The Concept of Womanhood in the Novels of Thomas Hardy
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Thomas Hardy is one of the leading novelists at the close of the nineteenth century. His concept of womanhood may be studied in the context of other writers of the Victorian era; namely, the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, and Thackeray.

Hardy's father was a gifted amateur musician, centering his talent on the church services; and his mother was a well-read woman, a characteristic that she bestowed upon her son. Hardy enjoyed reading Shakespeare and going to the opera. He also read the works of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and John Stuart Mill, whose positivism influenced him deeply. He married Emma Lavinia Gifford whose encouragement led him to consider literature as his true vocation.

Unable to find public for his poetry, Hardy was advised by the novelist George Meredith to write a novel. He devoted himself entirely to writing and continued to publish novels regularly. He drew upon his London experiences to write on the marriage market, social ambition and the exploitation of women. He also wrote about rural scene. Then, followed the novels known as “Wessex Novels” or “Novels of Character and Environment” which raised him to the top position among fiction writers. These novels were The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886), The Woodlanders (1887), Tess of the d'Urbervilles (1891), and Jude the Obscure (1895). He further published three collections of short stories and five smaller novels.
By this time Hardy was generally recognised, both at home and abroad, as one of England’s leading novelists. He wrote on unconventional subjects and was criticised for his frankness and candour.

Thomas Hardy is one of the greatest novelists of the nineteenth-century. He could very well blend in his novels the remarkable qualities possessed by novelists from Fielding to Dickens. Critics hold a favourable opinion about Hardy’s unique role in the growth of English fiction. Lascelles Abercrombie (1935), in the introductory chapter to his book entitled, ‘Thomas Hardy: A Critical Study’, asserts Hardy’s contribution to the growth of novel: “he [Hardy] has made it adequate for the high position to which man has latterly elevated it among the arts”.\(^1\) Mary Ellen Chase also observes that Dickens, Thackeray, George Eliot, Meredith, and others had used human experience as the base to depict certain relevant issues of life and paved the way for further revelations through writers like Thomas Hardy.

Chase points out that with Hardy

the nineteenth century novel was for the first time freed from the sentimental conventions of its predecessors and made the relentless exponent of every passion known to mankind; with him English realism became naturalism, not the minute and completely unrestrained naturalism of several of his French contemporaries, but a realism so far removed from anything that had gone before that it must needs to be termed naturalistic in order to effect a satisfactory comparison.\(^2\)

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No doubt Hardy accepted the influence and imbibed qualities of rare artists yet he was no less original in his own way of writing.

Hardy the novelist does not allow freedom whereby an individual becomes responsible for his acts. The novel for Hardy is a reflection of life itself and not something superimposed. Critics believe that Hardy aimed to give a fairly true picture, at first hand, of the personages, ways, and customs of the characters he created. This picture of humanity is presented in known surroundings based on his keen observation of things. Hardy does not enter into the realm of fantasy but is a scientist, telling precisely what he observes. Hence his realism is equated with naturalism.

In his novels, Hardy puts forward his philosophy of life which has a bearing upon his fatalism and pessimism. Man is depicted as a puppet in the hands of Fate or Destiny. Man has therefore no Free Will and Fate is always there to intervene wherever it likes. He has no free choice in any sphere of life. This is applicable to both male and female characters in his novels. According to Hardy there is a continuous struggle between Man and Fate and Fate is triumphant in this battle. The novels illustrate this philosophy of life through characters and events. For instance, Tess Derbyfield earnestly desires to be a schoolteacher in a village. She does not succeed in her mission because Fate intervenes and she is also deprived of a peaceful life. The fatal role of Fate is felt throughout and is proved by the death of the horse named Prince who was a source of sustenance for the family. This forces the girl to work with the renowned and rich family of d’Urbervilles. She
is thus seduced and it ruins her life to the end. Eustacia Vye's story is not unlike that of Tess or Gabriel Oak and many more, who have ambitions and desires but fail due to their enslavement to Fate. This misfortune is shared by most of the characters in Hardy's novels. The most extreme statement, in F.R. Southerington's words, came from J.S. Smart, in 1922, who writes to the following effect:

[Hardy] insists upon the external causes of disaster, the strange perversities of Nature, Fate, and Chance. His characters are brought to ruin by events over which they have no control, become the playthings of a blind, irresponsible power.³

Hardy also presents a gloomy view of life in his novels. There is no charm in life and happiness and perfection are rare. Man struggles in vain against an unsympathetic Nature and adverse circumstances. Hardy shows both men and women yearning for happiness which is not in their power to attain. They are helpless in the hands of Fate. Yet, he shows the world as he sees it.

Hardy's novels, from a realistic point of view, are social novels. They mostly deal with such problems as marriage, gender, sex, class, motherhood, love, chastity, divorce, etc. Hardy thinks that most problems in life are due to maladjustments in social life. He, therefore, holds society responsible for the miseries in life. In many of his novels, Hardy attacks and criticises the social mores of his time, particularly those relating to the institution of marriage and the male-female relationship within this very institution, which is regarded sacred.

Hardy lived at a time when matrimonial law underwent change, but marriage laws gave more rights to men than to women. According to these laws, the woman when married lost her independent legal personality. Men could divorce their wives solely on the grounds of adultery, but women had to give proof of cruelty, bigamy, incest or infidelity.

Hardy was critical about the stifling aspects of the institution of marriage and conventional views on sexuality. His own views on marriage were radical and even progressive for his time as he conveyed them through his novels; especially in his last two works namely *Tess of the d’Urbenilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. He regarded marriage not merely a means of sexual satisfaction or a sacred bond, but also a contract which can be broken at will. He was of the opinion that marriage should be dissolved as soon as it was inconvenient for either of the parties.

In his last two novels Hardy attacks the conventions of the repressive Victorian society. In *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, Hardy condemns the unjust social norms that deny Tess a past and does not allow her to lead a new happy marital life, simply because she is a woman. Angel Clare, a typical Victorian, does not forgive her for an unknown sin while Tess has forgiven him for his past experiences. Being a representative of his society, Angel replies, "O Tess, forgiveness does not apply to the case!" (25:264). In his case it applies because he is a man; but in hers, it does not. He is not willing to divorce her and deserts her in an inhuman way. It was this partiality on the part of social conventions that led Hardy to present the concept of ‘A Pure Woman’. In *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy’s protagonists. Jude and Sue, seek
divorce and violate the deep-rooted conventions by following their natural instincts in their (sexual) relationship. Commenting on Hardy's views in these two novels, Philip V. Allingham, in an essay entitled, 'The Novels of Thomas Hardy: An Introduction', writes thus:

As a novelist, Hardy felt that art should describe and comment upon actual situations, such as the heavy lot of the rural labourers and the bleak lives of oppressed women. Though the Victorian reading public tolerated his depiction of the problems of modernity, it was less receptive to his religious skepticism and criticism of the divorce laws. His public and critics were especially offended by his frankness about relations between the sexes, particularly in his depicting the seduction of a village girl in Tess, and the sexual entrapment and child murder in Jude.4

Through his novels one comes to know about Hardy's views on society and marriage and his challenges to its oppressive codes of conduct and their impact on women's lives. One also comes across those women to whom he is sympathetic and who possess qualities of ideal women of his imagination.

