Abstract:

The complicated scientific discourse circulating around the theory of evolution infiltrated all networks of Victorian cultural consciousness, from the disciplines of natural science and the emerging social sciences to the arts. Thomas Hardy entered the discourse on evolution by looking at the various complicated tenets of the theory in his novels: by illustrating the complex elements that contribute to biological heredity to behavioral adaptability to changing environmental and social conditions. The use of evolutionary elements in Hardy’s novels serves as a way for scientific thought to enter or (in some instances) to reinforce the place of scientific thinking in the Victorian cultural consciousness. In this way, Hardy, like the Victorian natural scientists, was grappling with the ramifications (socially, intellectually, and culturally) that the theory of evolution posed and its place in the network of Victorian society. This study seeks to investigate the extent to which evolutionary thought permeated Victorian cultural consciousness and the purpose of Hardy illustrating the tenets of evolutionary theory in his novel *A Pair of Blue Eyes*.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy, Charles Darwin, natural science, evolution, inheritable traits, *A Pair of Blue Eyes*

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“She was brought up by a very heathen father and mother, who never sent her to church or school, and it shows how the sins of the parents are visited upon the children…” (FFMC 69). Just as the fieldworkers of Bathsheba Everdene’s farm are anxious about the hereditary implications of Cain Bell’s name and the behavioral implications associated with it, Thomas Hardy’s preoccupation with inheritable biological traits are more clearly illustrated in the dichotomy of Elfride Swancourt and her grandmother, Elfride Kingsmore, in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. Hardy’s illustration of the clear relation between Effride and her grandmother not only looks at the problem of inheritable traits of behavior, but is a way for Hardy to enter the complicated late nineteenth-century evolutionary discourse. As John Glendening notes, by the end of the nineteenth century, Darwinian theory had infiltrated the cultural consciousness to the point that its ramifications were contemplated by cultural theorists and Victorian novelists alike. He writes that

While Glendening notes that Victorian novelists and sociologists were quick to respond to “the new Darwinism” that was interested in the social ramifications of Darwin’s theory, he attempts to locate the literariness of Darwin’s findings on the “Beagle” to a common ground between Victorian novelists and Darwin’s own writings (7-8). Hardy’s use of evolutionary and Darwinian thinking in his novels, therefore, is more than a mere representation of Darwinism in literature: it is a way of Hardy to enter the complicated discourse on evolutionary theory. This project seeks to investigate the complicated evolutionary problems found in Hardy’s *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and show that Hardy’s novel is not merely a representation of Darwinian theory, but a way to understand the complexity of Darwin’s theory of evolution within the Victorian debates on evolution.

Literary Darwinists John Glendening and Joseph Carroll, turn to Hardy’s novels (particularly *Tess*) to investigate the rise of Victorian literary Darwinism. However, where Glendening and Carroll are quick to notice the social Darwinism inherent in literary Darwinism, their work dismisses the true scientific nature of Darwin’s findings. Carroll argues that literary Darwinism, as a practice, is “…grounded in Darwinian conceptions of human nature;” a nature that is “…the foundation of human culture” (vii). This human nature that shapes and molds the thinking and output of a specific culture, according to both Carroll and Glendening, is the “…subject of literature” (Carroll vii). Thus it is that Darwinian theories entered the cultural consciousness through its representation in literature. This inquiry intends to build on Carroll and Glendening’s assertions that “[l]iterary involvement with evolution reached its high point around the turn of the century …[as authors began to] incorporate it [Darwinian thought] into novels far more extensively than previous writers had done and to anticipate a considerable degree of interest and understanding” (Glendening 15). By looking at the role of behavioral inheritance in Hardy’s *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, I seek to investigate Hardy’s use of evolutionary
thinking as a way to enter and expand on the evolutionary discourse on behavioral heredity.

