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## Introduction

Philip Davis describes agnostics as being “honest doubters symptomatically torn between ‘yes’ and ‘no’ — suspended in between belief and disbelief” (100). In this dissertation I will be exploring Victorian agnosticism, a concept that is seemingly paradoxical to the modern reader faced with the ambivalence of the Victorian intellectual rejection of the traditional faith of their ancestors combined with an emotional reluctance to part with the Christian ideals of morality. In this study of Victorian agnosticism I have chosen Thomas Hardy’s mature fiction and a selection of his poetry to illustrate my contention that the influence of Christianity and the Bible, in particular, on the psyche of the Victorian literary mind was so pervasive that, even when Reason rejected the miraculous and undermined their belief in God, the doubters could never quite disentangle themselves from the faith that had played such a central role in their formative years. This possibly subconscious enmeshment with Christian doctrine played an important role in the writers’ perception of the world and is reflected in their art.

Thomas Hardy’s views on religion are well documented in his writing. They provide a rich source for a study on religious doubt and its consequences for an author’s art. I plan to show that Hardy’s particular brand of agnosticism is unique in that his dilemma is not so much one of doubt as to whether there is a God, but rather a selective acknowledgement of certain Christian doctrines combined with a rejection of others. This study aims to investigate Hardy’s relationship with Christian doctrine by means of a close critical analysis of his treatment of religious themes in Tess of the d’Urbervilles (1891), Jude the Obscure (1895), The Return of the Native (1878) and a brief selection of his poetry. The analysis of the novels and poetry will be conducted with reference to three fundamental evangelical Christian principles with a view to establishing as precisely as possible the areas of religious doubt and allegiance peculiar to Hardy’s religious belief system. In this dissertation I argue that there appears to be sufficient evidence in Hardy’s literary output to indicate that his simultaneous affiliation to the Hebraic doctrines of sin and atonement and rejection of the doctrines of salvation and forgiveness are the chief factors responsible for his predominantly pessimistic world view. Furthermore, I wish to show that the doomed universe of Hardy’s fiction was born out of the pessimism that followed in the wake of Hardy’s loss of faith.

Agnosticism was a by-product of the vast changes that swept over Victorian England as a result of the advances of science, exponentially increasing industrialisation, and the enormous impact of the writings of prominent men of science such as Darwin and Spencer, whose theories overturned beliefs that had comfortably been accepted for centuries (Lerner 167). The importance of religion in the daily lives of the Victorians cannot be overestimated and is significant to this study as it places Hardy’s preoccupation with religion within the context of the *Zeitgeist* which was prevalent during his lifetime. Religion was the fundamental core of Victorian society. It determined a person’s social existence and behaviour (Jay 24). Thomas Carlyle puts it succinctly when he says, “A man’s religion is the chief fact with regard to him” (Collins 4). It follows, therefore, that loss of faith is a shattering experience which

seriously affects the lives of agnostics. Mrs Humphrey Ward's Robert Elsmere is an accurate account of the effects of loss of faith on the protagonist's psyche and its impact on his relationship with his wife, family and society in general. This novel illustrates the kind of mental agony Hardy must have experienced when his faith failed him.

The mental stress and morbid disillusionment that plagued Hardy as a result of his loss of faith are central to my dissertation and form the basis from which an investigation of the ambivalent nature of Hardy's agnosticism evident in Tess of the d'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure will be launched. The plots in both novels are dominated by a process of spiritual disintegration leading from faith to unbelief in the lives of the protagonists. Hardy explores the mental and physical repercussions of loss of faith in both Tess and Jude. Parallel to these developments, he also depicts the reverse: Sue Bridehead develops from agnosticism to belief and Angel's agnosticism is shown up to be a thin façade which cannot obliterate the faith he imbibed in his childhood. By juxtaposing the agony of the road to unbelief in Tess and Jude with the subversion of the very concept of agnosticism in Sue and Angel, Hardy illuminates the complexity of religious conflict that was ever present in his own heart. Although he explores many aspects of faith and unbelief, the final outcome of the plots of Tess and Jude send a powerful message: the road to unbelief is painful and it ends in annihilation. This study seeks to establish the link between the pessimistic world view expressed in Hardy's art and his religious leanings, and to show that the former was a direct consequence of the latter.

Walter Pater asks: "Who will deny that to trace the influence of religion upon a human character is one of the legitimate functions of the novel?" (Knoepfmacher 11). Hardy illustrates Pater's maxim in delineating the spiritual journeys of his protagonists Tess and Jude. Both display a deep religious awareness from a young age and are unable to reconcile the beliefs they acquired as children with real life as it unfolds for them. The disillusionment that pervades their outlook on life stems from their loss of faith and is a reflection of Victorian agnosticism and Hardy's agnosticism in particular.

Jan Jêdrzejwski states the Hardy was an agnostic who "remained emotionally involved with the church" and that the tension between his emotional attachment to the church and intellectual distancing from it was the controlling force behind the development of Hardy's art in its religious aspect (212). This statement sums up an important aspect of Hardy's spiritual dilemma which I will explore in this dissertation with reference to his portrayal of the institution of the church and its clergy and its influence on the lives of his characters. The inconsistent and often contradictory image Hardy created of the church bears witness to this conflict. However, I will argue that the conflict between emotion and reason in Hardy's quest for faith was perhaps not the controlling force behind Hardy's art in religious terms. I contend that perhaps it lay neither in the faith he lost, nor in the clash between his emotional attachment to the church and his intellectual alienation from it, but rather in those aspects of the religious doctrines that he retained. I wish to show that it is the pervasive influence of

these doctrines that shaped Hardy's thinking and framed the hopelessness and woe that characterise his world view.

By way of introduction to Hardy's literary-religious context, a general (and, given the limits of this study, necessarily only glancing) comparison between Hardy's novels and those of selected contemporaries might point up the extreme pessimism that is peculiar to Hardy and helps to explain why Hardy's beliefs differ so dramatically from those of other Victorian novelists. Furthermore, such a comparison highlights the unique nature of his religious views and, I plan to show, reveals the perhaps subconscious philosophical conditions that shaped his work. I have chosen the novelists Charles Dickens, Elisabeth Gaskell and George Eliot for the purposes of comparison since they represent the basic Victorian religious categories and cover a broad area of the Victorian religious spectrum against which Thomas Hardy's religious affiliations and their effects on his work can be sketched.

Both Dickens and Gaskell used the novel as a vehicle for exploring and transmitting religious views, sometimes even with a didactic purpose in mind (Lerner 13). They sought (amongst other things), to alert the public to the woes of poverty and to appeal to the Christian sense of neighbourly love to help improve matters. Walder states in Dickens and Religion: "Whether Christian or humanist, or both, nineteenth-century novelists were all concerned to adopt some position in relation to the religious activities and ideas prevalent then" (4). While I have reservations about the generalisation "all", (particularly with reference to Hardy), it is a description considerably more appropriate for Dickens, Eliot and Gaskell.

Each novelist often indexes — although not always unproblematically — his or her religious orientation. Walder, in his discussion of Dickens's "religion of the heart" which was humanistic in character rather than doctrinal or theological, describes in detail the broadly traditional Christian view Dickens espoused, complete with his unmistakable prejudice against dissenters. For example, the Cheeryble brothers in *Nicholas Nickleby* are the personification of Christian charity and demonstrate Dickens's belief in the power of the individual to spread goodness in society through good works. Hardy's novels, on the other hand, demonstrate a far less equivocal belief in the power of an individual to exert an influence for the good on his own life or his social environment. Clym Yeobright and Jude are both equipped with the necessary intelligence and noble vision to ameliorate life, yet they are condemned to failure because they are simply insignificant parts of the universe which is governed by laws of Nature put in place by the "Immanent Will," against which human beings strive in vain.

Dickens preaches what Walder calls a "social gospel" through the example of characters like Amy Dorrit, whose long-suffering, unconditional love and capacity to forgive emphasise the value of Christian virtues and Dickens's belief that love is an all conquering redemptive force that can change lives. Walder points out that for Dickens, redemption is possible through the unflinching goodness of semi-divine idealised females like Amy Dorrit and Agnes Wickfield who exert a powerful force that can overcome evil and bring deliverance to the men they love (144). In Hardy's world, characters lacking a belief in God turn to love to fill the

yearning in their hearts. Initially they think they have found that something that gives meaning and fulfilment to their lives, (Tess and Angel; Jude and Sue; Clym and Eustacia) only to discover that love brings nothing but misery and pain in the long term. In Collins this disillusionment is referred to as “a negative religious experience” (125). Comparing Hardy's women to Dickens's heroines one is struck by the fact that far from being instruments of deliverance, in some cases they are instruments of the destruction of their lovers, like Arabella, Sue Bridehead and Eustacia Vye, while Tess literally destroys her lover and becomes a sacrificial victim on the altar of love. For Hardy's characters, love is a liability and not a vehicle for improving the human condition.

A comparison of religious themes in the novels of Dickens and Hardy shows that while Dickens's novels reflect the positive power of Christianity, focus on the importance of New Testament virtues such as love, and send an uplifting, hopeful message of mercy and redemption, Hardy's reveal a harsh world where Christianity is portrayed as a feeble ritual based on a myth that lacks force and Christian virtues make characters vulnerable rather than powerful. His novels focus on Old Testament laws of sin and atonement which provide no means of escape or redemption. His message is one of “unhope”. It appears that Dickens and Hardy represent polar opposites on the scale of Victorian religious thought ranging from a life-embracing faith to doubt and despair.

Elizabeth Gaskell's fiction offers a valuable contribution in an investigation of the link between religious faith and authorship. She was a Unitarian minister's wife with first-hand knowledge of dissenting communities who expressed her religious sentiments and concern for the poor in her writing. In fact her writing was so inextricably linked to her religion that it included verbatim or paraphrased transcripts of factual reports published by the Unitarian Church on the plight of the poor (Fryckstedt 98). Like Dickens and Eliot, her message is predominantly one of hope. She unabashedly expresses her belief that God is omnipotent and has a redemptive plan for humanity. In Mary Barton, even the irascible John Barton says of Esther: “there glimmered in his darkness, the idea that religion could save her” (92). Her novels bear the stamp of many biblical citations, and promote the Biblical teachings of mercy, forgiveness, trust in God's goodness, comfort in faith and a belief in peace and rest in God at death. Dickens and Gaskell share a positive belief in the regenerative power of Christianity which is reflected in their fiction and noticeably absent in Hardy. Regeneration cannot occur in Hardy because characters are unable to exert an influence on their world, and God, if He exists at all, seems impervious to the fate of individuals. Hardy questioned the existence and omnipotence of God which Gaskell found reassuring and had long abandoned a belief in salvation and everlasting life. One could say then that Gaskell's views on religion are diametrically opposed to Hardy's. Although abject poverty and misery are central themes in Gaskell's novels, her faith acts as a vibrant and edifying force of hope and offers the possibility of overcoming evil. In contrast, Hardy's lack of faith renders his fictional world bleak and desolate.

George Eliot is an important novelist in the context of examining the influence of religion on literary output. Unlike Dickens and Gaskell who allowed their religious beliefs to influence their writing to a large extent, she strove to be scientifically objective and realistic in her portrayal of religion in operation in the lives of her characters. She wrote her fiction with the purpose of being as true to her observations of life as possible. Cunningham points this out in connection with Eliot's rendition of the Methodists in Adam Bede, which was highly praised by Nonconformist groups. One reviewer states of Dinah Morris: "the author has done ample justice to evangelical piety" (168). Eliot's personal experience of dissent through her Methodist aunt, her study of Southey's Life of Wesley and her commitment to presenting accurate representations of real life enabled her to offer an objective view of dissent that differed from the conventional Victorian prejudice detectable in Dickens's fiction.

While Eliot offers a realistic portrayal of religious groups in Victorian times, her personal humanistic ideas remain evident. For example, when Dinah visits Hetty Sorrel in prison to offer her the forgiveness of Christ and salvation, it is clearly the human element that appeals to Hetty, not the religious: "her (Hetty's) cheek was against Dinah's. It seemed as if her last faith and strength and hope lay in that contact, and the pitying love that shone from Dinah's face [...]" (Adam Bede 436). Cunningham states that "Eliot demythologises traditional formulas of repentance and conversion by reinterpreting humanistically Christian symbols and mythologies" (169). Like Hardy, she was an agnostic and rejected a belief in traditional Christian doctrines and dogmas (Haight 42), but she extracted Christian morals and values from their Biblical context and emphasised their relevance to life along humanistic lines. The case is very different with Thomas Hardy. Agnosticism produced a profound sense of hopelessness and futility in Hardy who rejected repentance and conversion (Hands 84) and portrayed the Christian value of loving kindness as a worthy but ineffectual force against the harsh laws of the universe. This can be deduced from the characterisation of Tess and Old Mr Clare whose goodness and commitment to loving kindness fail to influence positively their lives, or the lives of those around them.

The spiritual journeys from faith to agnosticism experienced by Hardy's and Eliot's heroines (Tess and Dorothea in Middlemarch) illustrate how differently each author treats the theme of loss of faith. Dorothea realises that she has grown estranged from the evangelical faith she held to be true in her early years. But this does not leave her with a feeling of desolation and forsakenness, as it does Tess — which I shall seek to show in Chapter one. She opts for a positive alternative and defines her belief as being " part of the divine power against evil — widening the skirts of light and making the struggle narrower" (Middlemarch 357). She never ceases trying to be good and to make life better for others. She believes that the "Immanent Will" is a life embracing positive force for the good: "it seems to me that the divine voice which tells us to set that wrong right must be obeyed" (Middlemarch 340). Eliot's humanist leanings gave her a confidence in humanity's potential for goodness and the ability through the exercise of free will to ameliorate circumstances in life. Her characterisation points to the existence of intrinsic goodness in human beings, suggesting

that there was no danger that the absence of God could result in the absence of goodness. She disagreed with the contention that there could be no morality without evangelical belief (Haight 55).

In Hardy's universe it is irrelevant whether or not a character is good or evil. Characters' fates are not linked to their moral standing as is common with Victorian writers writing in accordance with the Christian belief that the righteous are rewarded while the sinful are punished if they do not repent and reform. This pattern is followed by Dickens, Gaskell and even George Eliot. For example, Steerforth in David Copperfield meets with a violent death for his dishonourable behaviour towards Emily as does the wicked Carker in Dombey and Son, while Mr Dombey is redeemed by his daughter and becomes righteous through suffering. Christian morality and its law of consequences can be traced in George Eliot's portrayal of Bulstrode and Fred Vincy in Middlemarch. Both must suffer and pay for their mistakes.

