Chapter - 5

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Conventionally, the real problem regarding the relationship between man and woman arises only in the path of their union:

If we are to believe the poets, love and marriage exist in a state of conflict: love exists outside marriage, or ceases when marriage begins, or enters marriage only to destroy it.¹
The wedding gown and the ring symbolize an irreversible destination. The early Victorian literature, alike the writings that preceded it, generally vied for, 'and they lived happily ever after', endings. The problems that can crop-up after marriage were largely absent or avoided in literature. Even when some works did hint at differences between the husband and wife such differences were minimized and endured in the name of fate, chance or test of desired virtue. For instance, when Mr Rushworth gets his divorce at the end of Jane Austin's *Mansfield Park* (1814), it is simply a plot-device in order to dispose of a minor character. A wife's adultery was considered sufficient ground for a divorce, at the time, though not vice versa. Similarly, in George Eliot's *Silas Marner* (1861) marriage remains a peripheral theme. In poetry there are far fewer examples depicting relationships that delve into the complexities of matrimony. The sanctity of marriage was preserved at all costs. In the late Victorian period when England started getting rid of the rigid morality the obvious social reality that marriages did face problems became a part of the literary discourse as well. The repressions and evasions of the realities, at least in the middle class, made the educated and progressive people think that the institution of marriage was in crisis. The necessity for reforming the institution seemed inevitable.

Thomas Hardy represents the transition between Victorianism and Modernism. His poems, like his novels, document the drifting Victorian perceptions regarding man-woman relationships. They also raise pertinent questions regarding the role of social institutions like marriage. Hardy, in his later novels, rejected the temptation to pretend respect for perceptions and institutions, that appeared to him incongruous. He preferred to interrogate the problems in the light of the changing reality of contemporary times instead of being emotionally involved in a cowardly
fashion to the unreasonable and hence unacceptable moral and social conventions. Hardy was brave enough to openly despise and condemn social and religious conventions dictating man-woman relationship because he thought that they lacked foundations. Adherence to vain pretences of civilization, in the name of convention, saddened him. Pessimism, as ascribed to the very thought process of this thoughtful writer springs mainly from his frank views on the troubled and unbalanced persistent social reality. In such an intolerable conflict any concerned person would lose the joys of life and all feeling of personality, because at every moment one finds the suppression, restraint and check limiting the free play of one's powers. Commenting on Hardy's temperament and the judicious amalgamation of both the Victorian and the Modern traits in his writing Irving Howe states:

His writing at its most distinguished, displays a unique convergence of traditional and modern, both impulses in a fruitful engagement, neither in harmony nor struggle but in a kind of sustaining friction one with the other. The weight of the past looms large in Hardy's experience, and so too does the uncertainty of the modern world as he begins to glimpse it.²

His treatment of marriage in his last novel, Jude the Obscure was so interrogatively modern that it not only outraged the pieties and the innate unspoken values of the Victorian English middle class but also reflected the opinions and sentiments of the contemporary educated and progressive people:
Jude played a vital part in the modern transformation of marriage from a sacred rite to a secular and thereby problematic relationship – just as those nineteenth century writers who tried to salvage Christianity by scraping it of dogma and superstition unwittingly undermined the whole structure of theism (Irvin, 134).

This novel marks an important juncture in Hardy's literary career as the response and criticism meted to it induced Hardy to forsake fiction for truth. He immediately gave up his career as a successful novelist and embraced his first love, poetry. He was aware that sincere perceptions about life could be expressed more freely in poetry. And poetry provided him the much needed space to express more freely the ideas and emotions that run counter to the inert crystallized opinion.

Hardy, thus belonged to the group of late Victorians who chose to look at the realities of the conjugal life with an unprejudiced and candid eye. The unhappiness consequent upon an ill-suited marriage had been discussed in many of his novels and poems written even before the publication of Jude the Obscure. In the preface to The Woodlanders he writes that in this novel:

... as in one or two others of this series which involve the question of matrimonial divergence, the immortal puzzle–given the man and woman, how to find a basis for their sexual relation – is left where it stood and it is tacitly assumed for the purpose of the
story that no doubt of the depravity of the erratic heart who feels some second person to be better suited to his or her tastes than the one with whom he has contracted to live, enters the head of the reader or writer for a moment. From the point of view of marriage as a distinct covenant or undertaking, decided on by two people fully cognizant of all it’s possible issues, and competent to carry them through this assumption is of course, logical. Yet no thinking person supposes that on the broader ground of how to afford the greatest happiness to the units of human society during their brief transit through this sorry world, there is no more to be said on this covenant: and it is certainly not supposed by the writer of these pages.³

Thus, Hardy protests against the conventional endings in literature – with wedding bells symbolizing the certainty of happiness in conjugal bonding.

It would be wrong to assume that Hardy was against marriage. But sharing more proximity, in thought, with his modern contemporaries and successors, rather than the Victorians, he firmly believed that marriage was not an end but a new beginning. Samuel C. Chew very rightly maintains that marriage for Hardy “is not the goal of life but a mile stone on the path.”⁴ Hardy did not doubt that marriage did carry with it a hope of happiness, but he was aware that all hopes do not necessarily
materialize. In other words, the possibility of unhappiness resulting from marriage can not be denied. His reservations were not against marriage but the rigid social conventions that demanded unconditional conformity to the norms of marriage forcing the couple to drag their relationship, more as a burden than as a bliss. He never questioned the sanctity of marriage as such. His angry comments and sarcasm flung casually only at the antipathetic recriminatory mood of the average husband and wife and even in this anguish he sympathized with the victims of bad marriage. Not the vows of marriage but its irrevocable nature pained Hardy. The element of chance and fate play a vital role in uniting people in incongruous marriage in Hardy's poetry. He does not blame the lovers for falling prey to the trap laid down by Nature but at the same time he does hold them responsible for not amending their mistake even after realizing that they do not share affinity of temperament. The married couple in Hardy's poetry is more often than not destined to meet:

Two beings were drifting
Each one to the other:
No moments veil lifting
Or hint from another
   Led either to weet
   That the tracks of their feet
   Were arcs that would meet.

