Title of Paper: **Survival and the Tragic Ending of Thomas Hardy’s The Woodlanders**

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to explore what the conclusion of The Woodlanders means in for the reader. While it is not surprising that the ending is “tragic,” I would like to think about what Hardy intended the reader walk away with at the end of the novel when the immoral, villain like and unfaithful Fitzpiers reunites with Grace. At the end of the novel, the reader has seen Grace be removed from her home, educated, and then replanted in her home. Her identity is an issue, as she does not know how to live harmoniously with the people and place of Hintock as a character like Giles does. The reader watches Grace’s lack of certainty about herself, yet her ability to be compassionate and open to other females in the novel such as Sukie and Felice, even though these women were intimately involved with her husband. Hardy works to show readers how the characters are constructed by their environment and how they must struggle to survive. This is where the importance of the environment, of place, surroundings and space become vital to understanding the characters and the sequence of events that happens to them. As in earlier novels of the Victorian period, the complexity of characters and their motivations are not the central part of the reading experience. Altruism and egoism no longer become the center of the question of survival. Rather the characters become animal like in a grotesque manner where they must work to see and understand their surroundings.

Keywords: Thomas Hardy, The Woodlanders, Victorian, Environment, Education, Grotesque

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The tragic ending of Thomas Hardy’s *The Woodlanders* (1886) is fundamental to understanding questions of survival, environment and morality in relation to the characters of Grace Melbury and Edred Fitzpiers. It is difficult to understand what Hardy wanted his readers to walk away with from the concluding scenes of the novel specifically when the immoral, villain, unfaithful Fitzpiers, is able to reunite with Grace. I will explore Grace and Fitzpiers’ characters and actions, although characters in the novel lack complexity making it a challenge to understand their motives. By the lack of complexity, Hardy is able to show readers how characters are constructed by their environment and how they must struggle to survive, even if it means to do so tragically as the ending suggests.

Environment and place become vital to understanding the characters and the sequence of events that happen to them. Jonathan Bates argues that Hardy’s world in *The Woodlanders* represents a longing for an “imagined better life” before modern developments interfere with the simplicity of life (541). Bates argues that Hardy values a world, which has vanished; a world where people live in tune with nature in contrast to the noisy world modernity creates. Contrary to what many readers and critics might believe, Hintock is not a place “stuck” in the past and full of nostalgia for characters or readers. I argue that Hardy uses the natural space of Hintock in order to show that the same issues often found in urban areas also occur in the natural world of the woods. For Hardy, survival is universal. The land of Hintock and its community is constantly demonstrating itself to be what Megan Ward calls “cultivated.” Everything including characters and the physical land of Hintock is
shifting. Some characters have the ability to survive such change while others must
die off.

While Bates argues that readers and Hardy sense a feeling of nostalgia, Ward
argues that *The Woodlanders* denies a “nostalgic unified sense of nature” (866). When
Grace returns to her home, she and her “original nature” clash, as there is no originary
nature to return to meaning even Hintock is cultivated. Nature, Ward argues, is
always being cultivated. For Bates, nature is permanent in *The Woodlanders*. Nature
is planted and transplanted as Grace is placed and displaced. The novel shows the
digging and planting of nature reflecting the individual being planted and transplanted
in culture seeking improvement while expecting it to “seem natural” (Ward 867). The
effects of Grace’s cultivation creates a disconnect between Winterborne and Grace,
yet all of these effects for Ward are not permanent. There is always movement. The
lack of permanence is depicted in the ending where after leaving the doctor for
Winterborne, Grace goes back to Fitzpiers. Even though she promises to be by
Winterborne’s grave and be faithful to him, she ultimately changes her mind. She is
“cultivated,” but not morally improved.