The evil that befalls Hardy's characters is not necessarily the result of morally wrong behaviour. I aim to show in chapter one that in Jude and Tess, there is evidence to suggest that the Old Testament doctrine of Original sin taints Hardy's characters with the curse that came with sin and places them on a cursed earth. For this reason, moral fibre and good intentions do not save characters from their fate. Tess, Hardy's "Pure Woman", suffers the same fate as the wicked Alec. Clym Yeobright's return to Egdon Heath inspired by noble intentions, does not prevent him from suffering from near blindness, having to resort to furze cutting to survive and ultimately to leading a sad, lonely nomadic existence. Mrs Yeobright swallows her pride and seeks reconciliation with her son, but meets her death on the heath without having accomplished her aim. Hardy's characters have no control over their destinies.

Unlike George Eliot, Hardy does not attempt to recast Christianity in a humanistic form nor does he attempt to reinvent Christianity in a form that suits his agnostic framework like Mrs Humphrey Ward's Robert Elsmere, who clings to Christianity in a revised form by replacing the old rejected faith with a new one based on the person of Jesus excluding his deity. Hardy is possibly unique amongst contemporary Victorian agnostic writers because he faces the crisis of belief head-on with no comforting philosophies to lighten the burden and make it palatable. In "In Tenebris II" Hardy's insistence on seeking the "way to the Better" by exacting "a full look at the Worst" (CP 168), seems to place him in a spiritual abyss and his unbelief results in a doomed *Weltanschauung*.

In general, Dickens, Gaskell and Eliot reveal their relationship towards religion in their art, whether they entertained Christian ideas or not. Importantly, the prevailing sentiment that emerges is one of hope. There is a means of salvation for the characters in their novels either through faith or good works. Essentially, their view of man is optimistic. The evangelical view that man is totally depraved through Original sin for which there is bound to be retribution, is replaced by the belief in individual regeneration through the power of love and forgiveness. Hardy's work seems to negate this idea. In this dissertation I wish to show

that the doctrine of Original sin combined with a fatalistic notion that individual regeneration through conversion or experience was a myth exerted a demonstrable influence on Hardy's fiction and poetry. Consequently, his novels offer no possibility for hope or redemption.

Thomas Hardy's work does not provide as clear a picture of his religious views as those of Dickens or Gaskell. Nor can one detect the noticeable influence of any one specific philosophy, such as humanism in George Eliot's novels. The varied and often contradictory belief system that emerges from a study of Hardy's novels and poetry will be discussed in chapter three. Hardy renounced the notion that he subscribed to any particular belief or philosophy in his "Apology to Late Lyrics", where he repeatedly declares that his intention is not to state a particular belief. His purpose is, he insists, the "exploration of reality" (CP 557). I plan to investigate Hardy's perception of reality and to demonstrate that Hardy's pessimism and universe of "unhope" can be construed as a direct result of the influence that religion exerted on his perception of reality.

In the Preface to Tess Hardy insists that his art expresses impressions and not convictions and therefore cannot be interpreted as a personal statement of belief. While it can be affirmed that Hardy's writing does not indicate undiluted affiliation to any specific creed, it is possible to determine the gist of his personal opinions and beliefs from a close examination of his art. Hardy states unambiguously that he has no desire to portray reality accurately. Millgate quotes Hardy explaining that the purpose of his "art is a changing of the actual proportion of reality so as to bring out more forcibly [...] that feature in them which appeals most strongly to the idiosyncrasy of the artist" (LW 239). According to Hardy, this feature that he isolates and recreates under his artistic microscope is the product of what Hardy terms "the idiosyncrasy of the artist". The word "idiosyncrasy" means "a mental constitution, feeling or view peculiar to a person" and something that is "highly individualised" (OED). Hence it is reasonable to assume that his art portrays a personal vision and reflects his opinions, ideas and perception of reality. Norman Page sums it up in his contribution to The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy entitled "Art and Aesthetics": "What such convictions often amount to is a rejection of representation or 'realism' in favour of a highly, even eccentrically personal vision" (Kramer 38). In this dissertation I will attempt to define this "eccentrically personal vision" in religious terms.

Michael Bakhtin's theory on narrative discourse supports the concept that a writer's personal feelings, opinions and philosophies are an integral part of his art. He states, "The language of the prose writer deploys itself according to the author's ultimate semantic instantiation" (Bakhtin 295). Bakhtin's argument that it is virtually impossible for a writer to be completely neutral because his language is part of an organic whole which inevitably includes a historical and social context as well as personal and cultural beliefs is one which significantly informs the method and critical practices of my study. This thesis is based on the premiss that even a desperately private man like Hardy could not entirely avoid disclosing his personal beliefs via his language (despite his assertions to the contrary). The purpose of this study is to present some speculation upon the nature of Hardy's own personal ideology and to



show how this played out in the fictional world he created. Although reference will be made to biographical material, the key to unlocking the mystery of Hardy's religious views will focus on his novels and poetry. "The novel," Bakhtin states, "is a dialogized representation of an ideologically freighted discourse" (422). This statement implies that language, particularly dialogue and characterisation through dialogue in the novel will necessarily betray an ideology even against the conscious intention of the author. I aim to demonstrate that dialogue in the novels under scrutiny can be used as a tool to determine that Hardy's own peculiar perception of religion, in particular his readiness to dwell on the Mosaic code while rejecting the message of hope in the New Testament, was the driving force behind his doomed universe.

In Chapter one I shall outline Hardy's religious background showing the strength of the faith he ascribed to before he became an agnostic. This serves to put Hardy's loss of faith in perspective and give an indication of the importance of religion in his personal life. Having established the background to Hardy's religious affiliation, I shall then examine Tess, Jude and A Laodécian in the light of the three evangelical principles fundamental to Christianity as outlined by Davis in order to shed light on Hardy's religious ideology as it developed after his loss of faith, in as far as it is discernible from his fiction. According to Davis, Victorian Evangelical Christian belief was based on three distinct principles (104):

1. Man and the world are corrupt through Original sin and suffer the consequences of affliction and damnation.
2. Man requires salvation.
3. Adult conversion was stressed rather than infant baptism.

I intend to demonstrate that Hardy's interpretation of these principles determined his philosophy of life and they are therefore invaluable in assessing the profound pessimism which underlies his philosophy.

Chapter two aims to show that in The Return of the Native, an unusual novel that focuses on the primitive instinctive side of man's nature on the whole uncontaminated by traditional Christian teaching, Hardy's handling of plot and characterisation displays persuasive evidence that Christian doctrine exerted an inextinguishable influence on how he perceived life and in turn how he represented life in his fiction. This novel is set on Egdon Heath which is an essentially pagan environment where folklore and superstition govern the behaviour and thought patterns of the characters. Paradoxically however, pagan Egdon Heath also represents the Biblical cursed earth governed by the relentless laws of Nature which determine man's fate. Thus, despite the predominantly heathen nature of the Heath complete with eerie bonfires and voodoo type curses, Hardy's engineering of plot and characterisation still appear to follow Biblical principles concerning the Law. Consequently, the themes of sin, guilt and judgement follow the same pattern in this novel as in Tess and Jude which are placed in a traditionally Christian framework. An analysis of the religious content in these three novels implies a link between Hardy's doomed universe and his

religious views. The fate of his characters exhibits an affinity to ancient Biblical principles, and it is a fate that is characteristically calamitous.

Chapter three investigates Hardy's concept of the "Immanent Will" as it appears in his poetry with a view to exploring Hardy's concept of the nature of God, suffering and the meaning of life. The focus here is on Hardy's search for a means of reconciling the concept of a benevolent creator God with man's fallen (in the Biblical sense) condition which condemns him to a life of suffering and woe on this earth. Hardy raises a series of questions about the nature of God and offers a variety of possible answers without committing himself to any one in particular. It can be argued that Hardy's poetry opens the window to his soul and allows an insight into his personal religious conflict. Poems dealing specifically with faith and doubt reveal a more poignant personal emotional side to Hardy's loss of faith than can be found in his fiction. Hence they afford the reader a closer understanding of Hardy the man and his art. A sadness and sense of regret emerge, quite different from the apparent aggression, anger and cynicism that tend to emerge from his fiction. Thus Hardy's poetry augments the sense of tragedy in his doomed universe.

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Abbreviations for texts cited

CP	Gibson, James. <u>Thomas Hardy. The Complete Poems.</u> Numerical references from CP refer to the page number and not the number of the poem.
<u>Jude</u>	<u>Jude the Obscure</u>
<u>Life</u>	Hardy, F. <u>The Life of Thomas Hardy.</u>
LW	Millgate, M. <u>The Life and Works of Thomas Hardy</u>
<u>Tess</u>	<u>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</u>

## Chapter 1

### Evangelical Principles in Hardy's fiction

#### Original sin and the curse on the earth

A biographical look at Hardy's religious history puts into perspective the influence of religion on his early life and the importance he attached to religion on a personal level. This religious foundation remained with Hardy all his life and his fiction and poetry reflect its presence both in language and theme. Robert Schweik claims that "Hardy's representations of religion were most profoundly influenced by his loss of faith in Christian dogma" (Kramer 55). Yet an examination of Hardy's mature fiction shows that Hardy's loss of faith was not necessarily the single most important influence on his work. It appears more appropriate to suggest that this influence consisted of an allegiance to specific Old Testament teachings combined with his loss of faith. The combination of an adherence to the Mosaic Law and unbelief in the Christian doctrine of salvation can be traced in both plot and character in Hardy's fiction. Hardy's portrayal of the Mosaic Laws pertaining to sin and atonement in Tess of the d'Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure, and the New Testament teaching of salvation in Tess and A Laodecian sheds light on Hardy's relation to these principles and shows how they were instrumental in the formation of his melancholic world view.

Hardy grew up in a profoundly Christian environment. In Thomas Hardy: Distracted Preacher Timothy Hands meticulously describes the Hardy family's involvement in the church and parish affairs and remarks that Thomas knew the morning and afternoon services by heart as a result of his regular attendance at church (5). As a young man, Hardy's habit of marking his Bible as well as his prayer book and Keble's Christian Year Book (Gittings 77) with passages that were significant to his life, indicates that he personalised the scripture by applying it to his own circumstances. Furthermore, Hardy's attachment to the church was manifested in his youthful desire to become a clergyman (Hands 126). As an apprentice, Hardy frequently worked in churches which were a source of inspiration in his fiction and poetry (A Laodecian 3, CP 536).

Hands raises the important point that Hardy was not only influenced by High Church rituals and doctrines, but also by the Evangelical revival that swept over his native Dorset around 1859 (12). At the time, according to Hands, Hardy was deeply sympathetic to the Evangelical cause and the evangelical zeal for systematically studying the Bible strongly influenced Hardy who became a disciplined student of Scripture (Hands 15). His continual use of Biblical language and symbolism in his novels demonstrates his vast knowledge of the Bible and his intense preoccupation with Biblical themes even after he became an agnostic. An investigation into Biblical themes in selected novels and poems reveals the far reaching effects the Bible was to exert on Hardy's art.

The basis of evangelical doctrine is the concept of Original sin. According to Genesis 3.17 - 19, the sin of Adam and Eve has serious consequences for the earth and its inhabitants. Man and Woman no longer enjoy a privileged position in communion with God living in paradise. They are banished from the presence of God. Woman's punishment is

that she shall be ruled by man and that she shall bring children forth in sorrow. The earth is cursed and Man has to work by the sweat of his brow and eat in sorrow all the days of his life. The final consequence of sin is mortality.

Thus, Biblically speaking, through sin, humanity and the earth are Fallen and corrupt (Davis 104). Human beings stained with Original sin are born into suffering and damnation. In Tess Hardy creates a heroine whose self perception and perception of the world around her manifest signs of an awareness of Original sin and its consequences. From an early age and significantly, while she is still innocent and ignorant of the horrors of the world, a sense that the earth is corrupt and fallen is evident in her consciousness. Early in the novel, in a conversation with her brother Abraham about the stars and the universe, Tess calls the stars “worlds” and compares them to a box of apples: some are “splendid and sound — a few blighted” (Tess 71). Her brother asks her whether their world is “splendid or blighted.” Without hesitation she replies “blighted”. This raises the question why a young, innocent country maiden should view the world as “blighted”. The word blighted means “diseased” or afflicted by “an obscure force which is harmful”<sup>1</sup>. Hardy’s specific choice of this word suggests that the world is subject to a corrupting influence which appears to correlate with the Biblical concept of the curse on the earth following sin. He equips his heroine with an intrinsic sensitivity to the world as a “vale of sorrows” and intensifies this image of the world by expressing its melancholy aspect through nature: “the wind became the sigh of some immense sad soul, conterminous with the universe in space, and with history and time” (Tess 72). The implication is that Tess’s story is not unique. She is a symbol of the human race setting out on life’s journey, every step of which leads further and further into disillusionment, despair and ultimately dissolution both spiritual and physical.

Tess’s belief that the world is blighted is verified almost immediately after she has verbalised it. She falls asleep and her father’s horse, which is his livelihood, is killed in a collision with the morning mail-cart. Abraham’s explanation of the tragedy is: “ ’Tis because we be on a blighted star, and not a sound one isn’t it Tess?” (Tess 73). Tess mentally extends the blight from the earth to herself. Her immediate reaction is to accuse herself: “ ’Tis all my doing — all mine! [...] No excuse for me — none” (Tess 73). Her conscience is highly developed and she is almost eager to take responsibility for things that go wrong. She holds herself accountable although the reader is specifically told: “Nobody blamed Tess as she blamed herself” (Tess 74). The true culprit is in fact Tess’s father whose drunken state prevents him from taking the hives himself, leaving the task to Tess. Yet although Tess tells her brother that if they had not lived on a blighted star “ father wouldn’t have coughed and creeped about [...] and wouldn’t have got too tipsy to go on this journey” (Tess 71), she fails to recognise his culpability in the affair. She is consumed with guilt and takes her alleged fault so seriously that she “regarded herself in the light of a murderess” (Tess 75). It appears then that Tess interprets her experiences and her environment in terms of the Biblical concept of Original sin. She does not view the death of Prince as an unfortunate accident. She views

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford English Dictionary. 1998.

the incident as a manifestation of the curse on the earth and places herself in the shadow of the curse by allowing a sense of guilt to govern her mind and future actions.

Children in Hardy's fiction are often signifiers of man's fallen condition. For example, Tess and her siblings are born into a family of "difficulty, disaster, starvation, disease, degradation, death". Moreover, they are described as "captives; helpless creatures who had never been asked if they wanted life [. . .]" (Tess 91). They are doomed from conception to a life of poverty and misery. Importantly, children represent innocence and purity. Their suffering is not connected to any fault of their own. It seems to be simply part of the human condition in Hardy's fiction and the root of human suffering appears to be linked to the evangelical teaching of Original sin.