In Hardy's Wessex novels, female characters are more prominent. Hardy is at his best in his portrayal of women and proves an expert in his art of character-drawing. His attitude towards women is both complex and unconventional, which critics regard a reflection of his own experiences. Hardy's women are the most energetic and powerful of the sexes. He also has a special regard for his female characters. It is conveyed by Jane Thomas to the following effect:

Hardy's first-hand knowledge of the economic hardships suffered by rural women and their pragmatic attitude to sexual relationships, coupled with his friendships with forward thinking and cultured women in London, encouraged the development of strikingly unconventional conceptions of women and sexuality in his novels. She also thinks that Hardy thus got the approval of feminist writers like Mary Sinclair and George Egerton during his lifetime.

A close perusal of Hardy's novels brings to light an astonishing range and variety of female characters. There is a great variety of them which shows Hardy's ability to distinguish personalities and subtle distinctions and social status. Sometimes quite opposite traits are seen in his women. For example, Tess has 'a touch of animalism in her flesh.' Sue Bridehead, on the other hand, has a marked 'sexlessness' by her desire for marriage without physical union. Similarly, Elizabeth-Jane, Sue Bridehead and Ethelberta are different from one another. Sue feels a rare fusion of emotion and intellect; Ethelberta is nothing but cool, calculating reason, mathematical even in her love; Elizabeth-Jane is a special type, a little philosopher, the only woman of Hardy with a sense of honour.

Another feature of Hardy's female characters is that they are more vital and forceful than his male characters, who revolve around women like 'obedient satellites' according to Evelyn Hardy. His male figures are seen as either sensual, effeminate or else victims of a kind of

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internal attention. This view is expressed by Hardy's critics who observed a rare intensity in Hardy's interest in his female characters. Kate Fitzgibbon, in her class lecture in 1997, points out the change that has started taking shape in Hardy's novels regarding masculine identity, from the 'solid, monolithic, patriarchal role of the mid-1800s, to less typical, nearly feminine styles of manhood.' She continues thus:

With the increasing power of women during the Victorian Era, Hardy creates men who are in a state of ambivalence about their sexuality; they either reach for the well-worn stereotype of the "manly" man, or they attempt to explore their own complicated emotions, sensitive to the needs of the emerging New Woman.6

There are many examples in the novels which show men as overwhelmed rather than overwhelming, dominated rather than dominating, reckless in their relationships with their superior counterparts of the fine sex. Take, for instance, William Boldwood and Gabriel Oak in Far from the Madding Crowd, who make themselves slaves in their love for Bathsheba; or Michael Henchard in The Mayor of Casterbridge, whose obsessive power turns into a sense of being "unmanned"; Jude in Jude the Obscure, with his obsession and seemingly unattainable desire to join Christminster (Cambridge), indulges himself in a cursed sexual relationship with Sue Bridehead. In Far from the Madding Crowd, Hardy comments on the superiority of women which is approved by him:

THE only superiority in women that is tolerable to the rival sex is, as a rule, that of the unconscious kind; but a superiority which recognizes itself may sometimes please by suggesting possibilities of capture to the subordinated man (4:44)

He further describes Gabriel Oak’s longing for seeing Bathsheba as that of the dog for its food:

Love being an extremely exacting usurer (a sense of exorbitant profit, spiritually, by an exchange of hearts, being at the bottom of pure passions, as that of exorbitant profit, bodily or materially, is at the bottom of those of lower atmosphere), every morning Oak’s feelings were as sensitive as the money-market in calculations upon his chances. His dog waited for his meals in a way so like that in which Oak waited for the girl’s presence...(ibid)

Unlike many of his predecessors; who portrayed the woman that lived according to the prescribed societal ideals; Hardy disapproved such female figures and followed his own ideal by drawing radically independent heroines, who; along with beauty, passion and sensitivity; possessed a characteristic strength of character that made them resemble men in their actions and behaviour. Hardy thus preferred independent female protagonists to conventional types who may be termed as androgynous. Hardy’s women, according to Carolyn Heilbrum (1973), possess: “prodigious energy, stunted opportunity, and a passion which challenges the entire, limiting world.” This does not imply that Hardy created ‘perfect’ women. On the contrary, Hardy the realist knew woman as the weakest sex, who is more liable to fall a victim to human frailties, like jealousy, envy and flattery. Philip V. Allingham points out this contrast in Hardy’s depiction of women thus: “On the one hand, Hardy praises

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7 Carolyn Heilbrum. Towards a Recognition of Androgyny. (New York: Knoph, 1973) 70
female advance, strength, passion, and sensitivity; on the other, he depicts women as meek, vain, plotting creatures of mercurial moods". Yet, one feels certain that this is not his defect, it is rather a balanced way of showing the positive and negative aspects of a character.

It is essential to analyse female characters with reference to the novels. This enables one to know Hardy's concept of womanhood, the role of gender and class in the establishment of man-woman relationships in the various social domains, and the impact of the feminist movement on Hardy.

Among Hardy's prominent female characters is the heroine of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Bathsheba Everdene, whose beauty and charming ways endear her to all, including Gabriel Oak. Her emotional nature and romantic temperament are the marked features of her character. She is also endowed with self-confidence, efficiency, a sympathetic nature, dignity, purity, and candor. Bathsheba's vanity and pride are no doubt disguising for she is conscious of her beauty and looks at the mirror and admires her beauty thus:

She simply observed herself as a fair product of Nature in the feminine kind, her thoughts seeming to glide into far-off though likely dramas in which men would play a part—vistas of probable triumphs—the smiles being of a phase suggesting that hearts were imagined as lost and won. (1:28).