Instead of understanding characters’ motives as egoistic or altruistic, Hardy
focuses on what and where characters must work to see in order to become aware of
their surroundings in relation to the self. Edred Fitzpiers is able to see and also act on
what he sees. Other characters either see and do not act or are completely unable to
see. For example, Giles Winterborne often sees, but is passive. Or Grace’s father does
not recognize issues in Fitzpiers’ character nor what it means that his daughter has
become educated. For Grace’s father, Grace must marry someone “better,” because
she is more refined than others in Hintock. Those characters who are aware of their surroundings and know how to act on what they see, are able to survive, while those who are not able to see or fully recognize the changes they must go through to survive, end up weak and die off from Hintock. Winterborne perfectly contrasts Fitzpiers. Throughout the novel, Winterborne seems strong, connected to nature, the land and is altruistic in his actions. When he hides Grace in his home, he stays outside in the rain in order to protect her honor and ultimately dies. Even though Winterborne is an altruistic character and has the best interest for Grace because he loves her, he is not able to survive and be with Grace. His unification with Grace would be the satisfying and happy ending. Instead, Fitzpiers, an outsider of Hintock, a medical man who is not connected to nature and the land and also a self-centered man, is able to survive. As readers, we must understand why in order to fully recognize what Hardy’s message is for his readers.

Action becomes a focus of the narrative. Some characters see and are active while others see and are passive. Hardy introduces different characters and perspectives to the landscape of Hintock. Some differing perspectives are the locals Marty South or Giles Winterborne who are connected to the land. Other perspectives are the outsiders such as Edred Fitzpiers, Felice Charmond or Grace Melbury. By including the various viewpoints, readers are able to understand how certain attributes are necessary to survive, one of the most vital being action. Hardy was interested in seeing and perspective in other works. For his poem, “In a Eweleasze near Weatherbury,” Thomas Hardy included an illustration of oversized spectacles that sit on a pastoral scene including hills, fields, trees and sheep. The black outline of the
overwhelmingly large frames of the spectacles sits on the fields dominating the scene as seen in the figure below.

In relation to *The Woodlanders*, the large spectacles emphasize *seeing* and the different perspectives that become integral to the novel. Yet, in *The Woodlanders* the difference between local knowledge and outsider knowledge becomes part of who survives and who is able to act on what they see.

In addition to the seeing that occurs in the novel, Hardy is also making the reader aware of what the reader sees. Eve Sorum highlights the reader of *The Woodlanders* in her article “Hardy’s Geography of Narrative Empathy.” She argues that Hardy, “unsettles the belief in an uncomplicated shared perspective” (180). Readers are not only seeing something simply from a character’s viewpoint but also looking through their specific lenses. An example would be Fitzpiers in relation to Sukie, Felice Charmond and Grace who are all experiencing life in relation to the doctor. Readers are able to see what differing experiences entail and mean. Tim Dolin also discusses seeing in relation to Grace. He argues that *The Woodlanders* questions
what belonging means in Wessex. Dolin argues that the readers, or what he calls the “tourists” of the novel, see themselves as Grace Melbury in her struggle to understand her surroundings in relation to her new self. Dolin argues that if readers approach Hardy in this way, they see Grace “unmaking the self-evidence of the scenic Wessex: to notice it as she does, for the first time, in an extreme close-up that ‘disproportions’ and ‘denaturalizes it’” (24). In this reading experience, readers are alert and aware to look resulting in a truer way of seeing in the little things (Dolin 23). The reader is not a free moving figure who does not leave an imprint on the narrative. Instead the reader is also participating in it. The reader must come to a conclusion about the ending of *The Woodlanders* after they have experienced the differing perspectives within the novel.

Both Grace Melbury and Edred Fitzpiers are outsiders of Hintock. While Grace was raised in Hintock in her father’s home and spent her childhood with Winterborne, her father sent her away to become educated in order to better Grace for her marriage to Winterborne. When she arrives back to Hintock, Grace is different and changed, which makes it difficult for her to readjust to her home and also understand her own identity in relation to Hintock. Winterborne picks Grace up when she returns home. When he *sees* her, he is not able to move towards her or *act* upon it, even though he is anxious and excited for the return of his future wife:

*She followed his gaze and saw walking across to him a flexible young creature in whom she perceived the features of her she had known as Miss Grace Melbury, but now looking glorified and refined to much above her former level. Winterborne, being fixed to the spot by his*
appletree, could not advance to meet her: he held out his spare hand
with his hat in it, and with some embarrassment beheld her coming on
tip-toe through the mud to the middle of the square where he stood.
(Hardy 34)

In this scene, as in many others, Hardy uses the words, “gaze . . . saw . . . looking.”