The plot in Tess suggests that the Old Testament law linked with the law of Nature function as a catalyst which sets events in motion and determines their outcome. In considering the plight of the Durbyfield children, the narrator cannot accept that their predicament should be part of Nature's plan. He questions Wordsworth's "authority for speaking of Nature's holy plan" (Tess 62)<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, Wordsworth's point is that Nature's works are fair and are linked to the human soul. It is man's role that grieves Wordsworth. He laments "what man has made of man". Given this explicit authorial comment, it can be assumed that Hardy sees Nature's holy plan as ironic; the malevolent forces in the universe are to blame for the misery and poverty suffered by the Durbyfield offspring. The dire irresponsibility of the parents and their hopeless inability to raise or provide for their children is seen as part of the destructive nature of human existence rather than a moral choice made by individuals resulting in injurious consequences for their dependants. Unlike Wordsworth who blames man for the evil in the world in this poem, Hardy apparently disregards man's possible culpability.

In the seduction scene (Tess 128-129), the narrator notably omits any mention of the culpability of Tess's mother in the affair. He rails against an uncaring or even non-existent God for failing the innocent Tess but curiously ignores the sin of omission on the part of Tess's parents. Mrs Durbyfield purposely dresses Tess up to her best feminine advantage with a view to ensnaring Alec. Tess in her innocence trusts her mother's judgement. Only much later does she desperately ask her mother why she had never educated her and prepared her for the "danger in men folk". She declares her innocence and ignorance and cries out: " You did not help me!" (Tess 141). Even the wicked Alec raises this point: " it is a shame for parents to bring up their girls in such dangerous ignorance of the gins and nets that the wicked may set for them" (Tess 437). Mrs Durbyfield does not accept any responsibility and takes a fatalistic view: " 'Tisnater after all, and what do please God.'" This is her definition of "the law". Tess's fate in her eyes is part of the law of Nature, which she equates with the will of God.

Hardy's fiction is peopled by humans who are not free agents operating in a universe which allows them the exercise of their own free will in the Biblical sense. They are at the

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<sup>2</sup> Wordsworth. "Lines Written in Early Spring" (377).

mercy of the circumstances into which they are born and the cruel, inescapable laws of Nature determined by God after the Fall of creation. Both the characters themselves and the omniscient narrator subscribe to this view: Jude's life is described as a "struggle against malignant stars" (Jude 320) and Phillotson bitterly declares: " Cruelty is the law pervading all nature and society; and we can't get out of it if we would" (Jude 334). Indeed, the course of Tess's life is a testimony of how a child born into a cursed world, notwithstanding the fact that she is gifted by nature with "immaculate beauty" and natural grace, follows the relentless and irreversible path of destruction that is the natural progression of human life in this fallen world. Unlike characters in Dickens, Eliot or Gaskell who have the freedom to make choices which influence their fate, Hardy's characters are faced with a predestined doom which, it can be argued, is determined by a combination of the Mosaic Law and the laws of Nature.

Little Father Time, Jude's son, is the personification of the hopeless fallen condition of humanity. He is incapable of happiness. Jude and Sue's best efforts and love are powerless to redeem him from the sorrow that is his natural aspect. He is introduced by his father who feels his attitude to life will be like Job's: "Let the day perish wherein I was born [ . . .]" (Jude 288). When he appears in the narrative, the child's innate sadness is expressed in words that are incongruous for a small boy: "All laughing comes from misapprehension. Rightly looked at there is no laughable thing under the sun" (Jude 289). Little Father Time illustrates the tragic dimensions of Hardy's fictional creation of a world that appears to be corrupted by Original sin and afflicted by its consequences. The serious, melancholy nature of the child is so profound that he says: " It would be better to be out o' the world than in it [ . . .]" and wishes he had never been born (Jude 350).

This overpowering feeling of sorrow, hopelessness and futility climaxes when Little Father Time, seeing no solution to the misery of life, embraces death and kills his siblings and himself. Sue recognises that it was due to his "incurably sad nature" (Jude 357) and the doctor in attendance says that it is a result of the child recognising the terrors of life and "the beginning of a coming universal wish not to live" (Jude 354). The child's consciousness of the sorrow of life on earth is extended to humanity at large and reflects the morbidity of what Page calls Hardy's "eccentric personal vision" (Kramer 38). Tess and Little Father Time's melancholic image of themselves and the world is possibly the result of the depressing influence of the Biblical concept of original sin on Hardy as their creator. This influence robs human existence of hope and happiness and leads to a negation of life.

References to Original sin are not exclusive to Hardy's fiction. An allusion to the Fall can be found in the poem "At the Altar Rail" (CP 420). A man is waiting for his lover to unite herself to him in marriage. The woman decides against marriage and does not appear. The farmer cites her reason:

*"It's sweet of you, dear, to prepare me a nest,  
But a swift, short, gay life suits me best.  
What I really am you have never gleaned;  
I had eaten the apple ere you were weaned."* (11 - 14)

Although this is a humorous poem, the facts remain. The city woman has lost her innocence and cannot reconcile herself to retiring to a quiet life as a farmer's wife. Interestingly, she expresses her unsuitability in Biblical terms. She has eaten of the tree of knowledge and realises that there is no going back. Hardy links the promiscuous woman directly with the Fall of Eve in the Old Testament, the root of Original sin. Even in jest the sense of the curse of sin and the disappointment it causes can be detected in Hardy's art.

There is biographical evidence that Hardy believed in the existence of sin and that it is necessarily connected to consequences and punishment. Jêdrzejewski quotes an annotation that Hardy made in his copy of Mctaggert's book Some Dogmas of Religion, which declares that "If there is a God who is not omnipotent it would be quite possible for a determinist to hold that we are responsible to him for our sins. Such a God might be unable to create a universe without sin [ . . . ] and he might find it possible, as men do, to check that sin by punishment" (41). Hardy's deep concern with the nature of sin and its attendant consequences is explored in depth in Tess.

The concepts of sin and atonement form the basis of Christian doctrine and Hardy's perception of both is important in an investigation into the influence of his religious belief system on his art. Hardy questions the concept of sin, and seeks clarity on what morally constitutes a sin, particularly with reference to sex. He draws a distinction between the morals laid down by Victorian society on the basis of Church teaching and what behaviour is an acceptable norm according to Nature. Viewing the seduction of Tess from the perspectives of different characters with the added insight of authorial comments, he outlines his multi-faceted approach to Tess's "sin".

Tess's perception of her sexual relations with Alec d'Urberville is unmistakably shaped by her traditional Christian upbringing. The narrator informs the reader that "Like all village girls she was well grounded in the Holy Scripture, and had dutifully studied the histories of Alohah and Aholibah, and knew the inferences to be drawn from them" (Tess 155). Hardy selects a gruesome Biblical reference in Ezekiel 23 to elucidate Tess's religious mind-set. Alohah and Ahoilbah are prostitutes of the most depraved kind, whose lust is insatiable and who sacrifice their children to be eaten as food for idols. Their punishment is that they are given over to terror and plunder, they will be stoned and cut down with swords, and (significantly with regard to Tess, whose child dies) their children are killed. The "inferences" that Hardy refers to is the Biblical principle which rules Tess's philosophy of life and can be found in the final verse of Ezekiel 23: "You will suffer the penalty for your lewdness and bear the consequences of your sins of idolatry." Because Tess believes this, she is convinced that her sin is severe and she deserves to be punished. When her baby is dying, she cries out to God: " Heap as much anger as you want to upon me, and welcome; but pity the child" (Tess 156). Tess does not view her fate objectively and acknowledge that her mother forces her into the circumstances that lead to the seduction, or the fact that she is taken advantage of against her will. She seeks no scapegoat and instinctively shoulders all

the blame. In her mind she is as guilty as the Old Testament prostitutes and as deserving of judgement.

Tess's sexual experience with Alec d'Urberville leads her to perceive herself as part of the corruption of the earth. She thinks she is a "figure of Guilt in the landscape of Innocence" (*Tess* 145), and her consciousness labours under the burdensome notion that life constitutes " numbers of tomorrows just all in a line, the first of them the biggest and clearest, and the others getting smaller and smaller as they stand farther away; but they all seem very fierce and cruel and as if they said I'm coming! Beware of me! Beware of me! [. . .]" (*Tess* 197). The future appears to Tess to be bleak, threatening and without hope. This sense of hopelessness is a direct result of the oppression of sin in Tess's consciousness. Hardy universalises Tess's feelings calling them "those of the age — the ache of modernism" (*Tess* 197). Tess thereby becomes a signifier for all humankind tainted by sin inhabiting a world that is cursed and therefore hostile.

Tess's preoccupation with her own guilt determines her behaviour. Tess rarely acts, on the whole she reacts to life and her reaction is strangely passive. When Alec forces his attentions on her, Tess is described in purely passive terms as: "a puppet", "a marble term", and "as though she were nearly unconscious of what he did" (*Tess* 134). Even on the rare occasions when she does act, she immediately retracts the action and becomes submissive. Tess strikes Alec when he comes to pursue her while she is working on Farmer Groby's farm. She draws blood and then cries out " Now punish me! [...] Whip me, crush me [...] I shall not cry out" (*Tess* 458). Apparently, it does not occur to her that she has a right to defend herself. The same pattern of behaviour occurs when she kills Alec. After briefly attempting to flee with Angel she awaits judgement and the penalty without resistance. She says quietly " I am ready" (*Tess* 543).

Strangely, Tess exhibits courage and strength in taking responsibility for her siblings and her parents, yet is utterly unassertive with regard to her own life. Her docile reception of Angel Clare's rejection on their wedding night, on the grounds that she is unchaste, is another example of guilt determining her behaviour. Although Angel is guilty of the same sin and it would be appropriate for Tess to expect his understanding and forgiveness, she meekly accepts his judgement and in no way tries to influence him. The narrator specifically states: "If Tess had been artful, had she made a scene, fainted, [. . .] he would probably not have withstood her." But Tess's sense of guilt overrides her sense of self-preservation. She faces Angel with "dumb and vacant fidelity" (*Tess* 331). Tess deems his harsh treatment to be justified. It functions as a form of penance: "And I must take my Cross on me/ For wronging him awhile", ("Tess's Lament" CP 176). The overwhelming burden of her guilt and the hopelessness of her situation give rise to a death wish in Tess: she denies herself to the extent that she wishes to "unbe". She shares with Little Father Time the notion that death is the only possible escape from the storms of life. The novel demonstrates the powerful influence that a belief in sin and guilt can exert on thought and behaviour. The concepts of sin, guilt and the need for atonement emerge consistently as dominant themes. Hence it



seems reasonable to suggest that the plots in Tess and Jude appear to comply with the evangelical principle that man and the world are corrupt through Original sin and suffer the consequences of affliction and damnation.

Atonement takes the form of self-sacrifice in Tess and Sue. The death of Tess's father renders the family homeless, forcing Tess to become Alec's mistress in order to save her family from destitution. She sacrifices herself out of love for her siblings. There is a similarity between Tess's situation and that of Sue Bridehead when she returns to her husband and sacrifices herself out of a sense of guilt. Both women are sacrificial vessels. Their actions are governed by a sense that they must suffer to atone for their sins of in chastity. Sue says: " self abnegation is the higher road. We should mortify the flesh — the terrible flesh - the curse of Adam. We ought to be continually sacrificing ourselves on the altar of duty" (Jude 362). Hardy places Sue and Tess at the mercy of feelings that are specifically linked to the Old Testament Law by means of dialogue. This demonstrates the influence of the Bible on his thinking and creative output.

In examining the nature of sin and its consequences, it is interesting to note that Hardy's fiction implies that sexual sin ranks as paramount. Both Tess and Angel are ruled by the belief that sexual sin is serious and has life changing consequences which cannot be circumvented. However, both regard murder without flinching. Tess astonishingly commits homicide without experiencing any guilt at all. She considers it to be the only possible response to the given situation. In fact, she sees the murder as a means of gaining Angel's forgiveness and love. She says to Angel " I don't blame you; only Angel, will you forgive my sin against you, now I have killed him?" (Tess 529). Angel's response is love, tenderness and protection. He appears unconcerned that Tess is a murderess. The man, whose high moral ground so recoils from sexual sin as to extinguish in a moment the intense passionate love he has for Tess, disregards what traditionally is the most serious sin of all.

In contrast to Tess's evangelical view of her sin, Hardy demonstrates that when her story is viewed through Nature's perspective, Tess can only be seen as pure. As has been shown, Tess's mother dismisses her pregnancy with the words " 'tisnater". In her opinion, it is not a question of morality (Tess 164). Extensive authorial comments possibly shed light on Hardy's views. The narrator states that her experiences "but for the world's opinion would have been simply a liberal education" (Tess 163). He does not judge Tess harshly according to social norms (which in Victorian times were necessarily connected to Christian ethics); rather he looks into her heart and sees there no guile. Hardy tells the reader that "essentially this young wife of his was as deserving of the praise of King Lemuel as any other woman endowed with the same dislike of evil, her moral value having to be reckoned not by achievement but by tendency" (Tess 373). While Tess sees herself as "a figure of Guilt" Hardy insists that "all the while she was making a distinction where there was none. She had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly" (Tess 145). It is noteworthy that Hardy uses the passive: Tess is made to break the law, she does not actively or knowingly break the law.

She is indeed more sinned against than sinning, but more importantly, her “immorality” does not count as a sin in Nature (Tess 145). In order to examine the nature of Tess’s sin objectively, Hardy asks: “Moreover, alone on a desert island would she have been wretched at what happened to her?”; and also: “If she had been just created, to discover herself a spouseless mother with no experience of life, [ . . . ] would the position have caused her despair?” (Tess 153). He concludes: “No, she would have taken it calmly, and found pleasures therein.” Tess would rejoice in her child and not see herself as guilty at all. In other words innately, or in Nature, Tess is innocent. It is in the context of a judgemental society and the Old Testament Law that she is considered guilty.

Hardy’s attitude is ambivalent. On the one hand he clearly condemns the dogmatic teaching on sex which condemns Tess. As the author he declares her innocence by subtling the novel “A Pure Woman” and indicating that Tess is asleep when she is seduced. There is no question of consent and the sexual act is effectively rape. Ironically, Hardy uses Scriptural references (Proverbs 31, Tess 373) to emphasise Tess’s purity while in conventional theological terms she would most certainly be condemned, as indeed she perceives herself to be. Perversely, it is the Machiavellian Alec who recognises Tess’s innocence. He declares: “ Why I did not despise you was on account of your being unsmirched in spite of it all” (Tess 446). In her inner self she is pure but circumstances and her own ignorance and vulnerability combined with the evil of Alec taking advantage of her make her guilty in the eyes of the church and society. Hardy undertakes to remove judgemental theology and examine Tess under the microscope of natural morality in terms of her inner self, her intentions and motivations and declares her blameless.