One moved in a city,
And one in a village,
Where many a ditty
He tongued when at tillage
   On dreams of a dim
   Figure fancy would limn
   That was viewless to him.
Would fate have been kinder
To keep night between them? –
Had he failed to find her
And time never seen them
Unite; so that, caught
In no burning love thought,
She had faded unsought? (CP, 867).

The unintentional coming together of people guided by chance, fate or the unknown working of the universe prompted Hardy to analyze the mystery of life. A question that has remained unanswered: Are marriages made in heaven? is explored in his poetry through multiple angles. Two unknown individuals with seemingly opposite inclinations drift towards each other and unknowingly converge at a place where they unite for life. “Hardy knows that it is not passion but impulse and emotion, accident and circumstance, that control life at these as at other moments.”

In ‘The Destined Pair’ (CP, 856) Hardy does not suggest any happiness in the marital relationship of the protagonists as they share “no burning love thought” (CP, 856). Marriage without love has a lesser possibility of happy conjugal future in Hardy’s poems. But even more than the end the means adopted by nature to unite a couple in marriage prompted Hardy to examine marriage, as a relationship seeped in mystery.

There are poems in which chance meeting or even unintentional meetings develop into marriage. How people fall into marriage or even fall out of it has been the subject of many poems. ‘The Two Wives’ (CP, 607) treats the issue of marriage with sarcasm. But it clearly brings home the point that mystery of marriage involves perplexing propositions. The protagonist in the poem narrates his hidden desires and the clandestine relationship that he shares with a particular woman. Hardy depicts the
poem with dramatic progression reaching its climax and then the sudden twist towards an anticlimax that leaves the reader brooding about human relationships. The poetic persona’s wife and the wife of his neighbour are boating together while he sits at home with another woman whom he “loved more than life” (CP, 607). The boat capsizes due to the tide and they learn that one of the two ladies has drowned. The narrator is pained to learn that his wife has survived while his neighbour’s wife has drowned. He thinks that providence has been unkind to both, him and his neighbour, as he could have materialized his clandestine relationship whereas his neighbour gains nothing from the loss:

Then I cried in unrest: "He is free! But no good is releasing
To him as it would be to me!"
"- But it is," said the woman I loved, quietly.
"How?" I asked her. "- Because he has long loved me too
Without ceasing,
And it's just the same thing, don't you see" (CP, 608).

But his clandestine sweetheart’s confession leaves him, as well as the reader, gasping at the sudden turn of events. Metaphorically, one may say that the revelation of the lady suffocates the emotions of the poetic persona and the accident kills his desire. The tide of passion like the tide at sea overturns whatever cannot sustain its force.

The poem bears a linguistic smoothness that allows the reader to sail through the sea of unbridled passion expressed by the married man’s clandestine dark desires. The sudden revelation that engulfs him should not be attributed to Hardy’s so called pessimism. In stead it should be viewed as one of the facets of love and human relationship. A dark desire that finds a corrective measure in the poem reflects the
working of the imminent will that is more interested in pairing people than their desired happiness.

‘Contretemps’ (CP, 551) is another such poem where a man and woman hurriedly embrace each other late in the evening. The blind passion that entices them to seek each other, to their horror, is soon realized to have cheated them. The hour of loving and the individual to meet rarely coincide in Hardy’s poetry. In this poem the couple that embraces each other so passionately immediately becomes resentful on realizing that they hugged the wrong individual:

A FORWARD rush by the lamp in the gloom,
And we clasped, and almost kissed;
But she was not the woman whom
I had promised to meet in the thawing brume
On that harbour-bridge; nor was I he of her tryst.

So loosening from me swift she said:
"O why, why feign to be
The one I had meant!—to whom I have sped
To fly with, being so sorrily wed!"
— 'Twas thus and thus that she upbraided me (CP, 551).

Who could have imagined, apart from Hardy, that this momentary mistake of the lovelorn couple could tie them together for life. Moreover, the woman in the poem is already married. Her husband, to their surprise, has followed the wife to their clandestine meeting place. He is unaware that his wife has not only erred in their conjugal relationship but has also miscalculated the tryst and ended up embracing the wrong man:
My assignation had struck upon
Some others' like it, I found.
And her lover rose on the night anon;
And then her husband entered on
The lamplit, snowflaked, sloppiness around (CP, 552).

Instead he appears to be a relieved man and immediately disowns his wife:

"Take her and welcome, man!" he cried:
"I wash my hands of her.
I'll find me twice as good a bride!"
– All this to me, whom he had eyed,
Plainly, as his wife's planned deliverer (CP, 552).

But that was not all. When the element of chance or fate decides to ruin a person, in Hardy's poetry, there is very little chance of deliverance from its clutch. The man she had actually come to meet, her lover, who was to elope with her far away from her husband's home, arrives on the scene and he too abandons her:

And next the lover: "Little I knew,
Madam, you had a third!
Kissing here in my very view!"
– Husband and lover then withdrew.
I let them; and I told them not they erred (CP, 552).

Two strangers who came together very briefly from two unknown walks of life find themselves stranded on a dead end. Their situation has been very aptly described:

... Well, there faced she and I--
Two strangers who'd kissed, or near,
Chancewise. To see stand weeping by
A woman once embraced, will try
The tension of a man the most austere (CP, 552).
Cupid plays its part and the sting of beauty releases its magic effect. The man desires to encash the opportunity and totally unmindful of his beloved, who failed to turn up on the appointed time and place, feels attracted towards the unknown woman:

So it began; and I was young,
She pretty, by the lamp,
As flakes came waltzing down among
The waves of her clinging hair that hung
Heavily on her temples, dark and damp.

