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Heroism and Pathos in *The Woodlanders:* A study

Dr. V. Sudhakar Naidu, Ph.D.
Asst Professor of English
Faculty of Languages
Department of English
University of Tripoli- Libya

ABSTRACT: *The Woodlanders is one of the best novels written by Thomas Hardy. The article entitled, "Heroism and Pathos in The Woodlanders: A study" is an analysis of The Woodlanders – the story of unhappy marriage promoted by snobbery and perpetuated by convention. The heroic characters of Marty South and Giles Winterborne and their bitter sufferings from bitter frustration of personal desire have been closely studied. It is also observed that the novel conveys a sense of confusion and pathos and above all the sadness of the lives of essentially good people destroyed by selfishness. It is also seen that the wrong choices and temperamental differences led to tragic gloom in love and marriage. The tragic situation caused either by fate, chance or coincidence in the novel is also studied.*

The novel chases on the sublime figure of the peasant girl, Marty South, mourning by the grave of Giles Winterborne whom she has passionately and selflessly loved. In the novel, Hardy intensifies Nature and man, and suggests that whatever the creation of God, it is majestic. Further the characters of Fitzpiers, Marty, Melbury and Mrs.Charmond are closely studied.

KEY WORDS: *Heroism and pathos, snobbery, frustration, selfishness, temperamental differences, wrong choices, tragic gloom.*

The Woodlanders is hailed as a masterpiece and has attracted the attention of scholars and critics over a century. In his later years, Hardy often said that it was 'in some respects … his best novel'. In fact, *The Woodlanders* has attracted more unanimous chorus of critical praise when it first appeared in 1886 than any of Hardy's previous novels. Trevor Johnson very aptly remarks, 'unquestionably it contains much of Hardy's first writing, the many descriptions of the woods at different seasons and at all hours of the day and night … are among his finest'. In it's thematic content it is nearer to *Far From the Madding Crowd, The Return of the Native, The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the D'urbervilles.* It is a proto-type social novel, the 'purposeful' forerunner of *Tess* and *Jude.*

In *The Woodlanders,* the inter linked chain of love affairs, forms the backbone of the plot. It is the story of an unhappy marriage promoted by snobbery and perpetuated by convention. Marty

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South never speaks her love for Giles until he is dead. Giles loves Grace, but she marries Fitzpiers, but she marries Fitzpiers and does not discover her mistake until it is too late. And Fitzpiers deserts Grace for Mrs.Charmond. The central conflict is rarely dramatized. Giles and Marty South endure. There is no dominant character as in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess,* and the conflict is more evident in Grace and her father when both indulge in pathetic hopes that the new divorce law will enable the latter to make amends for his unfulfilled intentions.

As the title suggests, *The Woodlanders* is a novel especially characterised by 'Unity of place'. From the very first paragraph, Hardy saturates the reader with the impressions of the woods, the abundance and variety of their foliage. E.M.Forster, whose appreciation of the novel was enhanced by reading it against the background exclaimed, 'Trees, trees, undergrowth, English trees! How that book rustles with them'. Like all Hardy's landscapes, this woodland is a little more intensely, vividly there any other real wood could possibly be. Little Hintock is described in the first chapter as, 'one of those sequestered spots outside the gates of the world'. But the effect of the novel is rather to make the world as being outside the leafy, rooted gates of the woodland. The readers of the novel are situated in the semi-wild heart of the woods, where human life corresponds closely to the primitive, in the anthropological sense of the world, than anything else in Hardy.

Starting from the absence of central and dominating figure, an unsympathetic account of the novel would go on to argue that Hardy barely justifies such a dangerous dispersal of his interest. Grace and Melbury come through as static and idealised creations; Grace as frivolous and petty in her interests; Melbury as a well- meaning and naively snobbish father; Mrs. Charmond and Fitzpiers as the stereotypes of rakish and self-regarding outsiders who first destroy others and destroy themselves.