Winterborne is full of excitement to see Grace as he loves her. In this moment, he is
dressed, “well-attired and well-mannered,” but looks “rough” next to the new and
refined Grace. Even though Winterborne wants to be with Grace, he is not able to act
upon those feelings. Instead, he is “fixed” by an appletree as if he himself were rooted
to the ground. He is fixed and unable to advance to meet her, rather embarrassingly he
gives his hand to her as Grace trudges though the mud towards him.

This scene when Grace returns reveals the divide between Winterborne and
Grace. They both love each other because of their connection in the past, but are
unable to fully connect on any other level. Their conversations pause during the ride
back to Melbury’s home. The conversations they do have clearly depict the changes
and disconnect Grace experiences in relation to her home. Grace looks at the orchards
and Winterborne asks excitedly, “Why -- you are looking at John-apple-trees! You
know bittersweets – you used to, well enough?” (Hardy 38). Winterborne attempts to
connect Grace back to her roots, but she is not able to as she has forgotten.

Winterborne feels the disconnect between the two of them and thinks, “It seemed as if
the knowledge and interests which had formerly moved Grace’s mind had quite died
away from her. He wondered whether the special attributes of his image in the past
had evaporated like these other things” (Hardy 39). A few moments afterwards,
Winterborne thinks to himself, “Anything to keep the conversation away from her and me” (Hardy 40). Winterborne is conscious of the separation between the two of them. Hardy discusses how different Grace is:

It was true. Cultivation had so far advanced in the soil of Miss Melbury’s mind as to lead her to talk of anything save of that she knew well, and the greatest interest in developing: herself. She had fallen from the good old Hintock ways. (Hardy 40)

It becomes clear that Grace’s development makes it difficult for her to connect to her family, former friends and home. Her development is compared to “soil” to further emphasize the doing and undoing that is integral to cultivation. At first, readers might think that Grace is too good for the “country ways” and simple life of Hintock as her father believes. Even though she is more refined and educated than the locals of Hintock, readers must think about the choices Grace makes and why. An example of choice is Grace’s decision to marry Fitzpiers instead of Winterborne.

To contrast the scene when Winterborne and Grace re-meet after her education, we should consider the first scenes of Grace and Fitzpiers together. The first time Fitzpiers sees Grace he watches her outside of his window. Hardy writes:

He steadily watched her out of sight, recognizing her as the very young lady whom he had seen once before and been unable to identify. Whose could that emotional face be? All the others he had seen in Hintock as yet oppressed him with their crude rusticity; the contrast offered by this suggested that she hailed from elsewhere. (Hardy 103)
Fitzpiers assumes that when he sees Grace and her refined ways, that she must be a guest of Mrs. Felice Charmond. Grace’s ways make her seem like an outsider of Hintock. Instantly, unlike Winterborne, Fitzpiers is able to think about how he wants to act on what he sees. Instead of immediately going to her, he prefers a “conjectural pursuit” as he follows her towards Mrs. Charmond and eventually her cottage (Hardy 103). During this moment, Hardy describes Fitzpiers outsider status of Hintock to reveal Fitzpiers’ awareness of his new surroundings that is unnatural to him. Fitzpiers, “was not altogether skilful with the reins, and it often occurred to his mind that if in some remove depths of the trees an accident were to happen his being alone might be the death of him” (Hardy 104). Fitzpiers recognizes that he is not fully connected to Hintock and therefore may struggle to survive. He is also aware of survival, as he knows if he makes a mistake, it could be the “death of him.” In addition to recognizing that he is not fully connected to Hintock, he also acknowledges that he only understands where Hintock is located, “I took a pair of compasses, and found the exact middle the country that was left between these bounds, and that middle was Little Hintock; so here I am” (Hardy 40). Fitzpiers is isolated from the ways of Hintock and the people. His only connection to it is a geographic one.