Literary scholars have investigated the use of evolutionary imagery and language in Hardy’s works. Paul Ward turns to *A Pair of Blue Eyes* to investigate Hardy’s Darwinian impulse. He claims that “[l]iterature has the great advantage of being able to absorb and interpret the implications of scientific discovery in a fully human context” (47). However, while Ward attempts to make a connection between Darwin’s *Descent of Man* and Hardy’s *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, his argument is driven so much by authorial intent that he fails to make a connection between Darwinian ideology and Hardy’s novel. This project seeks to reconcile the Darwinian gaps in Ward’s study and bridge his close reading of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* with one of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*. Similar to Ward, Tess O’Toole looks at the “…operation of genealogy [that] is perceptible through the instances of continuity and variation that mark the relationship of ancestor to descendant, simultaneously linking the two and distinguishing them” (207). O’Toole’s argument is unique in her way of positioning literary Darwinism within the scientific discourse of inheritable traits in Hardy’s *The Well-Beloved*. By drawing on O’Toole’s scientific rhetoric and looking at Darwin’s text in the larger context of inheritability and behavior, the goal of this study is to investigate Hardy’s illustration of “inheritable sin” in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* as a way of entering the late-Victorian Darwinian discourse on the complexity of the Darwinian theories and study what O’Toole argues is “[t]he operation of genealogy” in Hardy’s narrative (207).

By the time *A Pair of Blue Eyes* was published in 1873, scientific rhetoric had entered the novel to the extent that Victorian novelists were relying on it to adequately portray a new level of reality. Just as Victorian novelists turned to the rhetoric of science in order to create a new sense of reality, Victorian scientists turned to literary devices to provide the reading public with new ways of understanding complex scientific ideas. This popularization of science allowed the masses to enter the scientific discourse. Martin Fichman writes that “[l]arge and small public lectures and scientific demonstrations, textbooks, atlases, dozens of popular magazines and pamphlets, as well as science fiction provided the Victorian public with ample opportunity to keep abreast of scientific discoveries and debates” (43). Thus, according to Fichman, science became a Victorian cultural phenomenon. Philip Appleman furthers Fichman’s assertion. He writes that “[b]ecause it was so persuasive, *evolution* became a watchword for the late Victorians. By the end of the nineteenth century hardly any field of thought remained unchanged by the exciting

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1 Laura Otis argues that nineteenth-century scientists relied on a variety of literary devices in order to explain their findings to the reading public. Likewise, Otis claims that Victorian novelists adapted scientific rhetoric in order to create a more realistic narrative world. She writes that it would be inaccurate…to depict nineteenth-century literature as a realm in which imagination had comparatively free reign. Novelists of the period were greatly concerned with facts. Many, like George Eliot, performed careful research in order to make their works not just credible but historically accurate. (xxiii)

2 Otis writes that “[t]o win the confidence of educated readers, nineteenth-century scientists made frequent references to fiction and poetry of the day and to that of earlier generations” (xix). Thus, in order to illustrate their complex findings, scientists were turning to literary devices to explain their observations and findings.
new concept” (8). Taking Appleman’s claim further, Fichman marks the late nineteenth century as a change in socio-cultural attitudes towards Darwinism. He writes that “…in the late Victorian period, the situation with respect to the mechanism of inheritance was still in flux, and there was ample room for speculations about the mechanism of evolutionary change…” (55). This preoccupation with the evolutionary “mechanism” was driven by the complexity of evolutionary theory regarding inheritability of adaptable characteristic traits.