In *The Woodlanders* Fitzpiers attracts and is attracted by three strongly contrasted women, Felice Charmond, Suke Damson and Grace Melbury, who represent three different aspects of love. Trevor Johnson puts it, 'Felice stands for the wild, irrational, neck-or-nothing kind, Suke for plain physical lust, and Grace for a mixture of calculation, fascination and idealisation'. Hardy's method is to spin these four around in a hectic emotional round about. *The Woodlanders* is characterised by interrogative awareness of the literary modes within which it is working. That interrogation is crystallised in the figure of Grace Melbury, who is at the centre of it's shifts and point of view. Penny Boumelha points out, 'she migrates unsettingly between pastoral survival, tragic predicament, realist centre of consciousness, and melodramatic heroine'. In fact, the fluidity of her narrative role makes her almost nebulous figure in the novel. It is well said that the significance of Grace provides Hardy with an opportunity to sketch for Sue Bridehead. Her dilemma, caught between Giles Winterborne and Fitzpiers, her reputation and ultimate re-acceptance of the first marital partner, the 'Daphnean instinct' (P.310) that implies her to flee the returning Fitzpiers and the superficial pieties of her readings in the Bible and the prayer book, foreshadow Sue Bridehead's agonised agitations between Jude and Phillotson. Grace is like

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Elizabeth-Jane in her normality, like Thomasin in her genuine simplicity. Writing about Grace, John Butler says, 'Grace is almost Hardy's perfect woman: she has pride enough and modesty enough, she is passionate enough and reserved enough, she is beautiful'.

Mrs. Charmond in many ways is like Fitzpiers. She also dislikes woods, finding them dull depressing and, when she is lost in them, terrifying. David Lodge remarks, 'As a lady of the manor she controls the economic lives of the woodlanders, and oppresses them by pursuing a policy of enclosure'. She is insulated from contact with them by her rank, her carriage and her fine house, it's curtains drawn in day time and candles lit within. When Melbury breaks through these defences and attempts an honest personal encounter, she writhes with embarrassment. Mrs. Charmond belongs to the group of neurotic older women. Her name suggests charm and worldliness. Her situation in the big house relates her to all the ladies that Hardy created out of the impulse that produced his first novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady.* Mrs. Charmond , as a lady exerts an automatic fascination over Fitzpiers.

Like Daisy and Tom in *The Great Gatsby*, Felice and Fitzpiers are careless and self-centred. In the words of Richard Carpenter, 'Their pursuit of their own desires, with little regard for the well being of others, is the source of much grief for others, and eventually for themselves as well'. Complimenting their selfishness is the naïve attitude of the woodlanders that cultivation is more desirable than native simplicity. In the end pastoral life triumphs. Felice dies at the hands of a disgruntled lover, and Fitzpiers reunited with Grace.

The vehicle of the tragic component in *The Woodlanders* is a realistic analysis of sexual and marital themes. In his preface to the novel in 1895 Hardy himself states, ' …. it is tacitly assumed for the purposes 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 reader or writer for a moment' (P.35). Grace's eventual reunion with Fitzpiers is not so much enabled as enforced by the death of Giles, which puts an abrupt and decisive end to her emotional vacillations between the two men. Grace is not alone in such fluctuations; almost every character in the novel has more than one partner either actually (as Felice Charmond has a dead husband, a discarded lover and a current one), or potentially (as Giles has both Grace and Marty South)

The generalmultiplicity of involvements, frustrations and retractions undermines the notion of the exclusivity and irrevocability of marriage contract. Both Grace and Felice experience desire as if it were an external compulsion to which they must submit, locating in Fitzpiers the source of an emanation of 'compelling power' which calls forth the Felice a gloomy fatalism and in Grace a somnambulistic passivity.

The elements of pastoral elegy contribute significantly to both the structure and the tone of *The Woodlanders.* The elegiac tone is in excess of it's ostensible focus in the plot, the death of Giles

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Winterborne, and the erotic counter-pointing of the changing seasons invokes the implied regeneration which includes the pastoral elegy. The community of *The Woodlanders* is not merely depleted by the loss of Giles, but radically devitalised. This is a use of pastoral that presses beyond the simply ironic; in the elegiac excess, there dwells almost a sense of mourning for it's own loss, the mark of the text's recognition of the final inadequacy of the pastoral mode.