Yet, Hardy as the author and creator of Tess, despite his passionate defence of her innocence, delineates the progression of events in her life according to the Biblical principles of sin and judgement as is evident from the titles he has given to each phase of the novel: The Maiden; Maiden No More; The Rally; The Consequence; The Woman Pays; The Convert and Fulfilment. The novel proceeds from innocence through sexual “sin” to Tess’s hope of love and happiness with Angel, his discovery of her “sin” and desertion of her as a punishment, Alec’s re-entry into her life and ultimately her death, the “Fulfilment” of the Mosaic Law, which demands a life for a life. The evangelical principles of sin and its consequences emerge as determining factors in Tess.

In his novels Hardy is concerned with exploring the nature of human life, recording what he has observed and attempting to explain why things are as they are. An investigation into this exploration reveals that Hardy seeks the solution to the reason why the universe operates according to what he calls the law. Hardy differentiates between the Old Testament Law, laws of society and the Law of Nature “based on the scientific laws of determinism which state that all men are subject to the laws of nature which operate unequivocally on the human race regardless of whether they are innocent or guilty ” (Davis 108). All these laws are yardsticks for exploring the nature of sin and guilt, the consequence of sin and possibilities for atonement for sin. Hardy does not offer any clear cut definitions of these laws, rather he

shows how they operate in the lives of his characters and in so doing questions their validity or the perception of their application in differing circumstances.

The Old Testament law links sin with blood and states that atonement for sin requires sacrifice and the shedding of blood (Book of Leviticus). The first reference in the Bible of a sacrifice made to God is Abel's offering of the firstling of his flock (Genesis 4:3). Significantly, Abel's sacrifice which involves the shedding of blood is accepted by God, but Cain's offering of fruit is not. The themes of blood and atonement can be traced as a linear progression from the very beginning of Tess right to the end. The D'Urberville blood line and Tess's family's connection to this blood line form the basis of the plot. John Durbyfield's drunken celebration at discovering his link to the old family results directly in Tess's first mistake which sets into motion a sequence of events that ultimately lead to her death. Tess's gloomy destiny begins with the fatal injury of the Durbyfield's horse due to Tess's fatigue. Tess actively tries to reverse the misfortune and save the horse but she fails and is left stained with blood. "In her despair Tess sprang forward and put her hand on the hole. She became splashed with crimson drops" (Tess 72). This blood functions as a symbol and a prophecy of Tess's future. In Old Testament atonement rituals, blood is sprinkled as a form of atonement for sin (Leviticus 4:6). Innocent Tess bearing the blots of Prince's blood on her body bring to mind these sacrificial rituals and presage the role Tess is to assume as the sacrificial victim laid out on the altar at Stonehenge.

Tess views herself as guilty for the death of Prince, therefore she agrees to go to the d'Urbervilles to seek employment although her instinct is against it. "Well, as I killed the horse mother,' she said mournfully, I suppose I ought to do something" (Tess 77). Tess is sent to Trantridge Poultry Farm in virginal white suggestive of Keats's "still unravished bride of quietness"<sup>3</sup> in a pastoral setting. Her journey is a sacrificial one. Her first encounter with Alec is symbolically linked to the temptation of Eve by Satan in the Garden of Eden where she eats the fruit he offers her. On her way home a thorn on a rose he has put on her breast pricks her, drawing blood. Tess immediately reads this as an omen. Hardy carefully weaves symbols of colour to prepare us for the seduction and to emphasise its significance in Tess's life: Alec is described as "the blood-red ray in the spectrum of her life" (Tess 85), his home "the Lodge in the Chase" is crimson and the house is of a rich red colour.

Hardy links the blood line aspect of sin to the Old Testament law that the sins of the fathers be visited on the next generation by suggesting, albeit sarcastically, that Tess's fate at the hands of Alec may be a form of retribution for the sins of her ancestors (Tess 129), who had probably ravished innocent peasant girls. Furthermore, throughout the novel omens and signs connect her act of homicide to a family curse. In an authorial comment Hardy protests against the unfairness of this law: "to visit the sins of the fathers may be a morality good enough for divinities, but it is scorned by average human nature; and it therefore does not mend the matter" (Tess 129), but nevertheless his fiction implies that Biblical laws influence his art and shape the path of his characters' existence on earth.

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<sup>3</sup> Keats "Ode to a Grecian Urn".

Hardy traces these ancient Biblical principles in the events in his novels and the narrator's comments often serve to criticise, question or even invert the principle in operation. In the seduction Tess is clearly a victim and therefore the action does not in Hardy's view constitute a sin. However, the suffering it results in complies with the law as laid out in Leviticus 5.15 which requires a sacrifice from a person who sins out of ignorance, "and if a soul sin [. . .] though he wist it not, yet he is guilty and shall bear his iniquity." Therefore, despite the fact that Hardy exonerates Tess, showing that she is effectively abducted and taken advantage of while she is asleep, she is guilty under the law and must suffer the consequences.

While Hardy's later novels display a commonality with the Biblical law of sin and punishment, his attitude towards the relentless law appears to be far from neutral. Intrusive authorial commentary expresses grave cynicism and anger at his incomprehension of a fallen world and the God that created it, rather than a total rejection or merely ambivalence in a belief in God at all. The seduction scene in *Tess* exemplifies the case in point. Here Hardy does not deny or question the existence of God, rather he questions why Providence does not intervene, but allows the seduction to take place. He asks "where was Tess's guardian angel?" at that critical moment in her life and "where was the providence of her simple faith?" (129). The descriptions of Tess are tender; she is as a gossamer thread, hopelessly fragile as a creation, yet unprotected and vulnerable in the hands of Fate. Hardy cynically maintains that Providence must have been sleeping or otherwise occupied. The narrator responds with anger that it should be possible that Tess, the incarnation of innocence and purity, so deserving of protection, not destruction, should suffer such a dire fate which irrevocably sets in motion the wheels of her destiny: to be an unmarried mother, to lose the man she loves on her wedding night and ultimately to murder Alec and to die by hanging. There is no mercy, goodness or benevolence in this concept of Providence.

The notion that God is uncaring and neutral towards man is reflected in the comment on Tess's fate at the hands of Alec. The reader is told: "Tess — and how many more — might ironically have said to God: thou hast counselled a better course than thou hast permitted" (*Tess* 162). The almost reverent description of Tess at her most vulnerable pitted against an uncaring and merciless Providence can be seen as a powerful expression of Hardy's bitterness towards God. This aggressive anti-religious sentiment did not go unnoticed by contemporary critics: Edmund Gosse asks the question: "What has Providence done to Mr Hardy that he should rise up in the arable land of Wessex and shake his fist at his Creator?" (*Hands* 108) and G.K. Chesterton maintained that Hardy combined a disbelief in God with a hatred of him for not existing (*Lance* 8). These comments reflect Hardy's emotional attitude towards God and Christian doctrine and illustrate that his religious views shape his creative energy.

The theme of an ancestral bloodline connected to a curse and sin and atonement is also explored in *Jude*. Jude ponders about his affection for Sue and concludes "in a family like his own where marriage usually meant a tragic sadness, marriage with a blood relation

would duplicate the adverse conditions, and a tragic sadness might be intensified to a tragic horror” (Jude 96). Hardy sets the scene for tragedy on the basis of an ancestral curse. The “tragic horror” takes the form of murder and, as in Tess, is rooted in sexual “sin”. Jude’s son murders Sue’s children and then hangs himself. Uncharacteristically, Sue interprets this horrific deed in terms of sin and atonement. She believes that the death of her children is a punishment for her adultery and says to Jude: “ Arabella’s child killing mine was a judgement — the right slaying the wrong” (Jude 368). She then insists on returning to her husband because in her mind her children died to teach her that living with Jude was sinful: “ My children are — dead — and it is right that they should be! They were sin-begotten. They were sacrificed to teach me how to live! Their death was the first stage of my purification” (Jude 383). It is ironic that in the face of the horrifying deaths of her children, Hardy’s archetypal “modern woman”, well read in philosophy and overtly antireligious, resorts to religion of a most orthodox type to make sense of her life. Accordingly, her life choices from that point on are determined along extreme evangelical lines and she undertakes to bear the consequences of her iniquity by sacrificing her love for Jude and sacrificing her body to her husband Phillotson for whom she has an intense physical aversion.

Jude “who has long abandoned his faith” is scandalised by this development in Sue. He sees their separation as “acting by the letter” of the law and declares that “ The letter killeth!” (Jude 409). Through Jude’s response to Sue’s new found faith Hardy condemns the negative self-destructive effect that her belief in sin and atonement exerts on her life. Sue seeks forgiveness for her sin through suffering and self-sacrifice but Arabella’s final comment in reply to Mrs Edlin’s comment “ ’tis to be believed she’s found forgiveness somewhere” (Jude 431), expresses Hardy’s cynicism concerning the concepts of forgiveness and salvation and emphasises the assertion that only death brings peace: “ She may swear on her knees to that holy cross upon her necklace until she’s hoarse, but it won’t be true! She’s never found peace since she left his arms, and never will again until she is as he is now” (Jude 431).

### **Salvation and Conversion**

According to Davis (104), after sin and atonement, the second principle central to Christian doctrine is that Fallen man requires saving. According to the Bible, God set up a means to liberate man from the burden of sin. In the Old Testament, forgiveness of sin is achieved through blood sacrifice and offerings while the New Testament teaches that the sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary replaces that blood sacrifice and that under the new dispensation, forgiveness and therefore salvation, is attained by faith in Jesus. Hardy’s fiction appears to uphold the principle that the world is fallen and contaminated by sin for which atonement is required. The crucial point indicating a probable deviation of Hardy’s beliefs from Christian dogma is that while Christianity offers a way out of a cursed existence for humankind by means of salvation, Hardy’s universe remains firmly entrenched in the curse of sin because he has lost his belief that God is good and merciful and sent His son to save the world from damnation. The stumbling block for Hardy is the miraculous and redemptive theolatriy. Deborah Collins in Thomas Hardy and his God: A Liturgy of Unbelief, Pinion in A

Hardy Companion and Timothy Hands in Thomas Hardy: Distracted Preacher? outline in detail Hardy's loss of faith in God as a benevolent loving Being and in the supernatural aspect of Christian teachings. This loss of faith, especially in the doctrine of salvation, necessarily results in a rejection of any hope of humankind rising above its gloomy destiny in this vale of sorrows. In Hardy's world there is no means by which damnation and doom can be avoided. The removal of salvation from Christian doctrine renders it impotent as a tool for humankind to engage with and implement as a means of solving the difficulties of life.

Hardy's rendition of the baptism scene in Tess (156-159) examines the doctrine of salvation from the perspective of the believer and shows it to be a disillusioning myth. It is worthy of note that although Tess accepts her own fate in this world with resignation and displays no regard for her own salvation in the world here-after, she desperately tries to protect her child from the spiritual consequences of his illegitimacy. Her passionate belief in the necessity of baptism for her baby's salvation reflects her attachment to the traditional religious dogma she was brought up in. She feels that it is her moral duty to secure salvation for her child by performing the ritual herself as her father will not allow a clergyman in the house. This naive faith is fated to suffer a severe blow at the hands of the clergyman when Tess seeks validation for the baptism from the church. She appeals to the clergyman to face her "as you yourself to me myself" undermining the artificial church structures and reducing the issue to purely human and natural terms. On these terms the vicar is inclined to agree with Tess that the baptism is acceptable, but officially he has to deny the baby a Christian burial. Her sincerity appeals to the vicar's nobler instincts or rather those which have survived a decade of endeavouring to "graft technical belief on actual scepticism" (Tess 159).

Hardy levels severe criticism at the hypocrisy of a man who plays an important role in the church and society, one that is obviously incompatible with his personal beliefs. Tess performs the baptismal rite with great sincerity and an overwhelming desire to save her child from damnation while the lacklustre clergyman, who has the power bestowed upon him by the church to perform the rite, possesses no faith and views the act as the exercise of a trade. The stark contrast between the two dramatizes the enormous gap that separates genuine (if misplaced) faith and the empty form embodied by institutionalised religion. Religious rites are established to perform a function in society. In this case, the baptism is seen by Tess as a cleansing of her sin which is being visited on her child and as a reversal of the curse of the fallen world, so that her baby can be committed back to the earth in a state of innocence. Yet the church has become so enmeshed in social rules and doctrines that it cannot and will not perform these rites so vitally important to Tess. With scathing irony Hardy demonstrates that the young, frightened, "fallen" Tess is more able and worthy to perform the rite than the church representative. But underlying the whole issue is Hardy's cynicism concerning salvation. Hardy shows baptism and salvation to be merely artificial constructs without any place in reality. The faith in these constructs by the believer, in this case Tess, is rendered futile by the fact that it is not backed up by the very institution that teaches them.

Hardy's interest in the concept of adult baptism by immersion as opposed to infant baptism originated in his discussions with a Baptist colleague at the office (Hands 81), and is well documented in A Laodicean. His detailed presentations of theological arguments with regards to adult baptism in this novel are criticised as excessive and irrelevant by critics such as Lance (154), but they serve a twofold purpose. Firstly, they illustrate his intense mental preoccupation with Christian dogma and secondly, as Hands succinctly puts it, "Hardy uses his novels as vehicles for the rejection of the doctrines of his youth" (84).

Paula Power arrives at a Baptist chapel for the purpose of getting baptised. Her father, a devout Baptist, builds the chapel and insists that Paula be baptised. Hardy investigates adult baptism from three perspectives: Somerset, the agnostic outsider whose role is that of a neutral spectator, the Baptist minister and his congregation who have a strong desire for the rite to be consummated, and the emotionally charged Paula, the central figure faced with a choice between complying with her late father's death bed wish, or refusing in order to follow her instinct. Paula is a symbol of modernity. She is a wealthy, foreign, single woman of independent means who can afford both socially and financially to do as she pleases. Unlike most Victorian women, her choices are not limited by social norms. This is an important factor because it allows Hardy to explore attitudes towards religion in a vacuum, so to speak, uninfluenced by external factors.

On the question of baptism, Paula feels obliged to obey her father's wishes as a dutiful daughter. However, ultimately, she does not allow this sense of duty to overrule her personal feeling of what is wrong or right. Somerset notices that she has a copy of *Baptist Magazine* and "Wardlaw on Infant Baptism" on a chair in her bedroom (A Laodicean 40). Evidently, she reads up on the matter and wishes to make an informed decision and not allow emotions to determine her choice. Miss De Stancy clarifies Paula's position when Somerset judgementally notes that she should have known her own mind before going to the chapel to undergo the ceremony. She declares, " Paula's own mind had nothing to do with it! [. . .] It was all undertaken by her from a mistaken sense of duty." Paula tries over a period of time to pluck up the courage to go through with it. Confronted with the reality at last, she backs out, which, it must be noted, required a great deal of courage to do in the face of expectation of the minister and the entire congregation. A strong sense of irony underlies Miss De Stancy's explanation of her refusal: " She would not submit to the rite when it came to the point. The water looked so cold and dark and fearful, she said, that she could not do it to save her life," (A Laodicean 36). Instinctively Paula shies away, following her emotions and not her sense of social propriety. According to Christian doctrine, a believer gets baptised to profess her faith which results in salvation and eternal life. Yet Paula will not do it "to save her life". Hardy is punning on the spiritual meaning of Charlotte's words and expressing his own disapproval of the practice.