For Darwin, inheritable traits dictate which species survives and thrives through adaptable characteristics passed from one generation to the next. He writes that

[n]o breeder doubts how strong is the tendency to inheritance: like produces like is his fundamental belief…When a deviation appears not unfrequently…we cannot tell whether it may not be due to the same original cause acting on both; but when amongst individuals, apparently exposed to the same conditions, any very rare deviation, due to some extraordinary combination of circumstances, appears in the parent…and it reappears in the child, the mere doctrine of chance almost compels us to attribute its reappearance to inheritance. (99)

Thus, divergence of specific characteristics brought upon through living conditions (or in a truly Lamarckian language, “environmental changes”) become inheritable traits that either contribute to the species’ survival or bring about its downfall. Darwin furthers this assertion by illustrating wolves’ inherited knowledge of hunting skills. He writes that “…[the] innate tendency [for a wolf] to pursue certain kinds of prey…is known to be inherited…any slight innate change of habit or of structure [that] benefited an individual wolf…would…[give it] the best chance of surviving and of leaving offspring” (117). In order to survive, a species must adapt to any changing environmental conditions and pass these new traits to their offspring. These new traits and forms of behavior can be seen in the ability of the Swancourts to adapt to their living conditions in the remote village of Endelstow, separated from traditional London Society. Through the guise of scientific observation, Hardy’s A Pair of Blue Eyes sets up a naturalistic style, as the reader expects a “study” of character types within given “environmental” conditions.

In a truly naturalistic-observational style, Hardy opens A Pair of Blue Eyes in a way that is reminiscent of Darwin’s opening to The Origin of Species. Where Darwin writes that “[w]hen on board H.M.S. ‘Beagle,’ as a naturalist, I was much struck with certain facts…[that] seemed to me to throw some light on the origin of the species—that mystery of mysteries, as it has been called by one of our greatest philosophers” (95); Hardy furthers his observational musings. He writes that

[i]f the reader has taken the trouble to look down the list [of characters] with anything like curiosity, and given a minute of his time to the idle imagination

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3 In his Zoological Philosophy, Lamarck argues that “…the influence of the environment as a matter of fact is in all times and places operative on living bodies; but what makes this influence difficult to perceive is that its effects only become perceptible or recognisable [sic] (especially in animals) after a long period of time” (241). This idea suggests that, as Ernst Mayr claims, is a pre-Darwinian assertion that environmental effects on biological characteristics contribute to Darwinian “deviations” that then become inheritable traits after time.
of why such a company was ever brought together by Fate, Chance, Law, or Providence, it promises well. He will perceive that three or four of them are capable characters, whose emotional experiences may deserve some record. (7, emphasis added)

For Hardy, the role of A Pair of Blue Eyes is a naturalistic narrative: a way to illustrate, imaginatively, the ability of “people” to adapt to their surroundings and circumstances and the role of behavioral inheritability in this adaptational narrative of survival.

Left alone with her father in the rectory, Elfride Swancourt attempts to adapt her sense of feminine gentility to the masculine surroundings of the barren countryside. When we first meet Elfride, she is hastily preparing to receive Stephen Smith from London. Her biggest concern is the propriety of having to sit alone with the male stranger. She protests to her father, asking “‘[w]hat, sit there all the time with a stranger, just as if I knew him, and not anybody to introduce us?’” (10). Her father’s banal response is indicative of the utilitarian nature of provincial behavior. This portrait of Elfride Swancourt seems out of place in the barrenness of provincial Endelstow. However, later in the novel, we see Elfride’s new “adaptability” as she inverts the gender norms of gentility to suit the surroundings of Endelstow. The first glimpse of Elfride’s inverted adaptability is upon Stephen’s return to Endelstow and the beginning of their courtship. As Stephen and Elfride play a game of chess, we see Elfride’s unique position as Stephen’s intellectual superior. Hardy writes that “Elfride soon perceived that her opponent was but a learner. She next noticed that he had a very odd way of handling the pieces when castling or taking a man” (51). To Elfride, Stephen’s way of handling and playing chess is indicative of his inability to think logically, and therefore, decreases his ability to adapt to changing environments. In a Darwinian sense, Stephen’s inability to adapt indicates that he is missing an integral factor in the struggle for his line to continue. The day after their chess game, Stephen and Elfride take to horseback, where we see another of Elfride’s abilities to adapt to the requirements of provincial life. As the group prepares to embark on horseback, Mr. Swancourt tells Stephen that “’[i]t is almost too long a distance for you to walk. Elfride can trot down on her pony, and you shall have my old nag…” (55). When Stephen becomes anxious at having to go on horseback, Elfride chides him with “‘Ah, you don’t ride, Mr. Smith?’” (55). With this new revelation, Mr. Swancourt announces the new plan, where we see Elfride’s physical superiority. The rector states that “’Now, I recommend this plan: let Elfride ride on horseback, and you, Mr. Smith, walk beside her” (56). In this ability to mediate the boundaries of feminine gentility and masculine roughness of provincial life (whether leading Stephen Smith to the cliff or saving Henry Knight from dangling on the cliff), Hardy shows that Elfride’s ability to adapt to her environmental surroundings and circumstances gives her the ability,