And there alone still stood we two;
She one cast off for me,
Or so it seemed: while night ondrew,
Forcing a parley what should do
We twain hearts caught in one catastrophe.

In stranded souls a common strait
Wakes latencies unknown,
Whose impulse may precipitate
A life-long leap. The hour was late,
And there was the Jersey boat with its funnel agroan (CP, 552).

"Is wary walking worth much pother?"
It grunted, as still it stayed.
"One pairing is as good as another
Where all is venture! Take each other,
And scrap the oaths that you have aforetime made" (CP, 553).

The ending of the poem clearly indicates Hardy's liberal views about marriage. It advocates change of partner for a more meaningful relationship rather than dragging one's incongruous relationship. When the husband in the above poem learns about the infidelity of his wife he does not assault her in the name of honour. Instead he says:
"Take her and welcome, man!" he cried:
"I wash my hands of her.
I'll find me twice as good a bride!" (CP, 552).

Even the real paramour of the lady, on seeing her with another man, mistakenly assumes that she has a third lover. He too withdraws from the scene leaving two strangers to decide about the possible consequences of their unintended action. What the husband and the paramour consider as infidelity of the woman becomes the possibility for the third man. The poet very succinctly describes the mystery of man-woman relationship and advocates the scraping of rigid social laws governing marriage:

"One pairing is as good as another
Where all is venture! Take each other,
And scrap the oaths that you have aforetime made" (CP, 553).

Hardy holds rationalistic, ant clerical and scientific stance on the matter and gives precedence to individual welfare over social necessity in a bid to find options for the riddle of existence. He criticized male dominance and possessiveness in marital relationship where the wife is reduced to a mere commodity controlled by her husband. He advocated the sanctity of marital relationship to depend on the mutual consent of the husband and wife. He opposed the hypocrisy of the society that tolerated clandestine relationship for men or even allowed them to defy monogamy but relentlessly bound the women to adhere to the norms of strict monogamy. But Thomas Hardy did not espouse licentiousness in marital relationship or even the free love advocated by Shelley in 'Epipsychidion':
I never was attached to that great sect,  
Whose doctrine is that each one should select  
Out of the crowd a mistress or a friend,  
And all the rest, though fair and wise, commend  
To cold oblivion though it is in the code  
Of modern morals and the beaten road  
Which those poor slaves with weary steps tread.6

Two people engrossed in their personal lives, sharing little affinity of culture and upbringing may find it difficult to ally with each other. 'Fetching Her' (CP, 602) presents a touching tale of a husband who goes to fetch his wife. He has married her not for herself but for the difference she abides due to the native surrounding, atmosphere and culture of her up-bringing. Even while going to beget his wife, from her father's house, the husband is engrossed with the thoughts of the surrounding and atmosphere of his wife's beautiful country. He says:

... "It seems to be,  
My friend,  
That I were bringing to my place  
The pure brine breeze, the sea,  
The mews—all her old sky and space,  
In bringing her with me!"

– But time is prompt to expugn,  
My friend,  
Such magic-minted conjurings:  
The brought breeze fainted soon,  
And then the sense of seamews' wings,  
And the shore's sibilant tune. (CP, 602-03).
But time soon robs the magic of the place and the advice given to the husband by his
friend becomes a lesson though realised late in life.

So, it had been more due,
My friend,
Perhaps, had you not pulled this flower
From the craggy nook it knew,
And set it in an alien bower;
But left it where it grew! (CP, 603).

Hardy’s poetry on marriage presents multiple facets of man woman
relationship. He is concerned about the unintended follies of human beings that snatch
away from individuals their chance to live a happy conjugal life. The reasons that lead
to incongruous marriage have been very effectively highlighted in his poem, ‘Mismet’
(CP, 579). The title of the poem is in itself self revealing. It has two parts comprising
one stanza each. The first part describes a male persona while the second describes a
female persona. The generalization of the masculine and the feminine perceptions
have been adequately brought out in the poem:

I
He was leaning by a face,
He was looking into eyes,
And he knew a trysting-place,
And he heard seductive sighs;
   But the face,
   And the eyes,
   And the place,
   And the sighs,
Were not, alas, the right ones—the ones meet for him—
Though fine and sweet the features, and the feelings all abrim.
II
She was looking at a form,
She was listening for a tread,
She could feel a waft of charm
When a certain name was said;
   But the form,
   And the tread,
   And the charm
Of name said,
Were the wrong ones for her, and ever would be so,
While the heritor of the right it would have saved her soul to know! (CP, 579).

Hardy thinks that there is something wrong with the social laws that force two individuals, who share no affinity of temperament or thought, to live with each other. Thirty years after the publication of his short story 'The Distracted Preacher', Hardy Changed its ending. The note added at the end the story reads:

The ending of this story with the marriage of Lizzy and the minister was almost de rigueur in an English magazine at the time of writing. 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, in fact, marry the minister but- much to her credit in the author's opinion- stuck to Jim the smuggler, and immigrated with him after their
marriage expatrial step rather forced upon him by his adventurous antecedents.\textsuperscript{7}

Even in \textit{The Mayor of Casterbridge} he advocates the same thought through Henchard who considers his wife to be a drag on him. In a bid to get rid of her, he says:

\begin{quote}
For my part I don’t see why men who have got wives, and don’t want ‘em, shouldn’t get rid of ‘em as these gypsy fellows do their old horses.\textsuperscript{8}
\end{quote}