Hardy raises the issue of baptism, not infant baptism which is entirely passive, but adult baptism which requires personal conviction and courage to make a public profession of faith. Paula's public rejection of the rite is a statement of her modernity, mental liberty and

freedom to act according to her wishes. However, Somerset observes that her strength and resolution were not an “unassisted gift of nature” but that wealth and position contributed to this freedom. Furthermore, he notes that social pressure would have swayed her had she not had “something extraneous to her mental self” in the form of wealth and position “to fall back on” (*A Laodicean* 19). In other words, wealth and position and social independence buy her freedom. Paula, in line with the newness and change of the industrial age that was fast eclipsing the old order, chooses to reject religion, a bastion of the past, and break away from the teaching of her youth. Her decision is clear, unclouded by extenuating circumstances unlike characters in Hardy’s later fiction whose lives and fates are determined by external factors. They lack the freedom of choice and action that Hardy allows Paula. The harsh, bitter realism that pervades his mature novels indicates that Hardy possibly no longer entertains the idea that free will is an option for humanity.

Adult conversion, a prerequisite to adult baptism, is a theme that Hardy explores in various novels. In *Tess*, the candidate takes the very unlikely form of the archetypal villain, Alec d’Urberville. The fact that Hardy devotes the entire sixth phase of the novel to conversion, and entitles it “The Convert,” demonstrates the importance he attaches to this evangelical principle. Moreover, the process of conversion and its consequences are meticulously outlined on three separate occasions. The prelude of the conversion is described to Tess by Angel. Despite his own refusal to believe in conversion, he has the highest regard for his father who preaches repentance to Alec in the face of severe verbal abuse. Tess hears the entire story in detail from Alec himself via a sermon he preaches and yet again from him on a personal level face to face. He acknowledges his sinful nature and testifies to the radical change that God has worked in his life through the work of old Mr Clare. His conversion provides a forum for the causes and effects of adult conversion to be scrutinised.

A balanced examination of conversion is achieved by looking at it from two opposing points of view: the subjective view of the convert himself, and the sceptical view of Tess who has known Alec at his worst and cannot bring herself to believe in this “new” man. This deep scepticism is emphasised by the omniscient narrator. There is a strong resistance against accepting that such a radical transformation could be genuine or lasting. The descriptions are scathing, stressing the aggressive unnatural aspect of conversion: “animalism had become fanaticism, Paganism Paulinism”, Alec exudes “the rude energy of a theolatriy that was almost ferocious” (*Tess* 425). The main point Hardy makes as a narrator is that such a conversion is more than a paradox: it is a falsification that goes against the hereditary genetic make up of a man like d’Urberville.

Hardy’s fiction illustrates the contention that it is impossible for a man to rise above his biological inheritance. The spiritual is merely a façade erected in an attempt to initiate such a rise, but its failure is inevitable. The biological factors in the form of Nature will ultimately conquer all others. In Hardy’s universe, these inherited biological factors are linked to universal Natural laws that can be equated to fate. Alec’s facial features display his



hereditary evil nature. "The former curves of sensuousness were now modulated to lines of devotional passion. The lip shades that had meant seductiveness were now made to express supplication" (*Tess* 425). Religion briefly mutates them but they revert back at the slightest provocation. Tess inherited a whole genetic line of decadence and decay presented in the novel in the form of omens and curses. The native purity and innocent beauty of this "fresh and virginal daughter of Nature" (*Tess* 192) cannot reverse the relentless natural forces that govern the fate of a decaying hereditary blood line. Hardy's rejection of the New Testament doctrine of justification by faith removes any possibility of amelioration of the human condition. His characters have no choice. They are entrapped in the course that Fate allots them. People are sinful and born into a cursed world. This is their inheritance. Neither villains like Alec nor innocents like Tess can escape this inheritance. Scientific laws of determinism and Biblical laws are no respecters of persons. As Tess points out, "the sun do shine on the just and the unjust alike" (*Tess* 199).

The narrator's scepticism concerning Alec's conversion is echoed by Tess. She is horrified to hear the words of the gospel emerge from the mouth of a devil. Her response is, "Out upon such — I don't believe in you. I hate it!" (*Tess* 429). She despises those who have their fill of pleasure in this world at the expense of others and then conveniently convert when they have had enough. But the most significant comment is the reason she gives Alec for refusing to believe in the sincerity and validity of the conversion. It is that "a better man than you does not believe in such" (*Tess* 429). This remark prefigures others that lead to Tess's exposition of Angel's theories. In effect, by means of Angel's teaching, Tess reverses Alec's conversion. She is the agent of subversion both by her physical beauty (which is irresistible to Alec and a force far superior in strength to his new faith), and the agnostic ideas she propagates. Hardy's opposition to the evangelical principle of conversion can be deduced from his fiction which demonstrates that spiritual conversion of the Wesleyan sort cannot be lasting. Tess calls the conversion a "flash" that Alec "feels" and is convinced it will be short-lived. Hardy portrays conversion as an emotional experience and not a spiritual one. Its nature is shown to be temporary and not eternal.

Hardy's fiction demonstrates that man is incapable of rising above the animalism of his sinful human condition to purity on a spiritual plane which contrasts with the evangelical view that repentance can change lives. Alec's conversion differs sharply from George Eliot's representation of the dissenter doctrine that even a criminal facing hanging has a chance for eternal life: when Dinah visits Hetty Sorrel in prison she shows her the Evangelical way past human misery to peace. Dickens, too, in *Dombey and Son* espouses the view that forgiveness, reconciliation and personal reform are possible in even the hardest of hearts: Dombey converts from a cruel, unfeeling man to a gentle, loving grandfather, and, on a more specifically religious level, on her deathbed, Alice Marwood has Harriet Carker read to her from the Bible about the ministry of Jesus. This destitute, fallen woman can relate to Jesus as a saviour and find forgiveness and peace in death because of this belief. Hardy's treatment of this theme in his fiction contradicts this view as it consistently demonstrates that

the amelioration of a person's character or condition through an acceptance of God's mercy is based on a myth. In his fiction it seems evident that the course of life is determined by external forces.

Hardy uses Alec's conversion as a vehicle to examine various theological issues where Alec ironically represents the Church while Tess represents unbelievers. Alec, in his new role as an evangelical, states that he cannot accept that "you can have an ethical system without any dogma" (Tess 456). Tess replies: "Why, you can have the religion of loving-kindness and purity at least, if you can't have — what do you call it — dogma." Alec maintains that it is pointless to lead a good moral life if there is no God to reward or punish. Alec expresses the concept that casts fear into religious doubters. This fear is based on the premiss that if God is removed from the equation of human existence then anarchy would result since human beings only behave morally as a means to escape hell fire. However, Tess's life is a testimony of her belief in loving-kindness. She is prepared to make enormous personal sacrifices to protect her family from poverty. She wishes to do the right thing for its own sake, not in response to fear of punishment. Yet in Hardy's doomed fictional world, her charitable nature is denied the reward that Christianity would have afforded it.

Another example of such a short-lived conversion is that of Arabella in Jude. Like Alec, a death is the factor which drives her into the arms of the evangelical church. The parallel between Arabella and Alec extends further. Both are essentially animalistic and are slaves to their physical desires. They are the incarnation of the absence of spirituality. Therefore, it is incongruous to associate them with the spiritual or to take seriously any assertion on their part that they have embraced the spiritual simply because it is in total opposition to their nature. Arabella is described as "a complete and substantial female animal — no more, no less" (Jude 41), and we first meet her in the act of flinging a pig's pizzle at Jude. It appears nothing short of ludicrous to place such a woman in a spiritual context. Arabella's short-lived "conversion" seriously undermines the concept taught by the New Testament, that it is possible for people to deny their genetic identity and radically change their nature so that they can become "new creatures" by means of supernatural influence. Arabella says, "I must be as I was born" (Jude 331). Like Alec, she abandons her new found spirituality to pursue her former lover. The carnal is more powerful than any attempt at spirituality.

Hardy's novels indicate that despite the confusion of doubt and belief that prevails, on the issue of conversion and baptism, his views are unambiguous. His fiction demonstrates that human beings are governed by naturalistic forces which overshadow any attempt at spirituality be it by supernatural intervention in the conversion experience or formally by means of ritual in the form of baptism, infant or adult. Realism denies man's desire to secure a manifestation of spirituality. Conversion is merely an emotional experience that is as transient as any mood swing and baptism is a ritual which derives its meaning not from any inherent value, but from the value or lack thereof imposed on it either by the candidate

personally, in an adult baptism, as in the case of Paula, or the parent in the case of pædobaptism, as seen in Tess.

In lieu of a religious solution to the evil in the world, Hardy professes a belief in “evolutionary meliorism” which he explains as being “loving-kindness, operating through scientific knowledge, and actuated by the modicum of free will conjecturally possessed by organic life when the mighty necessitating forces [...] happen to be in equilibrium.” This “evolutionary meliorism” is to be “the first step to the soul’s betterment and the body’s also” (“Apology to Late Lyrics” CP 557). Yet, even a cursory examination of the characters in his mature fiction suggests that he rejects the possibility that the human condition can be ameliorated and regenerated by the positive actions of characters, or that characters can evolve into better human beings through their deeds and moral choices as has been shown in the characters created by Dickens, Eliot and Gaskell. Hardy’s protagonists are not given a free will. Their fate is determined by cruel laws of the universe against which they are defenceless. Loving-kindness is a weak and ineffectual weapon that has no power to influence what fate decrees. Consequently, his later novels, specifically Tess, Jude and The Return of the Native develop into a type of anti-*Bildungsroman*: instead of characters beginning as flawed creatures and experiencing hardships in order to build their strengths and overcome their weaknesses, Hardy’s characters begin at a point of relative strength which erodes as their lives progress until they are utterly annihilated.

Tess’s spiritual decline from faith to unbelief illustrates this point. She is raised in the Christian ethic and is accustomed to going to church on Sunday. As a young girl, she imbibes and automatically accepts the church’s teachings and displays a belief in Providence. But as her life unfolds in a sequel of evil events, her faith takes on a moribund character. She returns to Marlott after the seduction deflowered, pregnant and deeply depressed. On her way she encounters the sign painter whose bright red proclamation of her guilt “Thy damnation slumbereth not” (Tess 138) deeply affects Tess. At this stage Tess’s religious perception is one of overwhelming guilt. Tess reacts by seeking a means to alleviate her guilt and an escape from damnation. Assuming the sign painter to be a guide on spiritual issues and desperately seeking consolation Tess asks if guilt remains even if “the sin was not your own seeking” (Tess 138). She receives no comfort. Tess’s response is prophetic. It also summarises the essence of the effect of the Mosaic Law expressed in the New Testament as “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6 23): “I think they (the texts) are horrible,’ said Tess Crushing! Killing!” Since Hardy as the author does not allow the possibility of forgiveness and redemption, her case is in effect hopeless and doomed.

Hardy’s sign painter speaks “in a trade voice” (Tess 138) undermining the man’s assertion that he believes what he writes and is later echoed in the metaphor used to describe the vicar who refuses Tess’s baby a Christian burial. Both men represent religious stereotypes whose trade is to use their tools to accuse and condemn souls. The sign painter incident illustrates that contrary to its alleged purpose of regeneration and salvation, evangelical fanaticism can act as an agent of destruction. The signs are painted in vermilion

which is significant as it links in with the theme of blood, sacrifice and atonement. The authorial comment expresses contempt for this type of evangelism: “Some people might have cried ‘Alas poor Theology!’ at the hideous defacement — the last grotesque phase of a creed which had served humankind well in its time” (Tess 138). Furthermore, this comment suggests that religion has evolved to a point of extinction and has become obsolete in a Darwinian world determined by the principle of the survival of the fittest. Religion in that form does not deserve to survive as indeed it does not for Tess or Jude.

Still clinging to the religion she is familiar with, Tess arrives home and after a while of isolation, seeking comfort, she chooses to go to church because she “liked the chanting- such as it was — and the old Psalms, and to join in the Morning Hymn” (Tess 143). Tess identifies especially with the music and she feels as if it will “drag her heart out of her bosom.” These church rites form an important part of Tess’s religious and emotional consciousness at this stage of her life. Tess’s affinity to church liturgy and music reflects Hardy’s own, as Hands and Jêdrzejwski both document through biographical evidence and letters. However, Hardy immediately undercuts these sentiments by harshly pointing out that there is form only and no power in the religion of the established church. The congregation “rested three-quarters of a minute on their foreheads as if they were praying, though they were not; then sat up and turned around” (Tess 144). They then proceed to whisper about Tess. Filled with shame she concludes that she can never return to church. She enters the church seeking reassurance and leaves bereft. Religion is the source of Tess’s guilt and mental agony and she seeks alleviation in the church that forms her religious beliefs. Hardy criticises the fact that the established Church’s hypocrisy and enslavement to dogmas and man-made rules and regulations eclipse its true purpose, which is to meet the spiritual needs of the congregation. The church’s inability to meet Tess’s spiritual need causes the erosion of her faith.

At this time of Tess’s nocturnal wanderings, shunning society, Hardy describes her relationship with God as a feeling “of irremedial grief at her weakness in the mind of some vague ethical being whom she could not definitely class as the God of her childhood, and could not comprehend as any other” (Tess 145). Her religious sensitivity is essentially one of sadness that she should be covered in guilt and shame before God, although her consciousness of the identity of this God is vague and undefined. It is remarkable that her concept of God is indistinct but her perception of sin is so clear as to be almost tangible. This is possibly the result of the kind of religious teaching she experienced as a child which is described as including “curious details of torment” (Tess 156), causing Tess to visualise the devil tossing her illegitimate unsaved baby about on a pitchfork. Tess even comes to regard her beauty as a sin “and there was revived in her the wretched sentiment which had often come to her before, that in inhabiting the fleshly tabernacle with which Nature had endowed her she was somehow doing wrong” (Tess 430). This feeling induces Tess to “mercilessly nip her eyebrows off” (Tess 391). The same excessive sense of guilt persecutes Sue Bridehead and produces aggressive self-destructive tendencies: “ Self renunciation - that’s everything! I cannot humiliate myself enough. I should like to prick myself all over with pins and bleed out

the badness that is in me” (Jude 363). Both Tess and Sue succumb to an oppressive consciousness of sin. Their extreme sensitivity to their own “sinfulness” amounts to a tragic flaw. It is the driving force behind their actions and leads to misery for Sue and destruction for Tess.