When Fitzpiers asks Winterborne about Grace, the narrator tells us that Winterborne “had caught the doctor peering” at Grace (Hardy 105). While Grace is watched by Fitzpiers, Winterborne watches Fitzpiers, but the difference between the two men is the ability to act. In her article, “Thomas Hardy and the Role of Observer,” Julie Grossman complicates the idea of Fitzpiers seeing. She writes, “Fitzpiers’s perseverance wins out over Giles’s well-intentioned paralysis. Gile’s
genuine love for Grace is not enough to bring on a happy resolution; he lacks the assertiveness to act on what he sees” (626). Active and passive observation becomes the main difference between the two men in Grace’s life. Fitzpiers acts on what he sees because he desires instant gratification. Winterborne complicates moral conduct. Even though he does everything in his power for Grace, he is paralyzed. His lack of assertion results in his inability to be with Grace or to survive.

While Winterborne thinks for others, such as Grace, Fitzpiers is self-centered. Fitzpiers acknowledges that he is not in love with Grace, instead he says, “I am in love with something in my own head, and no thing-in-itself outside it at all” (Hardy 106). Fitzpiers tells Winterborne that he could have fallen in love with any woman that was in his sight, not necessarily Grace. Winterborne’s sense of altruism and Fitzpiers’ egoism become problematic in Winterborne’s ultimate death and Fitzpiers’ survival. When Grace first meets the doctor, she believes him to be asleep and gazes at him. As she watches him, she is aware of his outsider status the way he viewed her as an outsider. She thinks, “she had encountered a specimen of creation altogether unusual in that locality” (Hardy 115). Grace is embarrassed and nervous that she is watching Fitzpiers sleep. As she approaches the bell-pull with her back to Fitzpiers, she is able to see him through a mirror:

An indescribably thrill passed through her as she perceived that the eyes of the reflected image were open, gazing wonderingly at her. Under the curious unexpectedness of the sight she became as if spell-bound, almost powerless to turn her head and regard the original.

(Hardy 115)
Fitzpiers’ gaze is borderline supernatural as it completely overtakes Grace. In addition to the power of Fitzpiers as he watches Grace, watch him, Grace is attracted to his unusualness. At this point in the novel, she is not completely settled in Hintock as she is different and can never fully fit in. She relates and feels connected to Fitzpiers as an outsider of Hintock. Fitzpiers asks Grace as she leaves to look into his microscope. She becomes startled to learn a brain is under the microscope. As he defends his study of philosophy, Grace becomes humble and compliments the doctor, “I admire you very much!” (Hardy 120). In this meeting, Grace and Fitzpiers connect because of what they share. They are both outsiders to Hintock.

Grace’s choice to admire and become interested in Fitzpiers, is one that reflects the confusion of self she experiences in Hintock. She is no longer grounded or rooted and is confused in her choices. Throughout the novel, there are times when Grace steps outside of her confused self to make stronger decisions. In his work, *Burdens of Perfection*, Andrew Miller asks the question, “how do we become better?” (3). The self can only be challenged to reflect on its own being, if it encounters the other. Readers are able to see characters’ thoughts as Sorum argues to think about themselves in those positions. Melbury sends Grace to become educated to be better for her arranged marriage to Winterborne, yet it is Grace’s engagement with others that allows for potential moral growth. As Miller writes, “moral perfectionism stresses another means of improvement, one in which individual transfiguration comes not through obedience to such codes but through openness to example – through responsive, unpredictable engagements with other people” (3). Grace’s education is not what makes a morally better person, but rather the “unpredictable engagements”
she experiences. We see Grace’s potential for moral growth the “unpredictable engagements” during two examples in the novel; first when her and Mrs. Charmond are in the woods together, alone and secondly, when Grace invites Mrs. Charmond and Sukie into her home.