Galsworthy, writing about the unhappiness and misery of unsuitable marriage echoes Hardy’s feelings:

\begin{quote}
A more cruel existence either for man or woman I cannot imagine than that daily longing of their spirits when they try to live in comity, love not being there.\textsuperscript{9}
\end{quote}

Marriage without love cannot last long and as soon as the initial fervour of passion is spent the couple longs for deliverance from the shackles of lifelong conformity. Hardy appears to be of the view that ill-fated marriages should be avoided and if for some reason realization comes late to the suffering couple they should be free to consider other options. Though his views about marriage were consistent since his early writings, still it may be said, that his personal experience of mute misery consequent of decayed affection in his first marriage granted authority to his thought. The torment of ill suited marriage is the subject of numerous poems like ‘One Who

Marriage, for Hardy, was not limited to the consent and coming together of two individuals. One of his poems, ‘The forbidden Bans’ (CP, 773) very aptly portrays that marriage is not limited to a bond between a man and a woman. The approval and blessings of the elders are equally essential for the anticipated happiness. Happiness is a state of mind and requires for its continuation the subordination of other aspects that combine to make-up social life or a good home. In this poem the father of the bridegroom, unhappy with his son’s choice, forbids ‘the bans’ to stop his son from marrying. Unfortunately, The father dies soon-after. Though the son and his would be wife regret the old man’s death, they marry each other, soon after his death. They beget two sons from this union but both are, “idiot”(CP, 774), mentally retarded and full of hatred for their mother. This poem subtitled ‘A Ballad of the Eighteen Thirties’ may have the characteristics of the traditional folk-literature which indirectly endeavourers to control the conduct of the community through such creations. But at the same time even a more contemporary psycho-analytical reading would confirm that any physical union burdened by guilt, death of the father in this poem, may affect marital relationship and consequently the off-springs of such a union. Thus marriage also requires the proportionate combination of various social and personal aspects to become a happy experience. Love and human relations may have different meanings to different people. The father in ‘The Son’s Portrait’ is grieved to see his dead son’s photo sold in the market place only for the price of the photo-frame. His daughter-in-law has discarded it with other gifts and married another man after her husband died in the battle-field. The death of his son is an irrecoverable loss for the father but his
daughter-in-law re-attains a wifely rank immediately. Though Hardy advocated remarriage the satire in this poem clearly points towards the disregard ascribed to her deceased husband and the hastiness with which his gifts were disposed off, for a trifle, just in order to embrace another relationship. The father is grieved to find the photo of his dead son lying with other refuse and trash at a "lumber-shop" (CP, 823). Replying to the father’s query the shop-owner says:

"That photo? . . . A lady – I know not whence –
Sold it me, Ma’am one day,
With more. You can have it for eighteenpence:
The picture’s nothing;
It’s but for the frame you pay."

He had given it her in their hay day shine,
When she wedded him long her wooer:
And then he was sent to the front trench-line,
And fell there fighting;
And she took a new bridegroom to her.

I bought the gift she held so light,
And buried it as it were he, – (CP, 823).

The last two lines spoken by the distressed father bring out his anguish and helplessness. It also suggests that the woman could have as well buried the photo with otter gifts as a mark of peaceful committal to her husband, in stead of trading her relationship for a trifle at a scrap shop. At the same time it should not be forgotten that the poem presents the bereaved father’s point of view and not the wife’s perception. Never the less, it clearly indicates that marriage does not encompass only two individuals and that there are many more people who may be affected by the changes that may occur in the relationship of husband and wife.
‘One who Married above Him’ (CP, 700) is yet another poem that confirms the view regarding Hardy’s conviction that numerous factors are responsible for the success or failure of marriage. The psychological aspect, that discrepancy in social status of the husband and wife can disturb marital bliss, has been adequately highlighted in this poem. The husband’s perception that his wife has left him alone at home so that she can celebrate Christmas with her better-off parents springs from his sense of low self esteem. Lack of communication between the married couple results in misunderstanding for which the wife regrets throughout her life. Aspects that seem trivial and mundane, on the surface, can trigger conflicts leading to disastrous consequences:

"Tis you, I think? Back from your week’s work, Steve?"
"It is I. Back from work this Christmas Eve."
"But you seem off again? – in this night rime?"
"I am off again, and thoroughly off this time."
"What does that mean?"
"More than may first be seen. . . .

Half an hour ago I footed homeward here,
No wife found I, nor child nor maid indoors or near
She has as always gone with them to her mother’s at the farm.
Where they fare better far than here and may be meet less harm.
She’s left no fire no light has cooked me nothing to eat.
Though she had fuel and money to get some Christmas meat.
Christmas with them is grand she knows and brings good victual,
Other than how it is here, where it’s but lean and little.
But though much and rough,
If managed neat there’s enough
She and hers are too highmade for me;
But she’s whammed her once too often, she’ll see!
Farmer Bollen’s daughter should never have married a man that’s poor;
And I can stand it no longer; I am leaving; you’ll see me no more, be sure.”
“But nonsense: you’ll be back again ere bedtime, and lighting a fire,
And sizzling your supper and vexing not that her views of supper are higher.”

“Never for me”

“Well we shall see”

The skeptical neighbour and Stephen then followed their fore-designed ways,
And their steps dimmed into white silence upon the slippery glaze;
And the trees went on with their spitting amid the icicled haze.

The evening whiled and the wife with the babies came home,
But he was not there, nor all Christmas day did he come.
Christmastide went, and likewise went the New Year,

But no husband’s footfall revived.

And month after month lapsed, gray time to green and to sere,

And other new years arrived,

And the children grew up one husband and one wived –

She wept and repented,

But Stephen never relented.

And there stands the house, and the sycamore-tree and all,
With its roots forming steps for the passers who care to call,

And there are the mullioned windows, and Ham-Hill door,

Through which Steve’s wife was brought out, but which Steve
re-entered no more (CP, 700-01).