The Church’s refusal to allow Sorrow a Christian burial is a turning point for Tess. She finally turns her back on the church as an institution. Tess finds herself drifting further and further away from the God she believed in as a child. A short-lived revival of her Christian religious heritage occurs on her way to Talbothays. She feels exhilarated and joyful at being able to start her life afresh and commences singing to express her emotions. Significantly, as yet not weaned from the faith she is raised in, she chooses a hymn. However, she discovers that she doesn’t “quite know the Lord yet” (Tess 171). She has a sense that there is something missing. Hardy offers an interesting commentary on this incident. He declares “probably the half unconscious rhapsody was a Fetishistic utterance in a Monotheistic setting” (Tess 171). He explains that women like Tess, who are children of Nature, retain Pagan fantasy in their souls which eclipses institutionalised religion that has been taught them. In other words, Tess has an inherent desire to express the mysticism in her soul and she falls back on the religious experiences of her childhood in order to do so, but in reality religion does not reflect the true source of that desire which is essentially naturalistic. Nevertheless, the narrator concludes: “It was enough” (Tess 171). At this junction, Tess’s spiritual needs are still perceived to be met by the religious practices of her youth.

Tess goes to Talbothays where she meets Angel Clare. By this time she is fertile ground for his agnostic ideas. Tess’s spirituality is inextricably intertwined with Angel’s. His influence extinguishes her previous religious heritage. It is significant that the first words Angel hears Tess utter are of a spiritual nature. She is explaining how she sometimes feels as if her soul leaves her body. Likewise the first words Tess hears Angel say relate to religion. His words are a commentary on a story he has just heard that illustrates the tendency of rural folk to combine folklore, superstition and Christianity. In this curious story Hardy describes a man defending himself from an enraged bull by playing a Nativity song on his fiddle, and in so doing fooling the bull into believing that it is Christmas so that the creature bends on its knees in a prayerful position, offering the man a means of escape. This expression of faith is cynically subverted by the narrator’s blunt ending of the story stating where the man is buried. By implication it stands to reason that his belief is buried with him which in turn is reinforced by Angel’s statement, “ It is a curious story; it carries us back to medieval times when faith was a living thing” (Tess 180). Angel feels that faith has long been dead, a theme that recurs frequently in Hardy’s fiction and poetry. This prefigures the demise of Tess’s faith as a consequence of her allegiance to Angel.

Angel’s religious views are meticulously documented in the novel and are crucial to Tess’s spiritual journey. The fact that Hardy gives such detailed coverage of Angel’s religious views shows the level of importance he assigned to religion and moreover that he used his

works of fiction as a means of exploring different views and their effects on others and life in general (Tess 186).

Immediately after Tess meets Angel, he is placed by the narrator into his home context in order to elucidate his religious background and personal views. Angel is Hardy's archetypal agnostic. Hardy deliberately juxtaposes Angel's views with those of his God-fearing, parson father by means of a dialogue in order to optimise the contrast between them.

Angel shocks his father by refusing to follow family tradition and enter the church on doctrinal grounds. He finds he is unable to believe in a doctrine that preaches deliverance from or escape from damnation through God's sacrifice, specifically, he cannot believe in the resurrection of Christ (Tess 186). It is curious that Angel, who insists that he argues theology from an intellectual viewpoint, maintains that he follows his instinct in matters of religion. He quotes Hebrews 12.27 to support his argument. This Biblical reference is extremely pertinent to the Victorian loss of faith experience. It states, "The removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken remain." Angel, to use his own word, "reconstructs" this Biblical verse. It no longer refers, as in the original; to God's shaking up of the earth so that the creation will be removed, leaving only the kingdom of heaven in existence. Angel imbues the verse with a modern interpretation that concludes that the shaking will topple the dogmas and doctrines of institutionalised religion leaving an unmiraculous, inexorable reality behind as "that which cannot be shaken" in the Darwinian sense: whatever is not fit to survive in the modern world will face extinction.

Having established Angel as a modern free thinker, the narrator proceeds to illustrate that Angel's actions are diametrically opposed to his supposed principles. Hardy shows that like Tess, Angel is a product of his religious upbringing. Notwithstanding his liberal philosophies on an intellectual level, emotionally and instinctively he still clings to the Christian teachings of his youth. Once Angel is committed to marrying Tess, he is anxious to convince his parents of Tess's suitability to be his wife on religious grounds. He pronounces her a good church-going Christian although personally he holds in ridicule the fact that she and the other milkmaids should subscribe to overtly Christian beliefs because it seems incongruous amidst their essentially naturalistic beliefs. He does not wish to disturb her Christian faith. To support this claim the narrator quotes some lines from Tennyson's "In Memoriam":

Leave thou thy sister when she prays,  
Her early heaven, her happy views;  
Nor thou with shadow'd hint confuse

A life that leads melodious days. (Tess 258)

Angel does not understand that Tess's days have been all but melodious and that she has long been undergoing a spiritual decline. He appears to be blatantly oblivious to the profound impact his agnostic, Hellenistic ideas have on her. He does not seem to notice that she abandons her own faith completely and throws her spiritual lot in with his. Her faith in the power of prayer is extinguished by Angel. Tess says she is "forbidden to believe that the

great Power who moves the world would alter his plans on [her] account" (Tess 443). She tells Alec she has been "cured" of Christian belief by Angel. Hardy's various perspectives of Tess's spirituality are at odds with one another. While Angel sees Tess as a good Christian girl, she sees herself as a heathen. Furthermore, she proclaims these assumed doctrines of Angel's to Alec although she freely admits that she does not fully understand them, and thus she becomes the instrument that eradicates Alec D'Urberville's new found faith after his conversion which Angel's father has been at pains to secure.

Angel's condemnation of Tess at her confession on their wedding night proves that his liberal ideas are built on quicksand. He treats Tess like a sinner in a religious and conventional sense. If he truly did not believe in sin and damnation, he would be able to accept Tess as a child of nature and see her as pure, as indeed Hardy is keen to assure the reader she is. Angel is described as being independent and advanced, in fact, "a model product of the last five-and-twenty years" (Tess 373), yet even he is unable to break away from convention and custom when it comes to the test. His choice of words in his response to Tess's suggestion that he rid himself of her by divorce is significant: " Oh Tess you are too childish — [ . . . ] You don't understand the law — you don't understand!" (Tess 340). In this case the law refers to the Victorian social code of conduct based on the Biblical prohibition of fornication, which Angel conveniently omits to apply to himself. Here is an instance of the inversion we often find in Hardy that demonstrates the contradictory nature not only of belief, but also of unbelief. As an agnostic, Angel should be above judging Tess on Christian principles. However, he uses the standard he has ostensibly rejected to condemn Tess. This duplicity is further emphasised by Angel's asking Izz to accompany him when he goes to Brazil.

His paradoxical behaviour is magnified when he returns home alone after his marriage and his mother hints at the possibility of Tess not being chaste. Angel hotly defends her, insisting that she is "spotless". The narrator entering into Angel's psyche continues: "and felt that even if it had sent him to eternal hell there and then he would have told that lie" (Tess 372). Hardy's ambivalent attitude to belief is voiced in this remarkable statement placed in the mind of a model agnostic who allegedly does not believe in an afterlife or sin and punishment. It demonstrates that an outward profession of agnosticism is no guarantee against the all pervasive influence of Christian doctrine which emerges when a character is particularly vulnerable. This schooled modern agnostic cries out in anguish: " God's *not* in his heaven, all's *wrong* with the world" (Tess 359). When things turn out badly he instinctively tries to explain them in religious terms. Angel is unable to extricate himself from his Christian upbringing, a trait he apparently shares with his creator.

Angel creates an image of Tess that is the embodiment of spiritual womanhood. When he realises that she does not live up to his vision of spiritual perfection, she is dead to him. He crucifies the image he has created of her. In his dream he sleepwalks carrying Tess crying out: " My wife — dead, dead!" (Tess 351). This statement operates on two levels. One is that Tess's "sin" causes her to die spiritually for Angel because he reverts to the

doctrinal mindset of his youth. The other is that Angel's condemnation and unforgiveness, which is his sin, cause Tess to seriously consider suicide and ultimately lead to her actual death. On both counts, the Biblical principle "the wages of sin is death" applies. It is important, however, that only the woman suffers the penalty. Angel experiences a fair deal of suffering and finally comes to the realisation that he has misjudged Tess. It is too late for them both when he reaches this point of maturity. But Tess is condemned to death whereas Angel, who is the direct cause of Tess's dreadful fate, walks off into the sunset with Liza Lu and probably lives happily ever after. It gives one cause to reflect on Hardy's motivation for this ending. One wonders why Hardy could not allow Tess to be deported, as Hetty Sorrel is for infanticide in Eliot's Adam Bede. Angel could have emigrated, as he planned to do, and their love could have been redeemed.

It could be argued that Hardy's doomed universe does not allow for such an ending because Tess has to atone for her sin according to the Mosaic Law. He entitles the Seventh and final phase of the novel "Fulfilment." The number seven in the Bible signifies completion. In the seventh phase, the fulfilment and completion of the cycle of life, Tess dies, while Angel is spared. Fulfilment in this context is likely to refer to the fulfilment of the Law which demands a life for a life (Genesis 9.6; Exodus 21.23). Tess must give her life for the life she took.

Angel is paired with "a spiritualised image of Tess" in the form of her sister. The couple resemble Adam and Eve leaving Paradise after the Fall. The background is one of light and beauty. A religious tone is set by their being "bent down to the earth as if in prayer" (Tess 586). It appears that fate singles Tess out for destruction but saves Angel and gives him a second chance to achieve ideal love. Angel's search for the physical embodiment of his abstract and idealised concept of love (which Hardy later develops more fully in The Well Beloved), is elevated to a priority. Tess falls short of perfection, but her sister who is "half girl, half woman" is presented as an unblemished replacement.

Tess's loss of faith results in her total indifference to her own personal future after death. She frequently expresses her desire to die or "unbe" and she wishes that she had never been born, as death to her mind is equivalent to oblivion and freedom from suffering and pain. She faces death with equanimity despite the fact that she faces the hangman's noose for murder. Under Angel's tuition she successfully frees herself from the church dogma she grew up in and so reverses roles with her tutor, who displays evidence of those doctrines still operating in his life.

Tess initially embodies spiritual perfection for Angel and he in turn is the incarnation of Tess's yearning for spiritual fulfilment. This spiritual aspect of their relationship is emphasised by the Biblical and religious language Hardy employs in describing them: They are "Adam" and "Eve" and Tess is a "Madonna" in Angel's eyes (Tess 204). Their meetings remind Angel of "the Resurrection hour" (Tess 204). It is ironic that an agnostic and avowed opponent of a belief in the miraculous should be inspired to such a comparison. Tess's love for Angel is described as "devotion," and she regards him with "worshipful eyes". Indeed, "he



was like something immortal before her" (Tess 283). In spiritual terms, Tess transfers her need for a saviour from Christian belief to Angel Clare. He eclipses any ideology she previously held and becomes her God.

For Tess, Angel is a "divine being" and is "godlike in her eyes" (Tess 270) as opposed to the "vague ethical being" that constituted the God of her childhood. Tess expresses the religious nature of her love for Angel in a letter to him: "It has been so much my religion ever since we were married to be faithful to you [...]" and declares that her past was "a dead thing altogether. I became another woman, filled full of new life from you" (Tess 465). Thus Hardy reinforces the concept of a religion of love by Tess's words which are a paraphrase of Paul's in 2Corinthians 5.17 saying that all the old is passed away and believers are new creatures in Christ. In effect Tess is literally making an idol out of Angel. The narrator verifies Tess's statement by relating that when Tess tries to pray to God, "it was her husband who really had her supplication. Her idolatry of this man was such that she herself almost feared it to be ill-omened" (Tess 310). Tess has made Angel her Christ, her saviour. She has substituted religion with love<sup>4</sup>. It is possible that Hardy connects this idolatry with the previous reference to Ezekiel 23.48 (Tess 155). In this case Tess would be guilty under the law and have to bear the consequences of her sin of idolatry. The penalty for idolatry is death. Tess instinctively senses impending tragedy and her love is marred from the outset by an undercurrent of foreboding. She fears, that as in the case of Romeo and Juliet, "these violent delights have violent ends" (Tess 310). Subconsciously she labours under the belief that because she has sinned she does not deserve to be happy and calamity is inevitable.

Tess's overwhelming sense of futility and hopelessness in the world is initially a result of her sense of guilt, but as she loses her faith it increases exponentially. As an agnostic, Angel shares these sentiments which Hardy defines as "the chronic melancholy taking hold of the civilized races with the decline of belief in a beneficent Power" (Tess 190). Through this authorial comment, Hardy specifically links a pessimistic world view with a loss of faith and suggests that the removal of God from humankind's belief system means that hope is forfeited leaving despair and wretchedness in its wake.

At Talbothays both Angel and Tess feel able to overcome these moribund feelings and are injected with life giving forces of Nature in the summer overflowing with imagery of fertility. It is their Eden and the From River is their River of Life. But as the novel progresses, it seems that the dark laws which control this corrupt and fallen world shroud Tess and Angel's potential for happiness. Angel, whose name suggests a being who will bring light into Tess's life metamorphoses into a fallen Angel<sup>5</sup> who wreaks her ultimate doom.

When Angel deserts Tess, she is doubly forsaken. Not only is she unable to turn to the God of her youth for guidance and solace, she is bereft of the object of her overwhelming love that has become a religion to her. The death of Tess's father robs Tess of the last form

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<sup>4</sup> Hands remarks in this respect that having "abandoned the love of religion", Hardy created an "alternative religion of love", (54).

of protection she had in the world. She finds herself in a godless, husbandless and fatherless state, utterly alone. The hymn her siblings sing on the occasion brings home to Tess how far she has departed from the faith that comes so naturally to them.

Here we suffer grief and pain,

Here we meet to part again;

In Heaven we part no more.

The children unconditionally accept the validity of the words they sing but Tess is overcome by melancholy as darkness both physical and metaphoric descends. She is struck by the difficulty she now faces because she is unable to believe in the vision of hope that the children rest in. If she could only believe "how different it would all now be; how confidently she would leave them to Providence and their future kingdom! But in default of that it behoved her to do something; to be their Providence" (Tess 492). Hardy universalises Tess's plight by an authorial comment which states: "to her and her like, birth itself was an ordeal of degrading personal compulsion, whose gratuitousness nothing in the result seemed to justify, and at best could only palliate" (Tess 492). For Tess there is no cure for the suffering and pain in her life. She is desolate and is at her most vulnerable.