Gabriel Oak therefore concludes that she is vain and knows he has been charmed and attracted by her beauty and Hardy comments thus:

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8 Philip V. Allingham, 4
The girl's thoughts hovered about her face and form as soon as she caught Oak's eyes conning the same page was natural, and almost certain. The self-consciousness shown would have been vanity if a little more pronounced, dignity if a little less... (3:39)

She is quite independent, daring, wild, and whimsical and therefore her aunt tells Oak, who has come to ask her hand, that Bathsheba is "So good-looking, and an excellent scholar besides--she was going to be a governess once, you know, only she was too wild" (4:47). This wildness in Bathsheba's character is detected by Bathsheba herself when she directly tells Oak that she cannot marry him because she hates to become men's property in this regard. Then, she challengingly adds. "It wouldn't do, Mr. Oak. I want somebody to tame me; I am too independent; and you would never be able to, I know" (4:50)

Hardy, in this novel, shows brilliantly that he is and will never be conventional in his depiction of female characters. Here, he presents his concept of a New Woman, which reminds one of Charlotte Bronte's depictions of rebellious, daring, and independent women like Jane Eyre and Shirely. The abovementioned passage shows Bathsheba as a "wild and untamed" one who is challenging in her attitude to men. In this connection, Philip V. Allingham, in another essay entitled, "The Power of "No" for Hardy's Heroines", comments thus: "Hardy seems to have been fascinated by the one power 'respectable', 'middle-class' women had in nineteenth-century Britain, the power to say "No" to a prospective suitor". Bathsheba plays the same trick on William Boldwood, who is equal to her in status

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and whom she provokes to love her by sending him a foolish Valentine card on which she writes "Marry me!" And yet she refuses his proposal. This may be because she felt that Boldwood will not be able to tame her and satisfy her sexual need.

Bathsheba's self-confidence and androgyny is revealed when; after inheriting her uncle's farm; she dismisses her bailif and resolves to manage her farm herself. Though a woman yet she proves that she is very strong and resolute. She frankly tells her subordinates:

Now mind, you have a mistress instead of a master. I don't yet know my powers or my talents in farming; but I shall do my best and if you serve me well, so shall I serve you. Don't any unfair ones among you (if there are any such, but I hope not) suppose that because I'm a woman I don't understand the difference between bad goings-on and good... I shall be up before you are awake' I shall be afield before you are up... I shall astonish you all (10:96)

And, she does put her thoughts into action and runs the farm affairs successfully like a man. She rides a horse without a sidesaddle and goes to the Sunday market and deals with men perfectly well. The best comment on Bathsheba's character is given by Rosemarie Morgan, who compares her to Tess to the following effect:

Far from the Madding Crowd is, in many respects, the precursor to Tess of the d'Urbervilles (1891), with the role of Tess split between the trusting home-spung girl (Fanny) seduced by the untrustworthy "blue-blood" (Troy), and the courageous, self-determined girl struggling to make her way in a world made by men for men, played by Bathsheba. Unlike Tess, however, Bathsheba is by birth middle-class, by education accomplished, by inclination innovative, daring and adventurous--conversely vulnerable,
unguarded and rash.\textsuperscript{10}

Hardy, as a matter of fact, has a deep insight into female psychology. He does his best to portray the real character of this strong-headed woman, Bathsheba. He knows that she loves self-admiration and flattery, a flaw that will lead to her tragic end. On her first encounter with Sergeant Troy, who is "...moderately truthful towards men, but to women lied like a Cretan" (25:173), the narrator comments to the following effect:

After all, how could a cheerful wearer of skirts be permanently offended with the man? There are occasions when girls like Bathsheba will put up with a great deal of unconventional behaviour. When they want to be praised, which is often, when they want to be mastered, which is sometimes; and when they want no nonsense, which is seldom (24:171)

This is a psychoanalyst's review of female psychology. He reveals the foolishness of Bathsheba, who falls a victim to the lies of a man about whom she has been warned by Liddy; her servant; and Gabriel Oak, her sincere lover. Hardy describes her thus:

Bathsheba loved Troy in the way that only self-reliant women love when they abandon their self-reliance. When a strong woman recklessly throws away her strength she is worse than a weak woman who has never had any strength to throw away (29:191)

This is the fate of Bathsheba, a strong woman who becomes weak. And, this weakness affects her marriage. She frankly tells Gabriel Oak she will go to Bath to inform Troy of forgetting the idea of marrying her, but he has challenged

and aroused her womanhood by telling her that he admired a more beautiful woman:

But I was coming away, when he suddenly said he had that day seen a woman more beautiful than I, and that his constancy could not be counted on unless I at once became...And I was grieved and troubled...'And then between jealousy and distraction, I married him! (37: 249-250)

It is not love but jealousy that goaded her to marry him. Hence this weakness led her to marry a philanderer who had an affair with innocent Fanny Robin. This marriage has ill-consequences due to Troy's spend-thrift ways and lack of concern for the farm. It is only when Bathsheba learns about Fanny's story that:

Bathsheba burst into great sobs-dry-eyed sobs, which cut as they came, without any softening by tears. But she determined to repress all evidences of feeling. She was conquered; but she would never own it as long as she lived. Her pride was indeed brought low by despairing discoveries of her spoliation by marriage with a less pure nature than her own...Bathsheba had been proud of her position as a woman; it had been a glory to her to know that her lips had been touched by no man's on earth-that her waist had never been encircled by a lover's arm. She hated herself now (41:269).

Her agony increases when Fanny's coffin is brought to her house and Troy kisses Fanny and refuses to do the same to Bathsheba and adds: "Ah! Do taunt me, madam. This woman is more to me, dead as she is, than ever you were, or are, or can be" (43:291). Then, he leaves the town to re-appear after seven years, at a time when Bathsheba gets ready to marry Boldwood; not out of love but to mend her earlier mistake. Unable to cope with the thought of losing Bathsheba once again, Boldwood shoots Troy. This, of course, opens the way
for the loyal Oak to marry her. Throughout her life, Bathsheba, in Rosemarie Morgan’s words, is repeatedly subjected to judgemental views, to public scrutiny of her private life, to superstitious belief and sexual prejudice, as also to the prevailing laws of matrimony which deprive her of her property and the entitlements she had earned in her own right which are now assigned to her (thriftless) husband upon marriage.11

And this is the fate of all women in this patriarchal society.

With the creation of Eustacia Vye, the heroine of The Return of the Native, Hardy had certainly proved his artistic talent. He had, no doubt, made use of time and space to draw such an immortal picture of this female character, who excelled all other heroines of his novels. He created her rebellious as a man and romantic as a woman and thus combined the strength and beauty of both. In chapter 7, Eustacia is physically described as “full-limbed and somewhat heavy; without rudiness, as without pallor, and soft to the touch as a cloud” (7:72). Her hair is darker than the bleak winter season. Her Pagan eyes were full with nocturnal mysteries. So fine are the lines of her lips that they resemble the point of a spear. Her presence brings memories of things like Bourbon Rose, Tropical Mid-nights and Rubies. Her moods recall lotus-eaters and the march in “Athalie.” Her motion suggests the ebb and flow of the sea and her voice reminds one of a musical instrument.