In the woods with Mrs. Charmond, Grace attempts to understand Mrs. Charmond’s experience in relation to Fitzpiers. As they are lost in the woods, in the “narrow” passages and the darkness, the women embrace each other. Grace asks Mrs. Charmond if she is rested, “in what seemed her own voice grown ten years older” (Hardy 219). Grace has changed at this point in the novel because she has a shared experience with Mrs. Charmond who admits to being a “slave” to Fitzpiers (Hardy 220). A few chapters later, when Fitzpiers has been thrown off his horse, both Sukie and Mrs. Charmond go to Grace’s home, worried and anxious to know if Fitzpiers has died. Mrs. Charmond says, “I came to ascertain the truth of it. Is he – killed?” (Hardy 233). Both Sukie and Mrs. Charmond want nothing kept from them and Grace agrees to this, “You shall know all I know. Indeed, you have a perfect right to go into his bedroom; who can have a better than either of you?” (Hardy 233). She continues to make the experience a collective one like the one in the woods, “Wive all, let’s enter together! . . . I repeat, I have only heard a less alarming account than you have heard – how much it means, and how little, cannot say. I pray God that it means not much – in common humanity” (Hardy 234). Grace’s ability to invite both Sukie and Mrs. Charmond into her house reveals her potential for moral growth. Even though they have wronged her in being with her husband, she is able to step outside of herself and recognize that both Mrs. Charmond and Sukie are suffering as well. They are all
suffering together in relation to one man, but differently. Grace is able to think outside of herself and to recognize another’s experience; a shared experience.

Even though Grace experiences moments of potential moral growth and cultivation, like Ward argues, there is a doing and undoing. As Grace progresses, she also regresses. In the time that Winterborne gives up his home to Grace, he is outside suffering the forces of nature while she is inside, safe. During the harsh weather, Hardy writes, “To all this weather Giles must be more or less exposed; how mush she did not know” (Hardy 277). By the time that Grace thinks about Giles, it is too late and he falls ill. She calls to him, “O come in – come in! Where are you? . . . . I have been wicked. I have thought too much of myself . . . . Do you hear? I don’t want to keep you out any longer – I cannot bear that you should suffer so . . . . I want you here! Gi-i-iles!” (Hardy 279). Grace even stops thinking about any social conventions, “Come to me, dearest! I don’t mind what they say, or what they think of us any more” (Hardy 279). Finally, at this point the passive, Winterborne responds, but says he will remain outside. Yet, her passiveness and his, ultimately kill Winterborne. Grace did not concern herself enough with Winterborne’s well being, but instead focused on herself too much as she admits. Therefore, as Levine argues, Hardy “seems morally ambivalent about the whole set of actions . . . the moral value of the constantly adapting and mid-changing Fitzpiers/Grace world is greater than the moral value of the woodland protagonists, who cling to their ideals – and to their conventions” (location 3677). Winterborne as Levine suggests, “clings” to his ideals and conventions, which has no moral value in Hardy’s narrative. The true value is in the ability to recognize how to survive in an ever-changing world.
Grace’s ride home with Winterborne in the earlier part of the novel, foreshadows what comes towards the end of the narrative. Grace no longer recognizes the kinds of trees that Winterborne discusses. Eve Sorum discusses Grace’s forgetfulness as “geographic blindness” (188). Grace cannot see that Winterborne is ill and practically dead when he sleeps outside of his own home to protect her from her unfaithful husband. Sorum argues Grace’s lack of understanding of the situation in addition to Winterborne’s “overly empathetic nature” as the reason for Winterborne’s death. She fails to see the true Giles and the “purity of his nature, his freedom from the grosser passions, his scrupulous delicacy” (Hardy 282). When she returns home, she is disconnected from Winterborne and doesn’t fully understand him as she used to when they were children.