The religious and ritual undertones of the classical pastoral elegy are also clearly discernible in the last part of *The Woodlanders*. Grace tells to Fitzpiers, 'I go with Marty to Giles grave, I Am almost worship him. We swore we would show him that devotion'(P.354). It is also said that, 'weeks and months of mourning for Winterborne had been passed by Grace in the soothing monotony of the memorial act to which she and Marty had devoted themselves. Twice a week the pair went in the dusk to Hintock churchyard, and, like the two mourners in *Cymbeline,* sweetened his sad grave with their flowers and their tears'(P.344). *Cymbeline,* like all of Shakespeare's late plays, is much concerned with the ideas of death and resurrection and the literary tradition of the pastoral. In *The Woodlanders,* Grace's periodical visit to Winterborne's grave with Marty, which was kept up with pious strictness for the purpose of putting snowdrops, prim roses, and other verbal flowers thereon as they came'(P.353).

The most significant objection is to read *The Woodlanders* simply as pastoral, whether 'classical' 'traditional' or 'grotesque' is to make an ideological solution of the competing views of nature which inhabit the text and are played out upon the figure of Grace. Alongside the pastoral nature, there runs a quite incompatible vein of the Spencerian – Darwinian representation of nature as the sight of a struggle for survival in which mere physical proximity is certain to produce conflict and involuntary violence. The Spencerian component of such view resides, in the consecration of the evolutionary struggle as an apt, and even inevitable, metaphor for human society.

In *The Return of the Native,* the tragedies of Clym and Eustacia resolve themselves into a sexuality – founded polarity of culture and nature. *The Woodlanders* produces that dualism, but within the compass of a single character, Grace Mulbury. 'Her modern nerves with primitive feelings'(P.309) reveal her to be the first of Hardy's female characters to contain within herself at least the potentialities for a tragic conflict between sexuality and the intellect. In this she prefigures Sue Bridehead; but whereas Sue's conflict is between 'flesh' and 'spirit', the conflict within Grace presents itself as a simple opposition of mind and body, in the guise of education overlaid upon instinct. Her breakdown, consequently, consists in a lapse into a concern with propriety which falls short of a tragic intensity.

As in *The Mayor of Casterbridge,* Hardy has to convey about the previous relationship between Melbury and Winterbornes; by making Marty an involuntary eavesdropper as he evoke her suffering at the recognition of the hopelessness of her own position and the consequent mood of abnegation which prompts her to cut off her hair – an action richly symbolic in itself and rich in consequences for the eventual outcome of the novel. As Elizabeth-Jane in *The Mayor of*

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Casterbridge, Marty is the observer of other scenes in which she is herself emotionally but not actually involved. Like Elizabeth-Jane, she becomes a kind of moral touchstone of her world.

From her first introduction, working late into the night to complete her sick father's work, Marty is the personification of selfless, unostentatious heroism; while Giles, generous, chivalrous and scrupulously honest, fully earns Marty's epitaph, 'you was a good man and did good things'(P'375). This ethical superiority of Marty and Giles is associated with their sympathetic bond with the woods themselves.

The last word, and the ultimate loyalty to Gile's memory, remain with Marty South, who, with Giles and Grace, forms a third triangle of forces. Dignity and integrity belongs to Giles and Marty. One of the finest moments in the book is the scene in which they plant young trees together, Giles absorbed in a task he is performing with an expert's skill. Marty finding a mute though imperfect satisfaction is being with him, even though he is virtually unconscious of her sex, which is indeed played down by the narrator in accordance with a common Victorian convention of idealized femininity.

In *The Woodlanders* Hardy's treatment of the question of marriage becomes more explicit and his rejection of the happy ending is asserted. Later Hardy was to deplore the moral timidity of the novel, but it is fairer to regard it as representing an advance in courage and honesty for there is no way to a happy ending. The patterning of relationships in *The Woodlanders* resembles three triangles touching at certain points. The union of Grace and Giles, which originally possessed a certain natural rightness, is prevented by her father's uneasy ambitions and by the education she has received. The arrival of Fitzpiers provides a successful rival to Giles; but Fitzpiers in turn dallied with two other women, Sue Damson and Felice Charmond. Norman Page very aptly remarks, ' Fitzpiers' infidelity, and Grace's belated recognition of Gile's true worth, raise the question of divorce'.