To strengthen her dignity, Hardy adds further: “Eustacia Vye was the raw material of a divinity. On Olympus she would have the passion and instincts which make a model goddess, that is, those which make not quite a

11 Rosemarie Margan, p.3
model woman” (7:71). She is above her class in dignity. This “Queen of Night” refrains from indulging in plot-making but when she does, her plans and preparations show the comprehensive strategy of a General rather than small arts of common women. Thus, Hardy created an unconventional woman antagonized by the desires of passionate love and the independence of a male:

To be loved to madness—such was her great desire. Love was to her the one cordial which could drive her away the eating loneliness of her days. And she seemed to long for the abstraction called passionate love more than for any particular lover (7:75)

Yet,

Celestial imperiousness, love, warmth, and fervour had proved to be somewhat thrown away on netherward Edgon. Her power was limited, and the consciousness of this limitation had biased her development. Edgon was her Hades, and since coming there she had imbibed much of what was dark in tone, though inwardly and eternally unreconciled thereto (7:73)

Like the heath, Eustacia is untamed, dark, and wild. Her association with the heath illustrates her masculine qualities thus: “Her appearance accorded well with this smouldering rebelliousness, and the shady splendor of her beauty was the real surface of the sad and stifled warmth within her” (ibid).

Pamela Dalziel (1995) comments on the masculine and feminine images used to describe the character of Eustacia to the following effect:

..., and throughout Hardy’s text, though most notably in the “Queen of Night” chapter, her alignment with the “masculine” is modified by the use of equality extravagant female images. Hardy probably did not envision Eustacia as masculine per se but as distinct
from the conventional middle-class "womanly" norm...\textsuperscript{12}

Anyhow, Eustacia Vye may be considered androgynous for her passion, rebelliousness, and shows a refusal to accept the confines of Edgon. She may be described as an untamed romantic emotion and fantasy, and has little concern for the effects of her actions. To the extent that the narrator asks, "Why did a woman of this sort live on Edgon Heath?" (7:73). These characteristics make Eustacia less typical of women who lived during the Victorian age. But, the scene in which her 'masculine' behaviour is most evident occurs during the Mummer's play when she disguises herself in men's clothes: "I can get boy's clothes— at least all that would be wanted besides the mumming dress" (II:4:130), she tells Charley. The narrator comments thus: "..., and Eustacia felt more and more interested in life. Here was something to do; here was some one to see, and a charmingly adventurous way to see him" (II: 4:131). Eustacia wishes to free herself from the restrictions society imposed on her. She wants to have close affinity with Clym Yeobright, who has just returned from Paris. She thinks that Clym, a broadminded person, will be generous enough to relieve her from the suffocating atmosphere of Edgon Heath. She does succeed in enticing him into a love-relationship; and then, marrying him against the will of his mother.

Eustacia, a rebellious woman, cares for none but herself and thinks about achieving her objectives. First, she

falls in love with Damon Wildeve and succeeds in dominating him, though she knows that he has already proposed to Thomasin. She even challenges Diggory Venn, who threatens her of spreading the news of her relationship with Damon throughout Edgon Hill. Hardy comments on it thus:

The reddleman's hint that rumour might show her to disadvantage had no permanent terror for Eustacia. She was as unconcerned at that contingency as a goddess at a lack of linen. This did not originate in inherent shamelessness, but in her living too far from the world to feel the impact of public opinion (1:10:100).

He writes further:

As far as social ethics were concerned Eustacia approached the savage state, though in emotion she was all the while an epicure (ibid).

Eustacia can sacrifice even her love for the achievement of her purpose. She is confined to Edgon as Clym decides to remain a school-master. Both Eustacia and his mother try to convince him to change his mind but in vain. This increases Eustacia's frustration and feeling of loneliness. The death of Clym's mother and the false allegation of her involvement in it adds to her misery, and she decides to commit suicide. She is saved by Wildeve in her attempt to do so, and in her bewilderment and lack of resources Eustacia expresses her sorrow at her tragic fate in the following words:

How I have tried and tried to be a splendid woman, and how destiny has been against me... I do not deserve my lot! ...O, the cruelty of putting me into this ill-conceived world! I was capable of much; but I have been injured and blighted and crushed by things beyond my control! O, how hard it is of Heaven
to devise such tortures for me, who have done no harm to Heaven at all! (4:7:354)

Hardy believed destiny controlled human beings. Women also seeking self-improvement or indulged in acts of independence or wished to follow their way of life or carry out their ambitions were rendered helpless. In a society run by educated men who were responsible for its well-being one can cite the example of Clym Yeobright. Eustacia Vye has no option left but to give up an imprisoning environment to go to Paris and she got drowned on her way.

Tess Derybeyfield is a strong and courageous woman as H.C. Duffin writes thus:

Among Hardy's women Tess Durbeyfield claims attention first, not only by reason of popularity, but more especially in that her creator distinguished her by the appellation of "a pure woman."^13^3

And, according to Philip V. Allingham, of all Hardy's women, surely it is Tess who has won the greatest respect for her strength and struggle to be treated as an individual. She is passionate, intelligent, humane, responsible, powerful and without any supposed feminine weakness. Though a victim of social pressure Tess is always self-determined and strong enough to struggle and even challenge all kinds of opposition.

Tess, like Hardy's heroines, is endowed with beauty. Hardy describes her thus: "beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet" (1:11:102). Her exceptional good looks bring her unwarranted attention from men. And what proves unfortunate for her is

^13^ H.C. Duffin. Thomas Hardy: A study of the Wessex Novels, the Poems and the Dynasts. (Delhi: Doaba House, 1993) 218
her mature sexual appearance, "a luxuriance of aspect, a fullness of growth, which made her appear more of a woman than she really was" (1:5:65), a feature that she inherited from her mother. And, by trying to enhance her good looks, her mother dresses her up with the best she has ever had, which: "Imparted to her developing figure an amplitude which belied her age, and might cause her to be estimated as a woman when she was not much more than a child" (72-73).

She is regarded a woman by Alec d'Urbervilles and it ruined her life.

Tess has led a difficult life and her parents were responsible for it because her father was an alcoholic and mother a careless and incompetent housekeeper. This leads her to assume responsibility for her younger siblings. This concern has led her to drive Prince, the horse, with her younger brother as a companion rather than ask someone else to do the job, "Oh no—I wouldn't have it for the world! Declared Tess proudly" (1:4:51). She then takes full responsibility for Prince's death, to the extent of feeling like a murderess. It is actually this feeling that causes her to acquiesce in her mother's scheme to go to the d'Urbervilles for help. Although "she had hoped to be a teacher at the school" Tess's purpose for going there is a noble one, "going about her business with some self-assurance in the thought of acquiring another horse for her father by an occupation which would not be onerous" (1:6:71). This leads to an opposition between the mother and the daughter as Hardy comments on it to the following effect:

Being mentally older than her mother she did not regard Mrs. Durbeyfield's matrimonial hopes for her in a serious aspect for a moment. The light-minded
woman had been discovering good matches for her daughter almost from the year of her birth (1:6:72).