The understanding, that is essential, between the husband and wife is lacking in this
poem. It is not only the female persona’s decision to go to her parent’s dwelling for
Christmas that results in the catastrophe, but also the time she chooses for it. The
husband has come home to celebrate the New-Year’s Eve with his family. The
absence of his wife and children hurts his ego and makes him feel unwanted in his
own home. Hardy very aptly brings home the fact that happiness in marriage is
possible only through small gestures of love and care. The sanctity of the marriage
becomes insignificant if the husband and wife live as strangers. Thus, marriage is not
merely a physical union, but also a union of tastes and ideas. Emotional and spiritual
harmony between husband and wife should be the first consideration. Marriage cannot survive in the absence of love ensuing from shared experience. Matrimony based on the exclusive considerations of material prosperity and authority of the convention, to sustain and sanctify it, is the worst form of suffering and the worst kind of cruelty. Only mutual love and trust can convert marriage into a source of blessed existence.

‘At the Dinner Table’ is one such poem that hints at a happy married life. This poem which runs in six stanzas encompasses the marital bliss of fifty years. It is again in the small remembered gestures that the feeling of happiness uncoils itself. Sitting at the dinner table the female persona remembers an incident that brought her to tears in her youth. Her husband had playfully changed the normal mirror with a warping mirror to tease her. When the young woman saw her distorted image in the mirror she was terrified and tears ran into her eyes. But, when her husband responded with a laugh and disclosed his intention, to have played a prank on her, she felt relieved. fifty years hence, her image in the normal mirror resembles that distorted reflection of the past. It instantly reminded her of her husband’s good-humoured mischief. The incident that had brought tears in her eyes, fifty years back, is now the cause of mirth:

I sat at dinner in my prime,
And glimpsed my face in the sideboard-glass,
And started as if I had seen a crime,
And prayed the ghastly show might pass.

Wrenched wrinkled features met my sight,
Grinning back to me as my own;
I well-nigh fainted with affright
At finding me a haggard crone.

My husband laughed. He had slyly set
A warping mirror there, in whim
To startle me. My eyes grew wet;
I spoke not all the eve to him.

He was sorry, he said, for what he had done,
And took away the distorting glass,
Uncovering the accustomed one;
And so it ended? No, alas,

Fifty years later, when he died,
I sat me in the selfsame chair,
Thinking of him. Till, weary-eyed,
I saw the sideboard facing there;

And from its mirror looked the lean
Thing I'd become, each wrinkle and score
The image of me that I had seen
In jest there fifty years before (CP, 619).

Hardy, also feels that if a man and woman find each-other suitable for gratification initially it does not mean that they will continue to love each other endlessly, till death or ever after. The promise of loving each other till death by the bride and the groom is a ridiculous binding that may even strangle the relationship. In fact it is the post-nuptial relationship that leads a couple to a realistic knowledge of each other and removes from their eyes the rose coloured glasses of romance through which they have looked at each other in glorious light. Then they realize that their partner is not the god or goddesses imagined. But it is too late when the romantic image shatters because conventional marriage symbolizes a dead end, a decision that is irreversible. ‘A Question of Marriage’ presents a dilemma concerning the possible consequences of the unutilized options of marriage that life may have presented an
individual with. In this poem the countess regrets her decision to refuse the marriage proposal of a passionate sculptor:

“I YIELD you my whole heart, Countess,” said he;  
“Come, Dear, and be queen of my studio.”  
“No, Sculptor. You’re merely my friend,” said she:  
“We dine our artists; but marry them – no” (CP, 856).

She marries a man “[I]n rank and wealth of her own degree” (CP, 857), but at the later stage of her widowed life she gloomily broods to herself:

“Far better for me had it been to shine  
The wench of a genius such as he  
Than rust as the wife of a spouse like mine!” (CP, 857).

In yet another poems, – ‘A Beauty’s Soliloquy During Her Honeymoon’ the female protagonist during her honeymoon realizes:

“Too late too late! I did not know my fairness  
Would catch the world’s keen eye’s so!  
How the men look at me! My radiant rareness  
I deemed not they would prize so!

That I was a peach for any man’s possession  
why did not some one say  
Before I leased myself in an hour’s obsession  
To this dull mate for aye.! . . .

I was too young. I dwelt too much as duty  
If I had guessed my powers  
Where might have sailed this cargo of choice beauty  
In its unanchored hours.

Well, husband poor plain man, I have lost lives battle  
Come – let them look at me.  
O damn, don’t show in your looks that I am your chattel  
Quite so emphatically! (CP, 756-57).
An unhappy marriage, according to Hardy, is an unendurable load of misery. Hardy feels pity and sympathy for the unhappy man and woman who are compelled to live on with partners they loath. Hardy thought that it was the contemporary society that was primarily responsible. The orthodox view of marriage that maintains that its sanctity should be preserved under all circumstances is mocked in the poems portraying comic and tragic ironies of missed chances of matrimonial relations. Many short poems satirically mock the institution of marriage by depicting a very realistic picture of the licentious liberties taken by married people. 'In the Days of Crinoline' (CP, 372), 'In the Marquee' (CP, 835), 'On Martock Moor' (CP, 777), 'The Vampirine Fair' (CP, 249), are few examples that unveil the promiscuity with which couples are forced to live. It won't be wrong to infer that if marriage laws were more practical, tempered with kindness and love, human life would become more meaningful. Most characters who suffer in his poems and novels are ruined primarily due to the error of their judgment, regarding matrimonial union. Hardy thinks that there is something wrong with the societal laws that compel a man to marry a woman with whom he has drifted into intimacy due to the transitory passion of momentary weakness. It is natural that an individual might err in his choice regarding matrimony just as one may misjudge any other option available in life. But the unfortunate fact that matrimonial misjudgments are regarded worse than criminal offence, that individuals are forced to drag a dead relationship pained Hardy the most. His novels and poems powerfully present the torments of 'mis-matching':
In both his novels and his poetry Hardy's thoughts revolve frequently around the comic or tragic irony of the mischance and marital relation: he broods more than most men do, though not more than the evidence warrants, upon the penalties attaching to mismating. At the root of his polemics are his sense of the injustice of imposing a permanent bond as the penalty for passing desire and his knowledge of the numberless instances in which love has been stifled by obligation.¹⁰