Tess realises that she must fill the role of a provider for her family and it is ironic that the only means at her disposal to be their Providence is to accept Alec's offer of assistance which forces her into a life of degradation devoid of love. Hardy emphasises the connection between Tess's ultimate recognition of her loss of faith and her fate initiated by her falling into the hands of D'Urberville by placing these two events in immediate chronological order. Tess is not at liberty to make a moral judgement. There is no question of her exercising her free will as she is forced by circumstance or Fate to go with Alec in order to save her family from destitution. She accepts her role as a victim because she believes herself to be condemned to this fate by law. She says to Alec: "Once a victim, always a victim. That's the law!" (Tess 458). Tess makes no effort at all to try to avert evil because she believes it to be the natural consequence of her sin. The law decrees it and she accepts it unquestioningly. Hardy's Biblical heritage seems to act as a prism through which his creative expression is refracted. The evidence in the novel suggests that as a writer, he holds his characters accountable to the Old Testament law of sin and atonement which is the determining factor in their fates.

From this time forth, there is no longer any trace of Tess's childish faith in Christianity. Hardy has traced her spiritual decline to the bitter end. In his world there is no room for hope or faith. Life is governed by a harsh law which precludes happiness and fulfilment: Tess has no free will to exercise to alter the course of her life and Hardy's God is cold and uncaring. He does not intervene.

In the Preface to Tess Hardy defended his radically gloomy vision of the universe at the mercy of malevolent forces which he had variously named as The First Cause, the President of the Immortals and the Immanent Will, as having a precedent in Shakespeare, yet Gittings points out in his biography that Hardy was immersed in reading Greek tragedy at the

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<sup>5</sup> Hands uses the term "fallen angel" to describe Angel Clare (75).

time of writing *Tess* and this influenced his thinking as is evident in the reference at the end of *Tess* to schylus. Having abandoned the Christian idea that there is a purpose to suffering, and that a loving God controls the universe, Hardy seeks alternatives to explain the whys and wherefores of man's existence here on earth. There is evidence of many philosophic ideas reflected in Hardy's work: Comte, Hume, Huxley, Spencer, Schopenhauer and others (Kramer 69). While critics agree that Hardy's ideas certainly were influenced by these philosophers, he appears to have evolved his own belief system, which is by no means static; rather it is experimental in nature, often appearing to be contradictory. In essence, he seems to retain the Biblical principles he was raised in but to replace salvation and hope with a tragic vision akin to the Greek in which the controlling forces of the universe are anything but benign and man is an infinitesimal and inconsequential part of the universe. Mingled in with this Greek philosophy, hints of scientific determinism can be detected. Only the fittest survive. *Tess* and *Jude* succumb to the blows of fate. They possess neither the powerful animal survival instinct of Arabella nor the Angel Clare-like strength of intellect which eclipses emotions and creates a way to move forward in life after disaster has struck.

Hardy disputed any suggestion that he believed the First Cause or God to be a malignant force. He claims there to be "a vast discrepancy between the expression of my fancy and my belief" (*Life* 2: 217). However, it is perhaps unavoidable that his art represents to a larger or lesser degree his personal opinions and what he held to be the truth. Hardy's intensely private nature (Gittings 569) and defence of his position in "Apology to Late Lyrics" attest to his wish to remain neutral in the eyes of the world but the passionate nature of his prose and poetry preclude neutrality. If he had truly attained neutrality, critics would not have responded with such intensity to *Tess* and *Jude* (*Life* 2: 7-8, 46). Various "invidious critics had cast slurs upon him as Nonconformist, Agnostic, Atheist, Infidel, Immoralist, Heretic, Pessimist", yet his wife insists that "the only word that can be plausibly attached to him is churchy" (*Life* 2: 177). Hardy, the man, seems to conjure up as many inconsistencies as his characters *Jude*, *Sue* and *Angel*. Nevertheless, underlying the many apparent contradictions, there appears to be an allegiance to the Biblical principles Hardy subscribed to as a young man, which despite their mutations throughout the years, remain a recognisable derivative of the Christian religious tradition.

In weighing up Hardy's philosophies as represented in his fiction against the three evangelical principles put forward by Davis, there is persuasive evidence that Hardy accepts two of the three principles: the concept of original sin together with the curse it brings on man and the earth, and man's need for salvation. He departs from these principles in that even though he recognises man's doomed condition and the need for salvation, Christianity is not presented as a realistic means of salvation. He responds to conversion in his fiction with cynicism and suspicion and portrays salvation as proposed by the Bible as a myth.

Jędrzejwski draws attention to Hardy's recognition of the psychological significance of religious belief (42). In the characterisation of *Tess*, *Angel*, *Sue* and *Jude* Hardy illustrates the influence of religious perception on his protagonists' self-perception and life choices.

Despite Hardy's insistence that his work did not reflect his beliefs, (Life 2: 169, 40-41) critics over decades interpret his oeuvre as an expression of his thoughts and opinions (Life 2: 57-58). It is not unreasonable to assert then, that his fiction and poetry could reflect the psychological significance of Hardy's own religious belief system. Viewing Tess and Jude against evangelical principles reveals that Hardy's fictional universe is essentially melancholic and gloomy because it appears to be in the grip of the Biblical dispensation whereby men and women are victims inhabiting a corrupt world and are obliged to suffer the consequences of their sin as decreed by the law, but there is no provision for atonement or salvation at all; a very bleak vision of the world indeed.

## Chapter 2

### **Nature, the Law and Christian Ethics in The Return of the Native**

The Return of the Native is a study of humanity removed from the trappings of civilisation and traditional religion and subject only to the relentless Laws of Nature of which it forms an insignificant microscopic part. This novel describes man reduced to primitive basics in physical and spiritual terms. Traditional religion in the form of the organised church plays a negligible role in supplying society with the forms necessary at marriage and death. The inhabitants of the Heath resort to folklore and superstition in an attempt to understand and explain their harsh life on Egdon. The imagery and symbolism used in the graphic description of Egdon Heath suggest that it can be viewed as a microcosm of the cursed earth. The Heath is personified into a larger-than-life monstrosity that shares loneliness, sadness and the potential for tragedy with man. It is symbolic of Nature and the Laws which govern Nature and exerts an elemental force on its inhabitants.

Hardy devotes the entire first chapter of the book to a description of the heath. Initially it appears hopelessly digressive and but it is highly significant because it establishes the Heath as a universal symbol of the earth and all creation that has both Pagan and Biblical attributes. The Biblical description “the untameable Ishmaelitic thing that Egdon now was it had always been” (The Return of the Native 12) characterises Egdon Heath as timeless, unwanted and cast out. Being cast out implies that someone or something rejected it. Possibly it refers to Hardy’s agnostic view of the universe devoid of a loving Providence. This sense of abandonment is also reflected in Jude. As a small boy Jude pities the birds he is employed to scare, “They seemed, like himself to be living in a world that did not want them” (15). Furthermore, the heath is “full of watchful intentness” and it is waiting for “a last crisis — the final overthrow” (The Return of the Native 10). The heath emanates an inherent sense of inevitable tragedy which sets the tone for the novel.

Egdon is a place of darkness and negation. It “could retard the dawn, sadden noon, anticipate the frowning of storms [ . . . ] and intensify the opacity of a moonless midnight to a cause of shaking and dread” (The Return of the Native 9). Religious imagery depicts the darkness of the heath as representing “a mortal sin” (The Return of the Native 55), associating the physical darkness with a spiritual darkness. The “sombreness” and “mournful sublimity” of nature reflect the mood of man. Indeed, the narrator goes as far as to put the heath on an equal standing with man’s nature; the heath is “like man, slighted and enduring; and withal singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy monotony. [ . . . ] it had a lonely face, suggesting tragical possibilities” (The Return of the Native 11).

Having established the connectedness of man and the heath, it follows that the morbid qualities inherent in the heath are equally relevant to humankind. No reference to nature in The Return of the Native is inconsequential or random. In this novel Hardy’s fictional universe resembles the Elizabethan world view in which cosmic events are tied up with events on earth: the night Eustacia and Clym meet to secure their future is marked by a lunar eclipse presaging the darkness that is to cloud their lives; and the night Eustacia flees

and plunges to her death is marked by tempests, storms and darkness. In the aforementioned example, Hardy magnifies the unity of man and nature by creating in nature a mirror image of the turmoil that rages in Eustacia's mind and spirit. The environment becomes an extension of her mood: "Never was harmony more perfect than that between the chaos of her mind and the chaos of the world without" (The Return of the Native 345). Furthermore the rain and her weeping are unified, "the tearfulness of the outer scene was repeated upon her face" (The Return of the Native 346). The foliage and surrounds likewise take on a putrefactive hue reflecting Eustacia's mental state. Adjectives denoting decay abound: Eustacia stumbles over "oozing lumps of fleshy fungi [. . .] like the rotting liver and lungs of some colossal animal" (The Return of the Native 345). Hardy follows up the scene of tragedy in human terms and in nature by linking both to history. Specifically, the violence of the storm is linked to disasters "in the chronicles of the world" and "all that is terrible and dark in history and legend — the last plague in Egypt, the destruction of Sennacherib's host and the agony in Gethsemane" (The Return of the Native 345), thus universalising Eustacia's fate with that of all humankind in time and space. The Biblical allusions connect Nature and humanity to specific God-induced tragedies involving suffering and death. Thus, by implication, it can be assumed that the heath and its inhabitants represent a type of the fallen world prone to sin and punishment.

The Biblical references above denote respectively: the slaughter of first born Egyptian sons by the Angel of Death; forty thousand deaths by the sword of the Angel of the Lord and, finally, the ultimate human sacrifice which was in obedience to the Will of God. Hardy prefaces the references with the words "history and legend" leaving the assessment of the veracity of the event up to the reader. However, each Old and New Testament reference alludes to God or, in Hardy's term, The Immanent Will, being responsible for pain and destruction, which is a notion that recurs in Hardy's fiction<sup>6</sup>. It is expressed by the narrator in Tess, "The Prince of Immortals [. . .] had ended his sport with Tess" (564); and in Jude (355) by Sue, who thinks "a force external" to themselves forbids their success and happiness.

Eustacia also believes that Heaven has devised tortures for her (The Return of the Native 346) and the narrator in the same novel declares that human beings shy away from blaming "The First Cause" for the evil that befalls them and "invent excuses for the oppression which prompts their tears" (373). It appears then, that Hardy associates suffering and death with the judgement of the God of the Old Testament. Each of the Biblical tragedies above is a form of judgement. Pharaoh is punished for not allowing the Israelites to leave Egypt. Sennacherib's army is destroyed for defying God and Jesus is sacrificed to redeem "us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us" (Galatians 3.13).

In addition to being "an Ishmaelish thing", Egdon Heath displays dominant pagan elements which exert a powerful influence on its inhabitants. It lays bare the naked essence of human existence, unclothed by civilisation's manners, airs and graces that serve as a protective covering and hiding place for what lies beneath. Nature becomes preternatural and

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<sup>6</sup> The notion that the Immanent Will is responsible for evil is not consistent in Hardy's work. See chapter 3.

all is “in extremity.” Primitive urges rule over man-made culture. They are manifested in bonfires and dancing. The imagery employed to elucidate the emergence of primitive urges is significant. It is the imagery of hell and animal sacrifices. The flames are “like wounds in a black hide” and “scalding caldrons” (The Return of the Native 19) and are reminiscent of “funeral piles” (The Return of the Native 20), while the heath is described as “a vast abyss” and “Limbo” (The Return of the Native 20). Hardy links the bonfires historically to their pagan roots in Viking and Celtic times and to Christian symbols of hell and penance. The link covers myth, literature and art, thus encompassing man’s existence in the actual past, the present and in the realm of imagination.

Although Hardy’s plethora of references is severely criticised by many critics<sup>7</sup>, it is well worth examining the references closely to uncover the greater picture under consideration. By referring to Viking gods and druidical rites in relation to the bonfires, Hardy succeeds in imbuing the context of his narrative with a feeling of historical authenticity and the timelessness of human ritual activity. The lighting of bonfires is removed from the contextual political framework and put back in time and space into the realm of myth where it represents man’s rebellious response to the coming of winter which brings “foul times, cold darkness, misery and death” (The Return of the Native 21). Paganism and Christianity are assimilated in bonfire-making through the image linking Prometheus and Genesis. Prometheus, renowned for his disobedience to the gods, is linked to Adam and Eve who disobey God. Disobedience has severe consequences. Prometheus is fettered to a rock; Adam and Eve are banished from paradise, separated from God and the earth is cursed. The narrator refers to people as “fettered gods of the earth” who defy winter’s “black chaos” using God’s words at creation: “Let there be light.” Here again is an insight into Hardy’s portrayal of humanity as fettered to the Laws of the universe that dictate peaks and troughs in life. Literary references include Dante’s Inferno and Milton’s Paradise Lost. Both these works bring to mind sin and punishment in the Biblical sense, revealing the underlying theme never quite absent from Hardy’s work.

Folklore, dreams and superstition are further pagan elements that pervade The Return of the Native. The heath brings out primitive instincts and fires the flame of man’s inherent existential fears. These irrational primitive instincts determine behaviour even within the precincts of institutionalised religion merging paganism and Christianity. The church on Egdon functions as a social framework for the purposes of marriage and burial and as a bizarre arena for social interaction of a dubious nature. Eustacia’s burning desire to catch a glimpse of Clym, the man-saviour of her imagination, motivates her to consider going to church. The church also becomes the stage for an act of witchcraft when Eustacia is stabbed by Susan Nunsuch for allegedly bewitching her children (The Return of the Native 176).

Heath folk are too remote mentally and physically from the church in the conventional sense for it to be part of their daily lives. Natives of the heath resort to far more primitive forms of spiritualism than Biblical teaching and Hardy gives these primitive spiritual forms

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<sup>7</sup>Boumelha', P. Introduction to The Return of the Native. xxxii.

credence by engineering events to follow in accordance with dreams and witchcraft. In the Bible, a prophecy is considered valid if the event foreseen comes to pass (Deuteronomy 18.22). Eustacia's dream of herself and her partner diving into a pond on the heath and her partner falling into fragments is an omen of her death by drowning and Clym's fate as a broken man with a "wrinkled mind" at the end of the novel. Similarly, Clym dreams that he and Eustacia are locked out of his mother's house while she calls out for help and no one assists her. At that very moment in time she is dying on the heath because Eustacia refuses to open her home to her.