Ian Mackean (2001) points out that there is a relativity of moral values in which the clash of attitudes between the mother and her daughter is caused because "Tess’s education has given her a wider and more advanced outlook, transcending the parochial conventions of her mother’s world."^14

Tess’s struggle against the social conventions begins at home and is brilliantly indicated by the narrator in the very beginning, when he comments thus:

Between the mother, with her fast-perishing lumber of superstitions, folk-lore, dialect, and orally transmitted ballads, and the daughter, with her trained Natural teachings and Standard knowledge under an infinitely Revised Code, there was a gap of two hundred years as ordinary understood. When they were together the Jacobean and the Victorian ages were juxtaposed (1:3:44-45)

It is therefore a clash between the old and the new generation.

Tess rebels against social conventions when she tries to baptize her child after his birth and is prevented from doing so. Besides this the most debated issue in the novel is her loss of virginity that ruined her life forever.

Though she is economically dependent on Alec d’Urbervilles and is socially inferior to him Tess has resisted his advances on the night when the incident of her seduction takes place. Tess, after the dance of Chaseborough, refuses Alec’s offers to take her home and goes with him just to escape from a confrontation with Car

Darch and the others. The narrator comments on the obligation of the circumstance thus:

At almost any other moment of her life she would have refused such proffered aid and company, as she had refused them several times before; ...But coming as the invitation did at the particular juncture when fear and indignation at these adversaries could be transformed by a spring of the foot into a triumph over them, she abandoned herself to her impulse (1:10:95)

She has disliked his love-making and puts herself on the defensive, “with one of those sudden impulses of reprisal to which she was liable she gave him a little push from her....he nearly lost his balance” (1:11:97-98). Those who claim that Tess submits herself willingly to Alec are mistaken because she disapproves of the gifts sent to her family and exclaims thus: “‘O how very good of you that is!’ with a painful sense of the awkwardness of having to thank him just then” (1:11:100). Alec left her alone and “Tess became invisible and she fell into reverie upon the leaves where he had left her” (ibid). Tess falls into a reverie and was in the same state when the accident, which resulted in the death of Prince, took place. “Tess!” calls Alec upon his return, but:

There was no answer. The obscurity was not so great that he could see absolutely nothing but a pale nebulousness at his feet, ...Everything else was blackness alike. D'Urberville stooped; and heard a gentle regular breathing. He knelt and bent lower, till her breath warmed his face, and in a moment his cheek was in contact with hers. She was sleeping soundly, and upon her eyelashes there lingered tears (1:11:101)

It is therefore a case of rape as seduction requires mutual indulgence on both sides. And, Hardy rightly calls the novel “A Pure Woman”, for she proves herself pure at the end. She
has been so throughout but Hardy questions: "Where was Tess's guardian Angel? Where was the providence of her simple faith?" (ibid). It is, in fact, an expression of cruelty and Tess becomes a victim of her economic conditions, her mother's greed and lack of far-sightedness, her own fate and exploitation of man. Describing its inevitability and cruelty, Hardy writes thus:

Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive;... the wrong man the woman, the wrong woman the man... (1:11:102).

When she returns home and questioned by her mother she explodes thus:

O mother, my mother!' cried the agonized girl, turning passionately upon her parent as if the poor heart would break. 'How could I be expected to know? I was a child when I left this house four months ago. Why didn't you tell me there was danger in men-folk? Why didn't you warn me? (2:12:111).

She further refers to her ignorance in this regard:

Ladies know what to fend hands against, because they read novels that tell them of these tricks; but I never had the chance o' learning in that way, and you did not help me! (ibid)

The mother was reluctant to perform her motherly duty like a responsible woman before sending her daughter to an absolutely unknown world for she was afraid that Tess "would be hontish wi' him and lose your chance" (ibid).

Tess's acceptance of society's judgment makes her indulge in sin. She was not directly involved in the matter and Hardy comments thus:

It was they that were out of harmony with the actual word, not she. Walking among the sleeping birds in
the hedges... she looked upon herself as a figure of Guilt intruding into the haunts of Innocence...(2:13:114-115).

She chooses to isolate herself from the community and is turned into a complex woman. She is physically attractive and has acquired “liberal education”. She decides to make a new beginning in life, works on a farm and, meanwhile, gives birth to Sorrow, her child, to whom she is attached, “The baby’s offence against society in coming into the world was forgotten by the girl-mother; her soul’s desire was to continue that offence by preserving the life of the child” (2:14:122). When the child is ill and is breathless, Tess cries, “‘O merciful God; have pity; have pity upon my poor baby!’ ‘Heap as much anger as you want to upon me, and welcome; but pity the child!’” (2: 14:123) Tess is a kind generous mother. She christens the child before it dies and when it is to be baptized and buried and the vicar refuses to entertain her, Tess bursts out thus: “Then I don’t like you!’ ‘and I’ll never come to your church no more!’” (2:14:127). She rebels not only against the vicar but also against the religious laws and religion itself. She buries her child at the cost of a shilling and a pint of beer to the sexton. In this connection, Ian Mackean (2001) writes thus: “Tess adheres to no doctrine or tradition and represents Hardy’s direct challenge to both when she confronts the vicar on the subject of her baby’s baptism and burial”.15 He further comments that:

Hardy undermines the authority of the vicar by calling him a “tradesman” and showing how Tess’s genuine human feelings sway his nobler feelings against his doctrine... we are made to feel that the refusal was more off to Christianity than to Tess.16

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15 Ian Mackean, 4.
16 Ian Mackean, 4.
After her baby's death, Tess determines to seek solace by becoming a dairymaid on a farm away from home. There she meets Angel Clare, a young man from a good family, drawn to Tess by her simplicity and her misery. She tries to put him off on account of her past life which will keep Angel away from her. And, it proves true!

Tess accepts his love and agrees to marry Angel Clare; and also tries to reveal her past to him. At first his indulgent attitude causes her to retreat and then her letter slips under the rug and her effort to confess fails. Angel Clare, however, perceives Tess as "a fresh and virginal daughter of Nature". The thought of purity also recurs in Angel's thoughts. Unfortunately, his concept of purity and virtue is rather conventional; he equates it with physical virginity. He is intellectually liberated and does not subscribe to the religious beliefs of his father and refuses to become a minister. And yet he is basically a conservative person.