Like most of Hardy's novels, the opening pages of *The Woodlanders* begins with the establishment of a local context for the action, specified with the kind of precision that recalls the biography or the guide-book as much as a work of fiction. The scene is at first empty and then a solitary figure appears. In the words of Norman Page, 'The careful composition of the picture, the effect, as in a silent film, of image without speech, the thoughtful scrutiny of an unseen observer – these are familiar ingredients in Hardy's presentation of human behaviour'.

The Woodlanders depicts a world in which moral and physical decay is rampant. Hardy posits the possibility, that the world will gradually wear itself out. Nature is engaged in a melancholy struggle for survival within the woodlands. Hardy himself states, 'The trees dripped on the garden plots, where no vegetables would grow for the dripping, though they were planted year after year with that curious mechanical regularity of country people in the face of hopelessness'(P.144). The struggle for survival intensifies on occasion to a macabre process in

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which one species seems to devour another: 'owls that had been catching mice in the out-houses, rabbits that had been eating the winter-greens in the gardens, …. Were seen and heard no more till night fall'(P.24).

Giles Winterborne is the spirit of the wood, in all it's purity and organic vitality. He has not only awareness of the possible tragic figure of his life, but also patient acceptance of it. There is resolute endurance in his character, but no impetus to struggle. His strength supports his suffering and his independence. Dale Kramer says, Giles is \a 'nature god rather than a conflict between the courses of natural love and the restraints that an elaborate social code places on the expression and fulfilment of love'. His death is pitiable and pathetic because he is a physically strong man made physically helpless; but because he never challenges – indeed never comprehends – the forces that destroy him. He accepts death heroically. Giles death is the climax of the book. Richard Carpenter says, 'Giles is a masculine patient Griselda, who financially sacrifices himself in order to protect Grace's reputation. Propriety in *The Woodlanders* is as potent a force for disaster as chance in other novels'.

Grace Melbury is the victim of circumstances, of her father's ambition particularly, and her own inherited weakness of will. Grace blames her father for having deprived her of the happy life she might have enjoyed with Giles: 'I wish you had never, never thought of educating me. I wish I worked in the woods like Marty South! I hate genteel life, and I want to be no better than she ….cultivation has only brought me inconveniences and troubles…'(P.240). She is tormented by her husband's infidelities and the uncertain position in which she is placed by his disappearance. Her little snobberies, her docile submission to her father, her school – girl crush on Fitzpiers, her relative indifference to his desertion of her, her coy resumption of a relationship with Giles, her primly fierce adherence to moral properties when he is dying, her indulgent grief over his death and the arch and tentative resumption of her relationship with Fitzpiers – it is a biography which can with some justice be summed up in the hollow-turner's words.

There is a close resemblance of the two sets of characters Mrs. Charmond and Fitzpiers, Marty and Giles. In both cases the characters share a common sense of isolation. Ian Gregor pertinently admits, 'The isolation which is present to Marty and Giles finds expression in their absorption in their work; the isolation of Mrs. Charmond and Fitzpiers is in their enclosure within their own fantasies'. Fitzpiers and Mrs.Charmond are obviously kindred spirits, but there are significant differences between them. Idiom, tone, movement, all add up to a description of Mrs.Charmond as 'theatrical' in a way in which Fitzpiers is apparently not. All four relationships, so radically different in nature, have in common an acute sense of self-estrangement. Ian Gregor says, 'The sterile obligation of Marty and Giles, the sterile fulfilment of Fitzpiers and Mrs.Charmond – all four characters have complementary roles to play in the novel,…' They are isolated characters rather than versions of consciousness taking their substance from a total design.

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In *Far From the Madding Crowd* Hardy exhibited the fulfilled intention in the death of Troy and in the marriage of Bathsheba and Gabriel Oak. In *The Woodlanders* he gives the unfulfilled intention of the actual world. There is, therefore, a little of Gabriel Oak in Giles Winterborne; but not enough to round off his life with domestic happiness. There is a little of Bathsheba Everdene in Grace Melbury – enough to marry the man of her fancy and not of her heart. As for Fitzpiers, he is but intellectually superfine Sergeant Troy who escapes the gun of captain Boldwood. In *The Woodlanders* Hardy provides, a strong plot, diversifies rather than marred by whimsicalities of incident. Melbury, the timber-merchant, and the centre of the group of woodlanders, is in his way the impersonation of the unfulfilled intention.