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4 As Henry Knight invites Elfride to play chess in Volume II, Elfride remarks that chess is “…my favourite [sic] scientific game…” (167).

5 In Descent of Man, Darwin argues that man, whose intellect makes him “…the most dominant animal that has ever appeared on this earth” should use this intellect in order to survive (200). Darwin writes that man “…has invented and is able to use various weapons, tools, traps, &c. with which he defends himself, kills or catches prey, and otherwise obtains food” (201).
according to Darwin, to survive. However, this ability to adapt becomes too much for Elfride, as one can become too adaptable.

The characteristics that allow Elfride to adapt to her environment and circumstances prove her adaptable; yet her very adaptability shows that she may be too adaptable, and therefore, too evolved. While Elfride shows off her physical and intellectual superiority to Stephen Smith, her position with Henry Knight is the total opposite. When Knight visits the Swancourts, the two engage in a game of chess. Mr. Swancourt cheers Elfride on, telling her to “‘[c]hallenge him…She plays very well for a lady, Mr. Knight’” (167). As the game begins, we find Elfride’s position altered: she has met her intellectual match in Knight. Hardy writes that

Knight, by one of those inexcusable oversights which will sometimes afflict the best of players, placed his rook in the arms of one of her pawns. It was her first advantage. She looked triumphant – even ruthless…She immediately took up the unfortunate rook and the contest proceeded, Elfride having now rather the better of the game. Then he won the exchange, regained his position, and began to press her hard. Elfride grew flurried, and placed her queen on his remaining rook’s file. (168)

As Knight wins round after round of chess, we see Elfride physically regress. She becomes ill, almost as a conquered animal. Her thirst for competition, for survival, proves too much for her. Hardy writes that “Mrs. Swancourt opened the door. Elfride was lying full-dressed on the bed, her face hot and red, her arms thrown abroad. At intervals of a minute she tossed restlessly from side to side, and indistinctly moaned words used in the game of chess” (172-173). This Elfride Swancourt is too adaptable; therefore, she begins to slide on the slope of devolution in an illustration that adaptability, as an essential tenet of Darwinism, is just as complex as the theory itself. Hardy’s example of the contradictory nature of adaptability and evolution is similar to Doren Recker’s claim that Darwinism was a complex theory and it was difficult to discern any universal principles. He writes that practitioners of Darwinism were pluralistic and relied on non-Darwinian tenets in order to support their theories: that it was difficult to separate the “…boundaries [that] separated the early Darwinians from the non-Darwinians” (460). Thus, though Elfride has the ability to adapt to her environmental surroundings, essentially guaranteeing her survival, the black cloud that Hardy paints over her life is her “too-adaptability” and the “inherited sin” of the behavior of her namesake, Elfride Kingsmore. In this narrative way, Hardy shows the complexity of evolutionary adaptability and behavioral heredity.