Angel is moved to confess his sexual transgression on the night of their wedding. Like Tess, he wanted to confess this during their courtship but he was afraid to lose her. She warmly and immediately forgives him, and he accepts her forgiveness easily, "Then we will dismiss it at once and forever!" (4:34:261) Tess is sinful in this regard and hopes to be forgiven by him but he replies: "O Tess, forgiveness does not apply to the case! You were one person; now you are another. My God-how can forgiveness meet such a grotesque-prestidigitation as that!" (4:34:264).
Now Angel is no longer the same liberal man; he is conventional to the core. This also reflects the dual personality of a man in Victorian society. Asha Kanwar (1991) comments on Arnold Kettle’s second study of the novel, and writes to the following effect:

There is a greater awareness of the woman question in Kettle’s analysis of 1982 as compared with that of 1951. For instance, when Tess confesses her past experience, Angel recoils from her saying “the woman I have been loving is not you “...Kettle takes this as proof of the “process of idealization of women so deep in the Victorian ethos”. But the double standards are so evident, for the same lapse in Angel is forgivable whereas in Tess it is not.17

Again, Tess is depressed, lonely, and falls as a prey to the indifference of an insensitive man who chooses to suppress his love for her and obeys conventional rules he does not really believe in. Once again she is to struggle in life and yet is capable of proving her purity and innocence.

The economic conditions render Tess powerless enough to respond passively to Alec’s seduction, but she is also capable of murdering her oppressor on her husband’s return from Brazil. She dies like a heroine. Asha Kanwar (1991) points out that in literary convention the woman is depicted either as Madona or a whore but Tess belongs to neither of these categories. Tess is described as a fresh, virginal, pagan child of nature who finally hardens into accepting the position of a mistress. By designating her a “pure woman” contrary to societal conventions;

Hardy is clearly taking a stand in favour of women in Tess’s position. At one level, it might seem as if Tess is passively accepting her lot, (not by “blind fate” but

by society) she is quietly but heroically coming to terms with her situations. She cannot change the world, but she changes her situation as best as she possibly can, culminating in her final act of self-assertion, the murder of her seducer, which can be taken as her rejection of the society that has nothing better to offer to women like her.\textsuperscript{18}

Hardy was evidently a feminist who showed a great interest in his female characters. Tess was his portrayal of a perfect woman.

The next significant female character is Sue Bridehead; the heroine of \textit{Jude the Obscure}; who according to H.C. Duffin (1993) is Tess's most dangerous rival. Sue Bridehead is described as boyish, sexless, Voltairean and unconventional. She is a complex character, is passionate, sensual and yet sexless; she is unconventional and yet conforms to social conventions at the end of the novel, where she emerges as powerful, brave and even androgynous.

Hardy creates in Sue a symbol of radical deviance and thus supports his perverse, negative view of a society that victimizes all those who choose to ignore socially acceptable standard. This is true of Sue Bridehead. At first, Sue is regarded a tomboy in mannerism, joining boys in their exploits. Thus, she tells Jude that she "has no fear of men" and that she has "mixed with them almost as one of them" (118). She also asserts that she is a virgin, "I have remained as I began", a characteristic that contributes to her being 'sexless'. Phillotson, Sue's husband, describes her aversion to sex when he tells his friend, Gillingham, "She jumped out

\footnote{Asha Kanwan, 186.}
of window...so strong was her dread of me!" (183) He bitterly states the truth: "what must a woman’s aversion be when it is stronger than her fear of spiders" (176). Sue, in fact, despises sex even when it is a legal prostitution in the form of marriage. She tells Jude, "Though I like Mr. Phillotson as a friend, I don’t like him... it is a torture to live with him as a husband" (p.169). Marriage to her is not a sacred bond, "I at least don’t regard marriage as a Sacrament" (p. 166), she speaks thus when she comes to know about Jude’s marriage to Arabella. When she reveals her engagement to Phillotson she becomes defensive: "I shall tell you! said she with perverseness that was part of her... I have promised that I will marry him" (p.134).

When she leaves her husband and decides to live with Jude, they both seek divorce from their spouses. They break everlasting and prevalent conventions by asking for divorce, an act that is shocking as well as challenging to the Victorians. St. Andrews, in an essay on the issue of divorce, comments to the following effect:

The treatment of divorce in the novel suggests the narrator’s sympathies with contemporary feminist argument; this is felt still more in the account (or in the refusal to give an account) of Sue’s dislike of sexual relations with Phillotson. The refusal to explain (explain away?) Sue’s feeling is not a failure of realism, but a mark of Hardy’s attempt to get beyond realism. TH’s feminist position may be linked with J.S. Mill’s central argument, that ‘what is now called the nature of women is an eminently arbitrary thing, i.e., precisely not natural but socially constructed. Hardy challenges the late Victorian science which tried to show, in opposition to Mill, that women’s nature was biologically given;...but what TH shows is the operation of cultural and political forces, which leaves open the possibility of
When Jude and Sue are free they decide to live with each other independent of all obligations. Yet, Sue remains ‘sexless’ “you...are such a phantasmal, bodiless creature...who...has so little animal passion in you” (272), Jude tells her. Jude persuades her to marry him, but Sue tries to postpone it. She feels that marriage is an “iron contract” which will extinguish tenderness, and so she would “much rather go on living always as lovers ...and only meeting by day” (271). She further argues that it is against man’s nature to go on loving a person when he is told that he must and shall be that person’s lover. In their next attempt at marriage the wedding is not accomplished, though Sue declares, “let us go home without killing our dream” (301). This is her view of marriage, which contradicts that of society and religion. In desperation to prevent their marriage to take place, Sue questions him: “Don’t you dread the attitude that it sensibly arises out of legal obligation? Don’t you think it is destructive to a passion whose essence is its gratuitousness?” (286). She fears that marriage kills love, and to her, it is more like a sacrifice. She comments on marriage thus: “The flowers in the bride’s hand are sadly like the garland which decked the heifers of sacrifice in old times” (301). Finally, she comes up with her radical opinion with regards to marriage when she frankly puts it thus: “Fewer women like marriage than you suppose, only they enter into it for the dignity it is assumed to cater” (272).

Sue’s peculiar character is further revealed to Jude because in his imagination she is an ideal, but in reality she does not live up to his expectations. Rather, she is a complex woman, with flaws and inconsistencies, and therefore does not fit into the mould that Jude has made for her. The most shocking flaw in her is made evident when she allows herself to indulge or rather to transform her relationship with Jude from a spiritual one into a sexual relationship. In this respect, she is no longer ‘sexless’ or ‘spiritual’. This change is due to jealousy, a trait that she shares with Bathsheba Everdene, as discussed earlier. When she sees Arabella, Jude’s former wife, she feels jealous and consequently submits herself to Jude, who says of her:

You spirit, you disembodied creature, you dear, sweet, tantalizing phantom...hardly flesh at all; so that when I put my arms around you I almost expect them to pass through you as through air (256-257)

in contrast with Arabella, whom he sees as “...a complete and substantial female animal...no more, no less” (36).

Sue believes that self-realisation is possible only through leading an independent life. Regarding divorce, she expresses her views thus: “I am certain one ought to be allowed to undo what one has done so ignorantly” (272). She cannot bear “the necessity of being responsive to Phillotson whenever he wishes” (273), and Victorian values expect a woman to be responsive to her husband. Thus the Victorians condemned the novel.