Hardy's thoughts as presented in his poems are not restricted to the mere questioning of the social institution of marriage. Unlike most of his novels, Jude the Obscure, The woodlanders, The Return of the Native, which do not provide a straightforward answer to these burning questions, Hardy's poetry provides the much needed answers. Again because most of his novels were initially serialized and so he must have had to consider the public opinion and at times even the editor's wishes while providing straightforward answers to the controversial questions relating to the institution of marriage. He experienced more freedom in writing poems and so his poetry recommends very practical and undisguised solutions. In 'Rake-Hell Muses' the poetic persona very thoughtfully decides not to marry the girl with whom he shared temporary physical intimacy. The girl had conceived owing to their relationship. He thinks that the wedlock might bring unhappiness to both and so
defying the convention and unscarred by the blame and shame that would follow he concludes that:

\[ \ldots \textit{My faith would more undo her} \]
\[ \textit{Than my farewell} \] (CP, 654).

Another remedy hinted in Hardy's poems to minimize the matrimonial torture, is to accept alternative. There is no dearth of instances portraying happy marriage in Hardy's poetry. Few instances can be seen in poems like 'She Revisits Alone The Church of Her Marriage' (CP, 604), 'At Dinner Table' (CP, 619). In other words not all marriages, according to Hardy, end up in unhappiness. If husband and wife are unhappy, it is not solely because they are married. It could be because they may be ill suited to each other and lack the feeling of good fellowship which alone can help them tide over every problem.

A very humorous poem, 'The Ivy Wife' (CP, 158), brings out the destructive effects of a clinging wife through a vegetation fable. It is a light poetic fancy that tells the truth known to every lover of nature. The poem cannot be taken as an authorial statement. If the poem is taken literally, it may appear fragile to the point of absurdity. But the structure and presentation of the poem makes it irresistible. The bitterness that ensues from the poem melts into sarcastic smile as the reader oscillates between the gloom, glory and self-reproach of the speaker. And what is said of a clinging wife is equally true of even a clinging husband. And, if any couple clings to the other either physically or emotionally for too long, the relationship may suffocate for want of room. In yet another poem 'At the Altar-Rail' a village farmer is obsessed about a city lass and is emotionally so fond of her that he wants to marry her. The city lass is aware of their differences. She cannot reconcile herself to retiring to a quiet life, as the
farmer's wife. Interestingly, she expresses her inability in Biblical terms. She has eaten the fruit of knowledge and knows that there is no retreat to the imaginative paradise of conjugal relationship. Instead of clinging to a gullible wooer, she decides against marriage citing the following reason:

"Ay, she won me to ask her to be my wife -
'Twas foolish perhaps!--to forsake the ways
Of the flaring town for a farmer's life.
She agreed. And we fixed it. Now she says:
'It's sweet of you, dear, to prepare me a nest,
But a swift, short, gay life suits me best.
What I really am you have never gleaned;
I had eaten the apple ere you were weaned" (CP, 395).

Marriage, for Hardy, was not a means for regulating human passion but social norms, not merely a means of release from a sense of isolation but also a means to attain and provide happiness. For instance in 'The Dame of Athelhall', the dame flees with her lover "from a loveless bed . . . to a far off sun" (CP, 141). But her sense of guilt and marital obligation forces her return home. When she comes back, she hears her husband talking to another woman:

... "Another her Love, another my choice,
Her going is good. Our conditions mend;
In a change of mates we shall both rejoice;
I hoped that it thus might end!

"A quick divorce; she will make him hers,
And I wed mine . . .

... "Let the bygone be:
By now, no doubt, she has crossed the tide
With the man to her mind. Far happier she
In some warm vineland by his side
Than ever she was with me" (CP, 142-43).
This suggests that Hardy believed happiness to be the source of marriage. This happiness could be achieved in marriage by converting love into “warm friendship with one of kindred pursuits.” Warmth in conjugal relationship can sustain only when marriage provides happiness in a companionate state of love and not in marriage as a bondage. Thus, if marriage provides happiness, human passions are automatically regulated, but if it acts as a trap or bondage, human passions yearn to break free and divorce and in some cases even second marriage is the result.

That primal human passions cannot be regulated by marriage alone is again confirmed by the poem, ‘The War Wife of Catknoll!’ (CP, 819). In this poem a soldier confronts his wife’s death when he returns from war. She had committed suicide because in his absence she had developed illicit relations with other men. If marriage was to be a means to regulate passions, her passions should have been regulated. And Hardy, in this poem, trying to consider the situation of a wife deprived of her husband’s company, suggests that she had not ditched her husband. And, as she yielded to her primal desire after a year or so he does not wish to blame her for the same.

Hardy believes, it may be said, that the worn social ethics are the chains that bind human beings in loveless marriages. Man and woman, many a times, are forced by the beliefs deeply embedded in them and in the collective unconsciousness, to live with an unwilling partner throughout their lives. In ‘Four Footprints’ the beloved talking to her lover after having married someone else says:
"I have married him—yes; feel that ring;
'Tis a week ago that he put it on . . .
A dutiful daughter does this thing,
And resignation succeeds anon! (CP, 209).