The very same characteristic traits that allow Elfride Swancourt to successfully adapt to her surroundings at Endelstow are the very behavioral characteristics that contribute to her downfall. One could argue that Elfride Swancourt is the over-evolved species of Elfride Kingsmore: though adaptable, the adverse behavioral characteristics inherited from her grandmother contradict Elfride’s ability to adapt to her surroundings. Darwin writes that

…the species descended from a common parent, together with their retention by inheritance of some characters in common, we can understand the excessively complex and radiating affinities by which all the members of the same family or higher group are connected together. For the common parent
The Victorian

of a whole family of species…will have transmitted some of its characters, modified in various ways and degrees, to all… (154)

For Hardy, these inheritable behaviors, when unmodified, yet passed on to following generations, prove deadly. Though Darwin writes of inheritable behavioral characteristics, he laid the groundwork for those that followed him in the field of genetics to expand on his ideas of heritability and adaptable behaviors.

The inheritability of behavior, for Darwin, dictates the ability of a species to survive. In a fusion of Darwinian characteristic traits of adaptability and Mendelian heritability with contemporary genetics, William Clark and Michael Grunstein argue that “…behavior is defined largely by whatever it is that an animal does to stay alive and reproduce” (24). For Clark and Grunstein these behavioral adaptations are inherited through a form of sexual selection (30). Similarly, in a search for the location of the genes that influence behavioral inheritance, Jonathan Flint, et. al. claim “…the genes that cause behavior, in a linear pathway from genetic variant, cellular components, neural circuitry to behavior…genes cause our behavior to change” (205). Thus, while Darwin and Lamarck suggest that environmental influences affect behavior, which is passed from one generation to another in the struggle for a species to survive, the genes of inheritability dictate the types of behavioral traits that are passed through generational bloodlines.

Behavioral inheritance, dictated through Darwinian adaptability, passed from one generation to the next, is the biological function of evolution. Clark and Grunstein write that “[t]he complete collection of all the genes an animal has is referred to as that animal’s genome. This same gene collection is present in all other members of the same species; they all have the same genome. But some of the genes in the communally shared genome may exist in several different forms within the species” (32). While Clark and Grunstein are quick to note the role of genetic structures in the transmission of inheritable traits, they also discuss the role of “modifications” to the genetic structure that result in Darwinian deviations of appearance and behavior that are passed from one generation to the next. Flint, et. al. argue that while genes are the basic building blocks of inheritable traits, they work in tandem with environmental and circumstantial conditions. They write that “…modest alterations in…genes, in combination with other similarly altered genes, can produce very specific behavioral effects” (209). Therefore genetics and environmental changes influence inherited behavioral characteristics. According to Clark and Grunstein, behavioral traits are

6 In a truly naturalistic study, Clark and Grunstein trace the presence of behavioral characteristics through simple-cell organisms, in particular, the paramecia and earthworm in a way that is reminiscent of both Darwin and Mendel. While Clark and Grunstein rely on Darwinian and Mendelian observational science, they place their findings within the contemporary field of genetics, allowing an expansion on the essential tenets of Darwin and Mendel.

7 Mark Johnson writes that “[a]t the core of the ‘evo-devo’ model of brain evolution…is different species’ overall rate of brain development. This indicates that the long time span of brain development in humans is related to both the relative size of the human brain structure and the greatly increased scope for postnatal environmental influence” (310-311). According to Johnson, the human brain has naturally evolved to the point that it has inherited the behavioral characteristics that have “hard-wired” it for survival.
located and regulated along the nervous system and rooted in the brain. Behavior, then, is subliminal and unconscious. As behavior becomes modified due to changing environmental conditions, genetic structures alter, passing the modified behaviors on to following generations. Flint, et. al. writes that “…the pleiotropic and network attributes of genes have consequences of how genetic variation can produce behavioral variation. Each allele of a gene can potentially contribute in several ways to a phenotype. These contributions…depend on the partners with which that gene interacts. Variation can thus occur in a restricted portion of a gene’s range of activities…” (210). These genetic traits of behavior are rooted in the DNA that is the “brain-center” of genes (Clark and Grunstein 79). Clark and Grunstein argue that “[it] turns out that actual genes are scattered rather widely throughout the genome, separated by vast stretches of DNA that do not code for anything…What does all of this extra DNA do? Some of it surely represents genes we once used, far back in evolutionary time, and no longer need” (81). For Clark and Grunstein, rudimentary traits remain a part of the genome that is passed on through the generations of the species. These are the types of behavioral “problems” of heredity that Hardy investigates in the narrative of A Pair of Blue Eyes.