The final chapter in *The Woodlanders* is concerned not with the contemplation of Giles' death but with the speculation about the future married life of Grace and Fitzpiers. Fitzpiers is the real intruder in terms of the novel's setting: the big houses of the countryside must have their inhabitants and Mrs.Charmond is reasonably credible in such a role. Michael Millgate aptly observes, 'the convenience of Fitzpiers is that, once his presence is accepted, he becomes a ready instrument for bringing into juxtaposition and interaction the two elements of rural simplicity and urban sophistication' precisely because Fitzpiers is the odd man out, it is he who precipitates the more violent and striking actions, and it is worth noting that Hardy once suggested 'Fitzpiers at Hintock' as an alternative title for the title.

The ending of *The Woodlanders* upset many contemporary readers, and still capable of surprising and disconcerting ones. Some of the critics have supposed that Hardy cynically fixed up a happy ending for his heroine in accordance with the expectations of his reading public. But the contemporary reviewers were shocked that a cad like Fitzpiers, was rewarded rather than punished for his sins. Hardy's own recorded comment on the subject suggests that both criticisms are slightly, though not wholly, beside the point : 'the ending of the story-hinted rather than stated – is that the heroine is doomed to an unhappy life with an inconstant husband. I could not accentuate this strongly in the book, by reason of the conventions of the libraries etc'.

The woods in *The Woodlanders* play a similar part to that of the heath in *The Return of the Native* or Casterbridge in *The Mayor of Casterbridge.* It is true that Hardy is using them as he does the heath and the town, to give substance and coherence to his theme, they have a quite distinctive significance. There is one change which the woods emphasise in a quite distinctive way, and that is a sense of passive exhaustion and melancholy. *Tess* and *Jude* are tragic on scale much greater than anything in *The Woodlanders.* The woods establish an atmosphere, pervasive and persistent of deeply melancholy; they are capable of giving definition to the plot, they crystallise the fears of the characters – they do not in the last analysis darken the total impressions of the novel.

The Woodlanders provides a physical setting in which the cycle of seasons is recorded. It is a record of a cycle of typical human responses to existence. Richard Beckman comments, 'Since it

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is the special accomplishment of *The Woodlanders* to portray human life in the context of a natural setting, the division of the characters of the novel into types corresponding to the seasons becomes possible, …'. Marty South, the description of whose hair-shearing initiates the action of the novel, and Giles Winterborne, whose death of cold marks it's conclusion, both suggest the winter season symbolically. Marty's lament for Winterborne in the last paragraph of the novel represents the meeting of the two ends of the cycle and combines the theme of death of the year with that of the stoical endurance of winter devastation. The ambitious Grace Melbury is a sanguine and spring-like. Fitzpiers is summer-like in the creative heat and fierceness of his disposition. The novel thus depicts characters suggestive of Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall pursuing each other in that order.

It is said that *The Woodlanders* lacks the creative tension and energy of the other novels of Hardy and it depends too much on inter-related characters rather than on an intensely interesting protagonist. As Dale Kramer says, 'Each character of *The Woodlanders* represents an aspect of the totality of lives affected by social forces'. The novel conveys to the reader a sense of confusion and pathos, and above all the sadness of the lives of essentially good people destroyed by selfishness. After a critical study of Hardy's dramatic novels, one can conclude that wrong choices and temperamental differences led to a tragic gloom in love and marriage. The characters are just instruments in the hands of fate. They like to act on their own. Hardy makes use of coincidences mostly to create tragic plights. In *The Woodlanders* the tragic situations are caused either by chance or coincidence.

In *The Woodlanders*, the principal catastrophe(the death of Giles) generates pathos rather than pity and fear. Nature, as manifested in the woodlands, is shown to be a domain of ceaseless evolutionary struggle, but outwardly, it is calm, temperate and almost idyllic. *The Woodlanders* is a novel of quiet, meditative and homogeneous environment in which the characters are not forcing to represent more than they legitimately can.

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