The ring, here, symbolises bondage. One is forced to adhere to the powerful unconscious social rituals acting as law. The ring encircles the finger and guides a human being even against his or her own will. And the very next day, the newly wed couple leaves for their honey-moon. The wedding ring encircles a new relationship snapping all former relationships and passionate ties for ever:

And she whom I held is as though she were not,
For they have resumed their honeymoon tour (CP, 209).

A very good example of unconscious social beliefs compelling marriage, symbolized by the wedding clothes and ring, is presented in 'The Catching Ballet of the Wedding Clothes'. In this poem, a poor dame, on the advice of her lover, Jack, accepts gifts from another rich wooer. Jack has a plan to use the rich wooer's gifts for his own marriage with the dame. She wears the wedding gifts given to her by her wealthy suitor but marries her lover, Jack, in those clothes:

And at midnight, between her
And him she had wed,
The gentleman's figure
Arose up and said:
“My too – cruel darling,
In spite of your oaths,
You have married the man
Of the ring and the clothes!” (CP, 881).
The lady, in spite of having married her lover, is troubled by her guilt and the ruling social unconsciousness. She says:

\[
\ldots \text{"Yes, my word} \\
\text{It must be confessed o' me,} \\
\text{Jack has; but this man} \\
\text{Can claim all the rest o' me! (CP, 881).}
\]

She leaves her lover and returns to the man who had given her the wedding gifts; ring and dress. In spite of this, she is unable to forget her lover, Jack. The fact that Jack's image remains alive within her is proved in the last stanza when she, as a wealthy woman, visits Jack's grave.

For Hardy, marriage is not only union of two individuals but also the sharing of responsibilities. 'In Her Death and After' (CP, 34), when the dying wife realizes that her uncaring husband may not treat their lame daughter kindly, she calls her former lover and asks him to care for the unfortunate child, in her absence. The lover persona in the poem is devoid of glamour. He is more passive than active and appears to lack sexual magnetism. At the same time he represents those selfless lovers in Hardy's poems, 'The Burghers'(CP, 20), 'Four Foot Prints' (CP, 209), 'The Husband's View' (CP, 232), and novels, Diggory Venn, Gabriel Oak, Giles Winterborne, who are neglected by the beloved initially but remembered as most dependable aids at the time of crisis. The poem presents a retrospective recreation by the speaker protagonist and reveals his passion for the unrequited love of the beloved. Realizing that he has been called to the central drama of life, he reveals his detached anguish and excitement through the selective metaphors and prosody of the poem. The tone is detached, but his emotional torment becomes clear through the emphasis on the sense of sight, sound and atmospheric conditions that also reveal his state of mind. His emotional
involvement is restricted, to a large extent, to his sense of duty towards his former beloved. He does not blame her for not marrying him, but he does blame fate for pairing his beloved with an uncaring man:

The summons was urgent, and forth I went—
By the way of the Western Wall, so drear
On that winter night, and sought a gate —
Where one, by Fate,
Lay dying that I held dear.

And there, as I paused by her tenement,
And the trees shed on me their rime and hoar,
I thought of the man who had left her lone —
Him who made her his own
When I loved her, long before.

The rooms within had the piteous shine
That home-things wear when there's aught amiss;
From the stairway floated the rise and fall
Of an infant's call,
Whose birth had brought her to this.

Her life was the price she would pay for that whine —
For a child by the man she did not love.
"But let that rest for ever," I said,
And bent my tread
To the bedchamber up above (CP, 34).

Everything that a happy marriage should possess — wife, child, home — is present in the poem. The tragedy again springs solely from the fact that wrong individuals are paired by fate. The real husband and the father of her child is in love with another woman while the wife looks for spiritual support from her former lover. The lover's words may be called a virtuous lie but his deeds accord him the husband's position.
He acts as the true father to the woman's child agreeing to bring her up as his own. Thus, Hardy does not want people to be concerned only with the act of marriage, but with its spirit as well. The speaker protagonist, in seeking the custody of the child, also acquires the claim to his beloved, who though now dead is alive in her child. He forces the real father to give-up the child using a 'desperate stroke':

A desperate stroke discerned I then -
God pardon—or pardon not—the lie;
She had sighed that she wished (lest the child should pine
Of slights) 'twere mine,
So I said: "But the father I.

"That you thought it yours is the way of men;
But I won her troth long ere your day:
You learnt how, in dying, she summoned me?
'Twas in fealty.
— Sir, I've nothing more to say,

"Save that, if you'll hand me my little maid,
I'll take her, and rear her, and spare you toil.
Think it more than a friendly act none can;
I'm a lonely man,
While you've a large pot to boil.

"If not, and you'll put it to ball or blade -
To-night, to-morrow night, anywhen -
I'll meet you here . . . But think of it,
And in season fit
Let me hear from you again" (CP, 37).

In yet another poem, 'The Duel', Hardy portrays the lover and the husband engaged in a duel, fighting for the woman. The woman too is not a passive spectator. She is disguised as a page. She also conspires with the lover in order to kill her
husband and free herself from him forever. Hardy's musings about marital relationship and the troublesome arrangement in which couples find themselves emulate from his deep and contemplative inquiry about life and human emotions. "When a married woman who has a lover kills the husband, she really does not want to kill the husband but the situation" (Life 221). The lover kills the husband:

"All's over sweet," he cried
To the wife, thus guised; for the young page was she.
"'Tis as we hoped and said't would be.
he never guessed. . . . We mount and ride
To where our love can reign uneyed
He's clay, and we are free" (CP, 422).