Sue is capricious and therefore after her escape from the training school, she says that Phillotson “is the only man in the world for whom I have any respect or fear”, and
also that “I don’t care for him...I shall do just as I choose” (160). In the same scene Sue forbids Jude to love her, but then immediately sends a note saying, “if you want to love me, Jude, you may” (161). Jude feels vexed with Sue knowing that she is capricious, and becomes aware of “the elusiveness of her curious double nature” (219).

This domineering woman with her radical views regarding marriage and individual freedom believes marriage to be a contract of society that enslaves and binds a couple to endless happiness. She feels that her elopement with Jude will not bring them the happiness they yearn for. She regrets leaving Phillotson and decides to return to him, despite the fact that she condones the act of marriage: “I don’t love him, I must, must, own it, in deepest remorse! But I shall try to learn to love him by obeying him” (306). She also asks Jude to do the same. This happens when they have become victims of miserable economic conditions and their rejection by all. What is more is the suicide of their children at the hands of Jude’s son from Arabella. This is the adverse effect of their elopement. Hardy, thus, depicts the enormous power society has over its members. It also shows the misery of those who do not abide by the social and religious conventions. Sue Bridehead, who is described as “a creation of civilization”, who despite her strength of mind and virtues cannot find happiness in a patriarchal society.

Hardy’s other female protagonists are less prominent than those described above. They cannot excel those mentioned earlier. Elfride Swancourt the heroine in A Pair of Blue Eyes is quite feminine and possesses bright blue eyes and masses of blond hair. She tends to conceal her previous
relationship with Stephen Smith from her suitor, Henry Knight, who happens to be Stephen’s friend. Yet, critics over the years have been debating over the power of Elfride. Some are of the opinion that she lacks power and complexity of character while others feel that she is one of Hardy’s most provocative and striking heroines. Pamela Jekel maintains that:

Lawrence’s implication is that, indeed, the tragedy is not very great at all, since Elfride has not had the strength to throw off even “the first little hedge of convention”. In fact, the story of Elfride is at least poignant if not a classical tragedy, precisely because she does have the potential for such strength, because she does have many heroic qualities, and because she is betrayed by love...both false and true...and sadly, betrayed with her own complicity.20

(Quoted in Glen Downey’s essay: A Pair of Blue Eyes and its Critics)

Still Elfride is considered weak. It is because she gives up Stephen simply because he is socially inferior and connects her with her country past, though he is an ambitious man who adores her. Secondly, in her anxiety about her relationship with Stephen, she allows herself to be treated as a child. Therefore, Henry breaks off the engagement on account of her relationship with another man. And, Elfride later marries Lord Luxellian, with whom she remains dissatisfied. She finally dies. Elfirde does not come up to the expectations of men, her parents and society. Her failure to confess her past makes her afraid of Henry, who represents society which never forgives a woman for a past life that is undesirable.

The story of Grace Melbury, the heroine of The

Woodlanders, is more or less the same as that of Elfride Swancourt. Grace’s emotional relations with Giles Winterbourne are described in highly romantic terms: “could see far into the recesses of heaven as they mused and walked, the eye journeying on under a species of golden arcades” (28:156). And to affirm the legitimacy of their union, Grace abandons herself, “to the seductive hour and scene...her senses revelled in the sudden lapse back to nature unadorned”, and she experiences “revolt for the nonce against social law” and a “passionate desire for primitive life” (28:156-157). Her profound sensation, rebellious desire and power turn into self-conceitedness and meekness. On her return from the fashionable school to which she was sent to acquire education, her social superiority to her rustic lover, and Gile’s financial wreck prompts her father to break their engagement. Grace obeys her ambitious father to marry Edred Fitzpier. She does not show disapproval despite the fact that she suspects the young doctor, Fitzpier, to have relations with Suke Damwealthy, a village girl. Grace and Fitzpier are attracted towards each other, and Giles loses Grace's affection. They get married but this union is soon challenged by Fitzpier’s secret affair with Ms. Charmond, a wealthy widow. Grace learns of her husband’s adultery, and is annoyed and feels humiliated. It is too late for her to repent for her rash decision and the feeling of superiority regarding her honest lover, Giles. Contemplating the bounty of the season, Grace wonders that, “some kernels, were unsound as her own situation, and she wondered if there were one world in the universe where the fruit had no worm, and marriage no sorrow” (28:155).
Prompted by her father, Grace is forced to evaluate her marriage. With a hope to be divorced by her husband Grace again comes close to Giles, but she is disillusioned for Fitzpier returns from his travels with Felice Chamond. He exhibits his feelings of regret and she meekly turns to him. Grace's father comments thus:

But let her bear in mind that the woman walks and laughs somewhere at this very moment whose neck he'll be coling next year as he does her to-night; and as he did Felice Chamond last year, and Suke Damon's the year afore!

Fitzpier's cruelty is exhibited after he comes to know about Grace's social status, "Instead of treasuring her image as a rarity he would at most have played with her as a toy. He was this kind of man" (27:95). Grace Melbury, a liberated woman, overlooks the faults of her noble love and is betrayed by him. She is an ordinary woman who does possess the required qualifications of a heroine. Critics go to the extent of considering Marty South the real heroine of the novel. And, this proves true. Marty is the real heroine for she has profound courage. While Grace's love for Giles lasts for a few months, Marty's mute love sustains beyond the grave, "Now, my own, own love, ...If ever I forget your name let me forget home and heaven!" Marty is uncomplaining and is persevering. She has typically masculine traits in her, for instance she takes on the responsibility of her father and performs physical labour. She is thus stronger and more efficient than Grace.

Elizabeth-Jane, too, plays a significant role in The Mayor of Casterbridge, though she does not rise to the status of a real heroine. She is beautiful, intelligent, and ambitious.
Early in the novel, both her beauty and her innate intelligence raise her above poverty. She has no education and prospects in life, but once her economic conditions are improved as she has become the mayor's daughter, Elizabeth-Jane becomes conspicuous in all sphere of life. She is known for her beauty and is admired by young men, including Farfrae, "Everybody was attracted, and some said that her bygone simplicity was the art that concealed art" (15:107). Elizabeth-Jane; unlike any other girl of her time, enjoys nice clothes that Henchard's money allows her to buy, but she is intelligent and sensible enough not to take advantage of her improved lot. In this regard the narrator admires her thus:

It might have been supposed that, given a girl rapidly becoming good-looking, comfortably circumstanced, and for the first time in her life commanding, and for the first time in her life commanding ready money, she would go and make a fool of herself by dress. But no. The reasonableness of almost everything that Elizabeth did was no-where more conspicuous than in this question of clothes...This unsophisticated girl did it by an innate perceptiveness that was almost genius... (14:100).