The ending of the novel reveals that the main question of the novel becomes survival, instead of who behaved more morally than another. George Levine discusses how Hardy’s world reveals disappointment in expectations of a unified identity and consistent behavior (location 3507). Levine argues that Hardy is not looking solely at the woods, but seeing them against the ideal resulting in the woods becoming a slum. This results in a mix of genres such as satire, melodrama and realism as the form of the novel reflects the disruptions in the lives of the characters. There is no linear growth for any of the characters as Ward argues, rather it is constantly doing and undoing. The novel is preoccupied with nature and environment and how characters are either able to survive or not. At the end of the novel, Grace and Fitzpiers do not produce any offspring, which for Levine means “the decline of woodland culture” (location 3643). While, there is a decline in that simple, rustic culture, the lack of
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offspring clearly reveals a cyclical stasis. The novel does not attack Victorian notions of morality, but instead is shocking because of its ending (Levine location 3450). The most Darwinian part of the ending, Levine argues, is the potential of moral indifference. There is no moral growth. No matter how many changes or cultivation characters undergo, especially Grace, there is no real movement as characters either do not have the appropriate knowledge and if they do, they don’t know how to act on it in an ever-shifting space.

In his essay, “Candour in English Fiction,” Hardy expresses his frustrations about magazine publications and the difficulties of being an artist. For Hardy, magazines did not “foster the growth of the novel which reflects and reveals life” (Hardy 2). Hardy discusses that part of the difficulty in being an artist is whether the artist must decide whether to stay true to the characters, which might cause criticism by the public or publishing industry, or to have the character complete actions “contrary to their natures” (Hardy 3) While Hardy very much focuses on publication, his ideas and concepts about “natural” and actions of characters is relevant in thinking about The Woodlanders. The ending of the novel is a dark one especially when Grace reunites with Fitzpiers while Mary is alone grieving the altruistic Winterborne’s grave. The ending may be perceived as a dark one that perhaps is not satisfying, but the regression and stasis of the ending emphasizes the ideas Ward argues about doing and undoing in cultivation in relation to the moral indifference Levine describes. Edward Neill writes of the ending, “The Woodlanders seems to be providing a particularly sardonic commentary on the idea that is it the fittest to survive who automatically do so” (91). Grace is a survivor and so is Fitzpiers. John Bayley writes,
“Hardy does not like survivors but he can do nothing about it . . . a great part of the effectiveness of the novel comes from Hardy not being able to do anything about it” (14). The survival of Fitzpiers and Grace reveals the stasis of the “abandoned woodland and its dead champion” (Bayley 15). The idea of survival in *The Woodlanders* is dark as the “champion,” Winterborne who seems fit in his knowledge of Hintock is not able to adapt. He must die.

In addition to the “sardonic commentary,” of the death of Winterborne, those that do survive, do so because of action. Grossman argues, “Fitzpiers’s survival depends on his villainy. He is heroic by virtue of acting out his desire for self-gratification and sexual mastery. Grace survives, though her resignation to continuing her marriage with Fitzpiers is not quite consolatory, since she is aware that his infidelity will probably continue” (626). Fitzpiers is able to survive because of his action. Grace survives because she continues her relationship with him. It is fundamental for readers to understanding why Hardy had no choice but to make the ending of *The Woodlanders* tragic. The novel is one about survival, not the decisions or motives that lead to larger events. Survival becomes difficult as one must have a type of knowledge, but also know how to use that knowledge. Seeing and perspective become part of that knowledge, but if a character does not fully recognize how to act on what they see, they cannot continue on. Survival becomes even more challenging in a constantly changing space. Hardy was successful at depicting the doing and undoing of cultivation in a pastoral and natural space where many would believe such changing would not be occurring. For many, Hintock seems to be a place of the past, with a community rooted in nature, such as the characters of Giles Winterborne and
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Marty South. Yet, Hintock is changing as it is being cultivated, but also because outsiders enter the community such as Fitzpiers, Mrs. Charmond and even Grace who no longer completely understands her home. The novel is not a desire to return to a simple form of life, but instead asks its readers to recognize an ever-shifting world and the importance of adapting in order to survive.

Works Cited


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