CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Nature has been a major theme in the works of the five novelists studied in this dissertation. By way of summing up it could be said that the response of these novelists to the human reality and their vision of life are intimately related to their views of nature. Besides being a background to the human drama, nature, as it is presented by them in their works, illuminates various other themes of their fictional writing, for they use nature as an implicit or explicit comment on the meaning of human life and destiny.

In a broad sense, these authors represent the two major tendencies in the Victorian attitude to nature - the romantic and the scientific. Charlotte and Emily Brontë continue the romantic tradition in their concern with a transcendent reality and in their attempt to define the spiritual destiny of man in terms of nature. Their attitude to nature is essentially romantic inasmuch as it derives from the subjective vision, but the element of duality in their perception of the reality of life adds a new dimension to their romantic vision. In the more common romantic tradition of nature in fiction, as in poetry, the possibility of a harmonious vision of life is envisaged in the naturalistic thesis of man and nature. But Charlotte and Emily Brontë see the individual
as a centre of conflict between two opposite conceptions of life. In Charlotte this conflict is related to the emotional and social life of the individual, and as she attempts to reconcile the two without relating them to a common value system, it results in an ambiguity in both her vision of life and nature. In Emily Brontë the conflict is seen at a deeper and more fundamental level, for she perceives the two opposite conceptions of reality as essentially incompatible. The awareness of the dual principle - spiritual and material - in human life is at the source of her vision of the tragic human condition. Corresponding to this duality is her response to nature - nature as energy and nature as the world of things. Thus nature in these two manifestations provides symbols of human life, and elemental forces become an expression of the spiritual struggle for liberation from the material, which may be looked upon as a fulfilment of man's spiritual destiny. The presentation of an unresolved tension in human life, exemplified by the tumult in the world of nature, makes the spiritual assume the proportions of the natural, for the two opposite elements give, by contrast, an added meaning as well as credibility to each other. Thus Emily has been able to impart a sense of realism to the spiritual life of man.

Unlike the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, Meredith and Hardy were greatly influenced by the scientific and
philosophical ideas of their age. Its impact can be seen in the absence of the idealistic metaphysic in their vision of life and nature. They were concerned with the life of man on this planet and rejected the teleological approach to nature. Similarly, the idea of First Cause in the traditional sense does not concern them, and the question of immortality outside the frame of nature is irrelevant to their view of life. The idea of a providential design in nature either does not find a place, as in Meredith and George Eliot, or it is rejected, as in the case of Hardy. Unlike the Romantics of the early nineteenth century, they do not attempt to harmonise the scientific and religious notions into a metaphysical idea of nature. In the main, they see nature as the world of science, but their attitude to nature marks a significant shift from the early Victorian scientific attitude, for they rejected the idea of the spirituality of nature as well as life. They accepted the scientific picture of nature and brought it to bear upon the vision of life in their different ways.

To George Eliot nature is the deterministic order of the universe, governed by the strictest laws of causation, which does not show any concern either with the human destiny or human morality and justice. As the scientific picture of nature clashed with her deeply held religious beliefs, she used the idea of morality to ease the tension between
her inherited moral and religious values and the world of science. In the idea of the social goal of the individual she attempted to bring together two different views of life - scientific and emotional. In the concept of the organic unity of nature she perceived the significance of the cooperative efforts of man to ameliorate the harsh conditions of life. It became the basis of her vision of the value of human life to which she related her sense of the emotional fulfilment and the higher destiny of man. The idea of the inexorable law of consequences is brought to bear upon the meaning of human life. Fate in George Eliot is this inexorable law of consequences, and her protagonists are tragic in the sense that they struggle in vain against this law. Her search for a moral basis of human conduct not in nature but in society stems from her recognition of the non-moral order of nature.

Besides affecting her vision of life, the scientific concept of nature influenced the treatment of the characters and stories in her novels. Like nature's cause, human actions are shown as having their inevitable consequences. In her novels the individuals and society are shown as human variants of the organism and environment in nature. The cause-effect relationship is always operative in her plots. Her characters are presented not as morally perfect by nature but in the process of development. Similarly, her stories
grow like a plant, all the parts of which are organically related. The treatment of nature in her novels is characterised by the absence of the emotional and sentimental response to it, for she presents nature not as a subjective experience but as an objective reality. Although she was highly sensitive to the beauties of nature, she exercised an intellectual control on her feelings. It resulted in the replacement of the romantic nostalgia by scientific realism, and the place of Romantic naturalism and religious spiritualism is taken by 'religious humanism'.

Like George Eliot, Meredith believed in the social goal of man and adopted the view that the laws of nature should be made use of in the service of humanity. But unlike her, he had a faith in a moral and spiritual order implicit in nature. Although teleology in the traditional sense is not found in Meredith, a teleological significance of his concept of nature can be seen in a special sense that he accepted the evolutionary process as the design to be taken as the basis of human goal and higher destiny. From the concept of the evolution of nature he forged a principle of harmony between man's spirit and his higher destiny and made it the basis of his naturalistic ethics. His faith in humanity originated from his faith in the development of nature and he adapted it to the idea of human progress and happiness. In the idea of civilisation as part of the evolutionary
process he reconciled the claims of both society and nature (which is another word for the feelings and desires of the individual). His idea of the evolution of reason from the senses, which he adapted from the concept of biological evolution, harmonises the humanistic and the naturalistic ideals. The romantic desire for the emancipation of man's spirit and nature and the humanistic ideal of the social happiness as the goal of the individual are reconciled in his idea of civilisation as a growth of nature, for it provides for the happiness and fulfilment of the individual life as well as the progress of society. He saw the role of reason in the progress of the individual and society and made his rational naturalism the basis of his optimistic philosophy of life. Thus he was able to retain his romantic love of nature along with the contemporary scientific ideas.

Unlike Meredith, Hardy did not have faith in the evolutionary goal of nature and life. His idea of nature is similar to George Eliot's, but there are essential differences in their attitudes. To George Eliot the organic unity of nature implied the responsibility of one organism to another, but to Hardy it meant problems of adjustment and competition and even conflict between the organisms. George Eliot's 'determinism' lays emphasis on the invariability of the sequences, but she perceived some scope for the freedom of action in the idea that the sequences could be
avoided by controlling the cause. Hardy, on the contrary, lays emphasis on the inevitable antecedents in which there is little scope for the freedom of action. George Eliot's vision of life incorporates the idea of the tragedy of nature and not necessarily of life, for she recognised the value of human will in controlling nature. But as Hardy saw little possibility of the individual will being able to affect the course of events in life, his vision of life incorporates the idea of the tragedy of life itself.

Hardy, like Meredith, adopted the idea of mind as a product of the evolutionary processes of nature but rejected the idea that it could be made the basis of human happiness. On the contrary, he related evolution to the sufferings not only of man but also of other sensitive creatures. In the disruption of the old order of rural life by industrialism Hardy saw a confirmation of the idea of struggle for survival in which conflict is the predominant feature. He made use of the idea of chance and fate as uncontrollable antecedents in human life to illuminate his tragic vision of life. As Hardy was mainly concerned with the fate of the individual, he extended the idea of the indifferent and cruel processes of nature to those of society as well. To him the purposiveness of creation is to be tested by the standard of the happiness of the individual. As he felt that the natural order was not conducive to this goal, he rejected the
Romantic idea of nature's purposiveness and also the religious idea of a providential design in nature. Thus the reaction against the Romantic concept of nature came full circle in Hardy and his pessimistic vision of life anticipated the gloom and despair which were to find a significant place in the literature of the early years of the twentieth century and even of our time.