She also takes advantage of her leisure hours by reading to improve her lot.

Elizabeth-Jane becomes impressive chiefly by her simplicity, loyalty, and sense of satisfaction with whatever she has. When Farfrae abandons her for Miss Templeman, Elizabeth-Jane withdraws quietly although she loves him. Again, when Henchard, after Elizabeth's mother's death, offered her his surname, "you'll take my surname now--hey? Your mother was against it; but it will be much more pleasant to me. 'Tis legally yours, you know" (19:130); she accepts it.
Any other girl would have rejoiced, but not the loyal Elizabeth, "Here she remained in silence, and wept,—not for her mother now, but for the genial sailor Richard Newson, to whom she seemed doing a wrong" (19:131)

Elizabeth-Jane does not retain any bitterness and finally marries Farfrae after his wife's death. And although she lashes out at Henchard when she finds out that he has lied to keep her away from her real father, Newson, but she soon forgives him and goes to find him. She is really touched by Henchard's will upon his death and honours his wishes. She is therefore worthy to be esteemed and admired.

Like Elizabeth-Jane, young Thomasin Yeobright is presented as the opposite of Eustacia Vye in The Return of the Native. Thomasin is an innocent girl, who is treated roughly by circumstances and men. Thus in a conversation with her aunt, Mrs. Yeobright, Thomasin tells her about her miserable plight:

I am a warning to others; just as thieves and drunkards and gamblers are... what a class to belong to! Do I really belong to them? Tis absurd! Yet why, Aunt, does everybody keep on making me think that I do, by the way they behave towards me? Why don't people judge me by my acts? Now, look at me as I kneel here, picking up these apples--do I look a lost woman? (2:2:117)

She adds vehemently, "I wish all good women were as good as I!" (ibid) Throughout the novel, Thomasin tries to be good, but she is misunderstood and misjudged, or, at least, she feels so. She wants to be good to everybody and is treated kindly by everyone except her husband, Damon Wildeve. She is quite normal but rather conventional in her
views. She never aspires for the impossible, never challenges or resists her fate and at the end of the novel she is conveniently disposed of for a happy future with the right man. R.P. Bhatnagar and Rajul Bhargava, in their introduction to the novel, comment thus:

After the principal characters have staged their exit, Diggory and Thomasin survive. Hardy seems to be onc (once) again pressing the point that those who respect tradition survive; those who rebel against it have a tragic end. It is no wonder then that the best contenders for survival are the totally unpretentious and unambitious heathmen and healthwomen (10).

Thomasin does bear the irony of fate with tightlipped patience. Indeed, it is for her patience and virtue that she is rewarded in the end.

In the history of English fiction, no other woman is ever presented in the way Susan Henchard is portrayed in The Mayor of Casterbridge. Her being sold off to the highest bidder shows to what extent Hardy ironically attacks the conventions prevalent in his time. It also brilliantly shows his awareness about female subjugation in the nineteenth century England. For a woman to be sold along with her daughter like any other item by her own husband is awful, yet it reflects a truth. Susan Henchard's case is not rare for according to Hardy,

It may seem strange to sophisticated minds that a sane young matron could believe in the seriousness of such a transfer; and were there not numerous other instances of the same belief the thing might scarcely be credited. But she was by no means the first peasant woman who religiously adhered to her purchaser, as too many rural records show (4:44).

Philip V. Allingham, in an essay entitled, "The Wife Sale in The Mayor of Casterbridge" writes that in the Macmillan
The Concept of Womanhood in the Novels of Thomas Hardy

edition of the novel, editors Andrew A. Orr and Vivian De Sola Pinto point out that Hardy had restudied carefully the wife-tradition in British newspapers of the early nineteenth century and that he had heard of such a case at Portland, a place that is not far from Dorchester, which brought the idea into his mind. Whatever be the fact it gives a vivid picture of the real position of women in this patriarchal society in which a man is ready to dispose off his own wife and daughter for a quantity of beer and fifteen shillings.

As the novel starts Susan Henchard is portrayed as being naïve and resigned to an existence over which she has no control. While the bargaining process is on, "The young woman, his wife, who seemed accustomed to such remarks, acted as if she did not hear them" (1:29). It was one of the ill-consequences of taking alcohol in excess. Henchard has already had the intention to dispose of his wife and daughter. Elaine Showalter of Princeton University comments that the scene dramatizes the analysis of female subjugation and describes it as an ill-consequence of capitalism. She adds that it verifies that in early nineteenth-century England women of her class in rural districts were regarded a stock to be disposed off at their owner's whim.

While the bargain is going on Susan neither comments nor protests or even resists. On the contrary, she passively accepts the act of being sold. She assumes that the transaction is valid and that she must accompany the sailor, Newson, and stay with him. Showalter, once again, points out that Hardy tells very little about the relationship between Henchard and his wife, Susan; and that what is
seen in the early scenes does not show that she is drooping or complaining. She insists that;

Her role, however, is a passive one; severely constrained by her womanhood, and further burdened by her child, there is no way that she can wrest a second chance out of life. She cannot master events, but only accommodate herself to them.21

Nevertheless, Susan lives on good terms with the sailor for many years and bears him a child before a friend finally makes her realize that she is not bound by Henchard’s act.

After the sailor is presumed dead at sea, she sets out to find Henchard, not for her own sake but to benefit her poor daughter. When she finds him as the mayor of Casterbridge, she never thinks of taking advantage of it or of ruining him. She only thinks of securing good life for her daughter. She dies after she has made Elizabeth-Jane safe.

There are so many instances in the novel which illustrate Hardy’s sympathy and deep concern over the sufferings of women. He brings to light almost all kinds of problems faced by women during the Victorian age. Mrs. Yeobright, in The Return of the Native, is represented as a victim of motherhood. Fate plays its role of depriving her of the desire to reconcile with her own son, Clym, who marries Eustacia against her will. The money that she sends him as a gift is lost in gambling; and finally, she dies with the realization that she is ignored by her son. In Far from the Madding Crowd, Fanny Robin becomes a victim of the hostility of fate for she goes to the wrong church to lose a chance of legalizing her relationship with Seargent Troy, and she dies on her way to seek him. In Jude the Obscure,

Jude's son from Arabella feels the burden and undergoes the hardships of life. He, therefore, decides to end his life and that of his brothers.

Hardy was undoubtedly aware about women being subjugated and their miserable plight. He also highlights the fact that those women who try to change their lot in this patriarchally-dominated society ultimately fail, and will not survive as in the case of Eustacia Vye and Tess Durbeyfield; for they have to conform, willy-nilly, to the social conventions as in the case of Sue Bridehead. Hardy was also aware of the weaknesses of women, such as jealousy, envy, love of flattery, etc. His psycho-analysis of women is a unique feature of his character-study.