country is seen in Anna Braxby; the tragedy in Lady Penelope’s life caused by lies and gossip; the suffering of Lady Emmeline at the hands of a cruel husband and a fastidious lover; and finally, the maturity attained by Laura after years of suffering. In all these women, we behold the sympathy, keen insight and sensitivity of a male author – uncommon in the Victorian period – whose concern with gender matters establishes him as a writer in the feminine tradition.

In these collections of short stories, Hardy examines the relationships between the sexes and reveals that they are not only marred by sexual jealousies and rivalries, class differences and economic disparities but also by the various gender based constructs and ideologies of a patriarchal society. In this manner the basic structure of these stories incorporates in itself some of the polemic elements that highlight the weaknesses of such narrow beliefs and concepts. Closely associated with the subject of love and relationships are the issues of marriage, sex and divorce which Hardy dwells upon more emphatically in the Noble Dames stories than in Wessex Tales. In this collection, (Noble Dames), Hardy presents the less happy underside of upper-class life. He focuses on the women and the injurious effect upon them of the clash between
convention and sexual passion. They are the victims of social rules and norms, of men and at times their own social 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 that emphasizes education, social establishment, title, wealth as fundamental attributes in a spouse. Thus, differences in class lead to tension in the lives of the characters – with the capacity to both attract and repel the lovers. Class pressures account for the extent and diversity of unhappiness and tragedy, possible in a society that cherishes birth above human qualities. And, the victims of these conventional practices and ideals, are women and children. The importance placed on legitimacy over illegitimacy, male over female causes for either acceptance or rejection of children in this rigid system of inheritance.

Therefore these short stories depict the influence of conventions and norms, followed by the patriarchal society in Victorian England, and how they affect gender roles and matters of gender. Both Wessex Tales and A Group of Noble Dames, reaffirm and project Hardy’s concern as a writer – the principle of life itself, with all its complexities, heartaches, and hope.