The preoccupation with familial lineage and its hereditary implications enters Hardy’s A Pair of Blue Eyes very early as Mr. Swancourt questions Stephen Smith about his family background upon coming to the rectory. Hardy writes that “‘[b]y the way,’ said Mr. Swancourt…’you said your whole name was Stephen Fitzmaurice, and that your grandfather came originally from Caxbury. Since I have been speaking, it has occurred to me that I know something of you. You belong to a well-known ancient country family—not ordinary Smiths in the least’” (20). The Rector’s obsession with family history allows him to place Stephen Smith not only within British historical context, but to assess Stephen Smith’s “stock” in a way that is reminiscent of the hereditary implications of Cain Bell’s name in Far From the Madding Crowd. When Stephen confesses his true lineage to Elfride, he acknowledges the hereditary “problems” of familial lineage and genealogy. He confesses to her about his anxiety of “…your father’s belief in my ‘blue blood,’ which is still prevalent in his mind. The first night I came, he insisted upon proving my descent from one of the most ancient west-county families, on account of my second Christian name; when the truth is, it was given me because my grandfather was assistant gardener in the Fitzmaurice-Smith family for thirty years.’ (77)

For Hardy, family lineage and heredity dictates not only class and nobility, but characteristic traits. By looking at Stephen Smith’s family history, Mr. Swancourt is not only interested in Smith’s class/social status, but also the characteristic traits that

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8 Clark and Grunstein write that “…the use of Na+ and K+ pumps and channels to polarize and depolarize a cell membrane in response to Ca++ signals…[is found] in the human brain and throughout the nervous system to generate what we call a ‘nerve impulse’…This is the basis of all human behavior…” (37-38).

9 In The Descent of Man Darwin writes that “[t]he chief agents in causing organs to become rudimentary seem to have been disuse at that period of life when the organ is chiefly used…and also inheritance to a corresponding period of life.
have permeated Smith’s family line. We see this even more clearly in Hardy’s
dichotomy between Elfride Swancourt and Elfride Luxellian.

Elfride Swancourt has every adaptable characteristic that lends her
Darwinistically fit for survival. However, as Hardy complicates the Darwinian
problems of behavioral inheritance, we see that Elfride Swancourt, by inheriting the
rudimentary behavioral traits of her grandmother, Elfride Kingsmore, is doomed. As
John Smith and his helper Simeon work on the expansion of the Luxellian crypt, they
talk about the peculiarities of Lady Elfride’s behavior. Hardy writes “Simeon, I
suppose you can mind poor Lady Elfride, and how she ran away with the actor?”
(250). The conversation continues as Simeon and John discuss the details of Elfride’s
escapades. Simeon tells of how Lady Elfride
‘…fell in love with this young man of hers, and their banns were asked in
some church in London; and the old lord her father actually heard ‘em asked
the three times, and didn’t notice her name, being gabbled on wi’ a host of
others. When she had married she told her father, and ‘a fled into a
monstrous rage, and said she shouldn’ hae a farthing. Lady Elfride said she
didn’t think of wishing it; if he’d forgie her ‘twas all she asked, and as for
aliving, she was content to play plays with her husband…Well, the poor thing
died at her first gossiping, and her husband – who was as tender-hearted a man
as ever eat meat, and would have died for her – went wild in his mind, and
broke his heart…they were buried the same day – father and mother…” (251)
Though Hardy goes on to give the details of Elfride Luxellian in order to map out her
lineage to Elfride Swancourt, he writes that “Ladie Elfride and young Miss that’s
now alive now. The same hair and eyes: but Miss Elfride’s mother was darker a good
deal” (251). Hardy is drawing the direct line between the two Elfrides: showing that
Elfride Swancourt’s physical resemblance to her grandmother predisposes her to the
same behavioral characteristics of her namesake. Elfride Swancourt’s impulsivity is
therefore not surprising, whether running away to London with Stephen Smith or
leading Henry Knight onto the precipice of Endelstow Tower. These behavioral
traits that Elfride inherits from her grandmother undermine her ability to adequately
adapt to her environment and survive as once again the sins of the “grandmother” are
visited upon her lineage. Perhaps William Worm puts it best: “…if the Lord’s
anointment had descended upon women instead of men, Miss Elfride would be Lord
Luxellian – Lady, I mane” (251-252). Thus, though Elfride Swancourt and Lady
Elfride are removed by a generation, they share the same behavioral genes, passed
from one “parent” to her “offspring.”