Hardy did not favour violence and bloodshed for averting the social compulsions of incongruous marriage. But it cannot be denied that desperate couples can resort to extremes in order to avoid strangulation owing to incongruous marriages. A more positive solution is presented in 'The Burghers'. This poem again presents a triangle, the husband, the wife and the lover. The husband learns that his wife and her lover have planned to elope. He readies himself to catch them red handed and punish them befittingly. But as soon as he sees the young couple ready to elope, a feeling of guilt over-takes him and paralyses his arm. Instead of avenging his honour by slaughtering his wife and her lover, as planned, he becomes contemplative about man-woman relationship in an incongruous marriage:

And I may husband her, yet what am I
But licensed tyrant to this bonded pair?
Says Charity, Do as ye would be done by" . . . (CP, 21).
And next, he helps them with money, gold, jewels and all her clothing. Then he takes them to the doorway and gives them a farewell befitting only to friends.

Thus, Hardy does not question the sanctity of marriage. He sees bad marriages as one of the chief causes of human misery and advocates timely amendments. It is solely in the hands of the sufferers to do justice to themselves and their partners. Even by recommending the change of mates, he does not discard the institution of marriage altogether. Instead he wishes to suggest a renewal of interest in life by seeking to amend the condition of the doomed couple. It is just like the renewal of a contract with a more suitable partner.

Marriage may succeed or fail but the fantasy of the perfect wedding remains ubiquitous even in Hardy's poetry. But 'Long Plighted' questions the efficacy of social bond in marriage rites for two elderly lovers who have longed for each others' companionship since their very prime:

Is it worth while, dear, now,
To call for bells, and sally forth arrayed
For marriage-rites — discussed, decried, delayed
   So many years?

Is it worth while, dear, now,
To stir desire for old fond purposings,
By feints that Time still serves for dallyings,
   Though quittance nears?

Is it worth while, dear, when
The day being so far spent, so low the sun,
The undone thing will soon be as the done,
   And smiles as tears?

Is it worth while, dear, when
Our cheeks are worn, our early brown is gray;
When, meet or part we, none says yea or nay,
Or heeds, or cares?

Is it worth while, dear, since
We still can climb old Yell'ham's wooded mounds
Together, as each season steals its rounds
And disappears?

Is it worth while, dear, since
As mates in Mellstock churchyard we can lie,
Till the last crash of all things low and high
Shall end the spheres? (CP, 128).

Similarly, ‘A Woman’s Fancy’ (CP, 545) is a curious poem that equates marriage with feelings and emotions for the other person. The fact that these feelings and emotions may not be based on real shared experience elevates marriage closer to mysticism. The poem draws a parallel between two instances of man-woman relationship. The first instance narrates the story of a lonely man who died, probably, with the unfulfilled desire of marriage with his chosen beloved. The second instance narrates the misconception of the village folk who perceive an unknown woman, who is a stranger in that village as the dead man’s unfortunate beloved and treat her as the inheritor of his property. With the passage of time, the second woman, who is not the actual beloved of the dead man, learns to feel for the dead man with sympathies and emotions befitting a widow or estranged beloved. She frequents his grave, lays a stone at its head and at the time of her death even requests the villagers to bury her in his grave. The difference between the relationship of the two women to the dead man is the social consent of marriage. Marriage as an emotional relationship of psychological attachment, transcending the narrow idea of physical commingling of two individuals is clearly perceptible in the last three stanzas of the poem:
At length died too this kinless woman,
As he had died she had grown to crave;
And at her dying she besought them
To bury her in his grave.

Such said, she had paused; until she added:
"Call me by his name on the stone,
As I were, first to last, his dearest,
Not she who left him lone!"

And this they did. And so it became there
That, by the strength of a tender whim,
The stranger was she who bore his name there,
Not she who wedded him (CP, 546).

Thus, it could be said that Hardy portrays the multifaceted relationship between man and wife in its numerous possible complexities. His poems about marriage can largely be divided into three categories. First, there are poems in which marriage serves as a social bond but either one or both partners seek love outside marriage. Poems like 'In the Marquee' (CP, 835), 'The Vampire Fair' (CP, 249), 'The Martock Moor' (CP, 777), 'Imaginings' (CP, 493), 'The War-Wife of Catknoll' (CP, 819), 'The Duel' (CP, 422), 'The Bride Night Fire' (CP, 63), 'A Military Appointment' (CP, 636), 'Why Be At Pains' (CP, 402) are only a few examples among numerous poems that portray extra marital desires, fantasies, and even relationships. The infidelity in relationship becomes a natural consequence of some unfulfilled desires in such poems. Hardy does not blame his protagonists endeavouring to break free from incongruous relationships. He is more concerned with the happiness of individuals locked in a wedlock than the morbid morality of marital confinement. Hardy does not advocate licentiousness or promiscuity in conjugal relations but at the same time he does not
shy away from depicting pre-marital relationships, remarriages, divorce and even a change of partner if it appears necessary for the correction of an incongruous marriage. Second, there are poems in which marriage ensues not from love or mutual consent but as a result of chance, destiny or some arrangement, human or otherwise. ‘The Contretemps’ (CP, 551), ‘The Destined Pair’ (CP, 867), ‘I Worked No Wile To Meet You’ (CP, 574) can be cited as examples. In such poems there is a greater possibility of marriage developing into a more lasting relationship. Third, there are poems that depict marriage as a lasting relationship of love and understanding. ‘The Face At The Casement’ (CP, 237), ‘The Burghers’ (CP, 20), ‘The Elopement’ (CP, 355), ‘The Memorial Brass’ (CP, 474), ‘A Wife Comes Back’ (CP, 568), ‘The Conformers’ (CP, 213) portray ideal situations leading towards a lasting conjugal relationship that may not be limited to a social sanction of togetherness. Hardy’s treatment of the subject clearly conveys that “constructive marriage is a tribute to man’s ability to use sentiment for positive ends.”\(^{12}\) And this very liberal and rational view of marriage was commensurate with Hardy’s larger humanitarian perspective.
NOTES