While John Smith and his workers discuss the “rumors” of Elfride
Kingsmore’s scandals, Elfride Swancourt confronts the hereditary implications drawn
from her grandmother. Stephen Smith and Henry Knight turn to Elfrie’s hereditary
lineage as they tour the Luxellian crypt. In a way that is reminiscent of the Rector’s
questions to Smith on his family lineage, Smith says “…That’s Lady Elfride Kingsmore
– born Luxellian, and that is Arthur, her husband. I have heard my father say that they

10 Clark and Grunstein mark that “[a] number of studies have suggested that impulsive behavior in
humans is highly heritable, and that genetics is at least as important a factor as environment in
determining whether a person is impulsive” (147).
– he – ran away with her, and married her against the wish of her parents”” (261). Henry Knight furthers the hereditary implications of Elfride’s biological relations. He says that “I imagine this to be where you got your Christian name, Miss Swancourt…I think you told me it was three or four generations ago that your family branched off from the Luxellians?” (261). As Elfride, anxious of her two lovers meeting and therefore learning of her “secret,” responds to the implications, it is clear that she recognizes the similarities between her current situation and the scandals of her grandmother. Elfride responds to Knight, saying that

‘[s]he was my grandmother’…Elfride had then the conscience-stricken look of Guido’s Magdalen, rendered upon a more childlike form. She kept her face partially away from Knight and Stephen, and set her eyes upon the sky visible outside, as if her salvation depended upon quickly reaching it…’Can one be pardoned, and retain the offence?’ said Elfride’s heart then. (261)

Elfride’s manner shows that she is aware of her current situation. However, the illustration of Elfride’s anxiety, placed side by side with the conversation about Lady Elfride, draw direct correlations between Elfride Swancourt’s questionable circumstances and Lady Elfride’s previous behavioral escapades, setting up the hereditary implications regarding the complexities of behavioral inheritance.

Though Hardy’s Elfride Swancourt is a quintessential illustration of Darwinian adaptability, capable of adapting and surviving in changing environmental conditions and circumstances, the behavioral characteristics that she inherited from her grandmother, Elfride Kingsmore, undermine her ability to survive. Darwin argues that “…the more diversified the descendants from any one species become in structure, constitution, and habits, by so much will they be better enabled to seize on many and widely diversified places in the polity of nature, and so be enabled to increase in numbers” (125). In Darwin’s ideal world, species develop behavioral modifications due to changing environmental conditions, which are passed from one generation to the next; however, Hardy’s Elfride Swancourt maintains the behaviors of her namesake, therefore hindering her ability to adapt and essentially “dooming” her. Thus, Hardy is complicating the already-complicated theory of evolution by proving that while Elfride Swancourt has all the essential tenets of survival, her over-adaptation and the inherited behavioral characteristics of her grandmother limit her ability to survive. This allows Hardy, as Joseph Carroll and John Glendening argue to enter the complicated Darwinian discourse of the late nineteenth century.
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