Startling scenes such as Susan Nunsuch making a wax effigy of Eustacia, piercing it with pins and burning it while chanting the Our Father backwards cannot be ignored in view of the fact that, voodoo or no, Eustacia dies a violent death. Superstition rules the lives of the heath folk, in particular Christian Cantle. But despite the comic element in Christian's fears and superstition, a grain of credibility is instilled by virtue of Hardy's tendency to back up the statements with facts. For example, Christian's manhood is believed to be compromised because he was born under a waning moon. The fact is that he is weak in mind and body and cannot find a wife; no one will have him. Even the stalwart Mrs Yeobright is not free of superstition as is evident when Thomasin leaves the house to get married and Mrs Yeobright throws a slipper after her.

Egdon heath represents the earth in all its historicity from pre Christian times to the present and Hardy takes care to point out that far from replacing man's natural inclinations with New Testament morality and goodness, Christian teaching dissolves under duress and the elemental forces underlying life itself, pagan in nature, gain control. The narrator emphasises this: "Indeed the impulses of all such outlandish hamlets are pagan still: in these spots homage to nature, self adoration, frantic gaieties, fragments of Teutonic rites to divinities whose names are forgotten, have in some way or another survived medieval doctrine" (The Return of the Native 376).

Dance is yet another form of paganism which Hardy explores in The Return of the Native. Eustacia goes to a dance on the village green to battle against depression. The dance is described as "a whole village-full of emotion" which meets annually. It releases primitive instincts in the dancers and the reader is informed that "paganism was revived in their hearts" (The Return of the Native 254-255). The spirit of the dance overcomes Eustacia and Wildeve and acts as "an irresistible attack upon whatever sense of social order there was in their minds" (The Return of the Native 257). Their defences against social impropriety are deactivated leaving them vulnerable to their untamed emotions regarding each other. The accidental reunion of the two former lovers rekindles the flame of their desire opening the door to adultery which is the catalyst in the chain reaction of events that leads to their tragic deaths. Thus pagan rituals play an important role in human behaviour and the outcome of events.

Egdon Heath functions ambivalently as an environment that shares both pagan and Biblical characteristics. The pagan and Biblical elements merge into a powerful invincible



force symbolised by Nature<sup>8</sup>. The unrelenting and destructive impact of Nature on the characters and landscape in The Return of the Native can be interpreted as a physical manifestation of the spiritual forces in pagan and Christian beliefs exerting a crushing influence on the fate of defenceless creation. The deaths of Eustacia, Wildeve and Mrs Yeobright are the result of the brutality of Nature and the vegetation surrounding the heath is equally vulnerable to the sadistic violence inflicted on it by the elements: “The wet young beeches were undergoing amputations, bruises, crippling, and lacerations, from which the wasting sap would bleed [ . . . ] and leave scars visible to the day of their burning” (The Return of the Native 207). This image of creation at the mercy of hostile forces of Nature recurs in Hardy’s late fiction as a reflection of life on earth. People are born in misery, live lives of pain and suffering and then die with the possible prospect of damnation.

Clym Yeobright is highly sensitive to the suffering of humanity, which he perceives as “ the whole creation groaning and travailing in pain” (The Return of the Native 175). Consequently, he decides to abandon his frivolous life and profession in Paris and return to Egdon, where he desires to be useful and “ teach ‘em how to breast the misery they are born to” (The Return of the Native 175). Hardy brings modernity, progress, refinement, education and civilisation embodied by Clym the native into the primitive Egdon Heath in order to explore the effect of an interaction between two disparate elements. Clym Yeobright returns to Egdon Heath armed with compassion, optimism and noble ambitions to ameliorate the lives of the locals by means of educating them. He is motivated by essentially Christian instincts. The narrator states that “Yeobright loved his kind” (The Return of the Native 171) and that he is a “John the Baptist who took ennoblement rather than repentance for his text” (The Return of the Native 172). Clym is a modern who believes (like Jude), that education is a means to amelioration in life. The Christian qualities attributed to Clym are augmented by the authorial comment: “He wished to raise the class [ . . . ] and was ready at once to be the first unit sacrificed” (The Return of the Native 171).

But he does not reckon with the inexorable power of the hostile forces of Nature which suck him back into the vortex of a hopeless, bucolic, primitive existence. In the battle of civilisation versus Nature, Hardy’s narrative demonstrates that civilisation proves to be an impotent opponent with no chance of victory. Egdon Heath remains “untameable”. Clym’s vision for the future is destroyed by his fatal attraction to an unsuitable woman and physical blindness which assails him preventing the realisation of his dream to become an educator. Both these factors are caused by external forces beyond his control and they determine his fate. His marriage fails and his blindness forces him resort to primitive menial work to survive. Eustacia recognises that Clym’s greatness, which is based on the Christian principle of loving-kindness, is misplaced on Egdon and is as ineffectual as vapour in the harsh world he desires to change. She sees in him a type of Apostle Paul in her description of him to Wildeve “ [ . . . ] though Paul was excellent as a man in the Bible he would hardly have done

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<sup>8</sup> Nature capitalised represents elemental universal forces while nature stands for plant and animal life.

in real life” (The Return of the Native 275). Clym’s delicate nature is not designed for “real life” in a primitive environment.

The novel traces Clym’s descent from a position of strength and respect to one of despair and resignation. Modernity and progress are eradicated by the forces of Nature, which obliterate Clym’s individuality rendering him indistinguishable from the heath. He becomes “a brown spot in the midst of an expanse of olive green gorse, and nothing more,” plagued by huge flies who buzz about him “without knowing that he was a man” (The Return of the Native 247). He is vanquished by the heath and is oppressed by the realisation that it represents the “arena of life” and that he has merely “a bare equality with, and no superiority to, a single living thing under the sun” (The Return of the Native 206). Hardy emphasises humanity’s insignificance by comparing Clym with caterpillars and insects crawling on the face of the earth. Far from being the crown of creation made in God’s image and given dominion over the earth (Genesis 1.26), Hardy portrays humans as negligible atoms in the universe, swept along the current of time without influence or choice. Life or death, suffering or joy, are all the same to the heath. Clym and Eustacia’s shattered dreams of a life in communion with one another; Clym’s blindness and broken dreams and even death itself are absorbed into the heath and become meaningless: “there was only the imperturbable countenance of the heath, which having defied the cataclysmal onsets of centuries, reduced to insignificance by its seamed and antique features the wildest turmoil of a single man” (The Return of the Native 317).

At the end of the novel, Clym is incapable of happiness. He roams the earth preaching and teaching those who care to listen. He arises on the Blackbarrow that Eustacia stands on in the beginning of the novel watching her bonfire. The narrative comes full circle, reinforcing the conclusion that the native returns, but is forced to become a nomad because in Hardy’s universe there is no progression toward a better future, only a survival from day to day until death brings release. Significantly, people listen with compassion to Clym’s sermons, not because of his great teaching, but because they pity him as a victim of evil circumstances.

Both Clym and Eustacia stand apart from the other characters because they are purposeful, determined and energetic. Yet despite Clym’s talents and everyone’s belief in his ability, and Eustacia’s strength and regal self assurance, both are fated to fail because they are subject to Natural laws and have to live their lives in “the quandary that man is in by their operation” (The Return of the Native 167). Their dreams and aspirations are annihilated by the malignant forces of Nature.

Eustacia from the start is marked (like Tess and Jude), with a morbid sensitivity to all that is negative and melancholy. She cannot believe that good can be enduring and is convinced that it is her destiny to be unhappy. Tess is reluctant to enter into an engagement with Angel because she is filled with fear since she sees the future as blighted and believes that love is transient. Eustacia echoes this sentiment: “ Nothing can insure the continuance of love. It will evaporate as a spirit.” These characters share a wish that they had never been

born, see death as a release and ultimately succumb to death. Eustacia's extraordinary statement: "obstacles [...] enable us to look with indifference upon cruel satires that Fate loves to indulge in. I have heard of people who, upon coming suddenly into happiness, have died of anxiety lest they should not live to enjoy it" (The Return of the Native 204) is indicative of the chronic aberrant defeatism that permeates Hardy's narrative. It seems that it is not part of man's destiny to experience joy and contentment.

Eustacia hates the heath. She associates it with her melancholic disposition and her fate. When Wildeve apologises for causing her ruin, she states that it is not he, but the heath that is responsible. She says prophetically: "'Tis my cross, my misery and will be my death" (The Return of the Native 86). To her it is Hades and a gaol. It is hell from which she seeks deliverance. Eustacia's belief that she needs saving from the heath augments the heath as a symbol of the cursed earth. She believes deliverance will come in the form of love. Eustacia imagines that she needs a man to save her. She prays "Oh deliver my heart from this fearful gloom and loneliness: send me great love from somewhere, else I shall die" (The Return of the Native 72). Clym's arrival brings into her sphere "a man who might possibly have the power to deliver her soul from a most deadly oppression" (The Return of the Native 130). She mentally creates a saviour in Clym Yeobright, who she trusts will remove her from the heath and take her to Paris, the fortress of civilisation and modernity. The Heathmen's comparison of Clym coming from Paris to "a man coming from heaven" (The Return of the Native 110) intensifies the image of Clym as a saviour figure. Indeed Clym sees himself as a saviour-type when he first comes to Egdon. Both Tess and Eustacia base their choice of a man/saviour on his cultured demeanour in the belief that through marriage their lives will be enriched and they will be saved from leading a miserable existence. They both reap woe and death, which can be construed as Hardy's vision of the fate of humanity on this cursed earth.

Ironically, despite the great pains Hardy takes to design in Egdon Heath a pagan environment that is relatively free from social and religious constraints, the main characters all regard their fate as being a consequence of their sins. They connect their guilt with punishment, thus affirming a belief in traditional Christian doctrine of sin and judgement. Clym Yeobright, the determined optimist, who accepts blindness and poverty stoically, is reduced to a heap of woe at his mother's death. Guilt motivates his decline. He blames himself for causing a rift between himself and his mother through his marriage. He suffers under strong guilt feelings for having failed in basic Christian virtues towards his mother in her sickness and loneliness. Like Tess, he believes that he deserves to be punished: "If there is any justice in God let him kill me now. He has nearly blinded me, but that is not enough. If he would only strike me with more pain I would believe in him forever" (The Return of the Native 304). Clym's inordinate guilt over his mother's death is almost pathological. His self-condemnation makes him physically ill. He believes that his sin has brought darkness over his life: "I sinned against her and now there is no light for me" (The Return of the Native 303) and his existence from his mother's death on is defeatist and shrouded by depression (The Return of the Native 296).

In fact Mrs Yeobright's death has multiple causes, one of which is a broken heart because of a mistaken belief that her son has cast her out. Hardy mercilessly casts the die to prevent a reconciliation taking place between mother and son. Eustacia's guilt about Wildeve and Clym's fatigue force Mrs Yeobright onto the scorching heath resulting in her death. It appears that there are three factors involved: human failing or sin, hostile forces of Nature, and nature in the form of a snake, which is placed in a Biblical context by Christian Cantle with a direct reference to Original sin: " Neighbours, how do we know but that something of the old serpent in God's garden, that gied the apple to the young woman with no clothes on, lives on in adders and snakes still?" (The Return of the Native 288). Christian's child-like question in the context of the entire event leads to the assumption that evil in man and nature which is related to Original sin "lives on" indefinitely and thereby poses an ever present threat.

While Clym wallows in self-inflicted guilt, Eustacia is less willing to admit her culpability. She cries out against Fate and declares that she has tried to be a "splendid woman" but destiny was against her. She is angry at heaven for having placed her in such an "imperfect, ill-conceived world." Her anger is intensified by the fact that she is fully aware of the great things she is capable of but cannot achieve because she is thwarted by God. She cries out: " I have been injured and blighted and crushed by things beyond my control! O how hard it is of Heaven to devise such tortures for me, who have done no harm to heaven at all!" (The Return of the Native 346). She feels she does not deserve her fate. However, unlike Tess who is the incarnation of innocence, Eustacia is no saint.

Hardy stresses her dark side by calling her Queen of the Night and surrounding her person with an air of witchcraft and the occult, although her actual negative characteristics are of a very natural human type and have predictable consequences far removed from anything pagan and mysterious. Hardy's authorial comment underscores Eustacia's belief that she is a victim of an unfair External Force: "Yet, instead of blaming herself, she laid the fault upon some indistinct, colossal Prince of the World, who had framed her situation and ruled her lot" (The Return of the Native 290). However, her obdurate pride causes strife between herself and Mrs Yeobright, her selfishness leads her to seek the company of Wildeve when her marriage fails and prevents her from exercising any compassion towards her husband in his illness and blindness. She marries Clym purely for her own gain and candidly admits to being a bad wife. Her guilt at harbouring Wildeve when Mrs Yeobright comes to make peace is the determining factor which causes Eustacia to leave the door shut against her resulting in her death. Therefore, although Fate does influence events, Eustacia is culpable. She later realises this and confesses to Wildeve: " I am to blame for this. There is evil in store for me" (The Return of the Native 297). She too believes that evil is a consequence of wrong-doing. The events that follow verify her belief: she pays for her adulterous behaviour with her life. Apparently, Hardy as the author holds her accountable by the law which exacts its penalty by bringing about the curse which Clym calls down upon his wife: " May all murderesses get the torment they deserve!" (The Return of the Native 316).

Fate or Destiny has Hardy's trade-mark characteristics in The Return of the Native. The machinations of Fate, when scrutinised, reveal that Hardy choreographs events such that disaster is inevitable. If Eustacia had received Clym's letter, she would not have run away. If Charley had not lit the bonfire to please Eustacia, Wildeve would not have mistaken it as a signal from her and come. Thus Eustacia's flight would not have taken place and her death would have been circumvented. If Clym had heard his mother's knock he would have been reconciled to her and her death would have been averted. The fact that these coincidences inevitably prevent good from triumphing over evil and result in misery and death indicates that Hardy in this novel follows the same pattern as has been traced in Tess and Jude: every human being, even the strong in Darwinian terms (like Eustacia and Wildeve), are subject to a Natural Law which governs the entire universe. It can be argued that this Law operates in accordance with the Biblical Old Testament Law which defines sin and exacts judgement. Hardy's characters are given no mercy or avenue of escape from the crushing power of sin, resulting in a universe characterised by doom.

Although the novel ends on a positive note, this is undermined by a postscript Hardy wrote in 1912 in which he declares that the original version left Thomasin a widow and Diggory Venn a restless nomad. He maintains that readers with a more "austere artistic code" should accept the latter as the true one. The happy ending was for the benefit of the serial publication, not a portrayal of truth<sup>9</sup>. It would seem that Hardy just cannot embrace any form of respite from doom if he is to remain true to himself.

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<sup>9</sup> Slade, Tony. Notes on text to The Return of the Native (472).

## Chapter 3

### The Immanent Will and Hardy's Art

An examination of Hardy's view of God is central to a discussion of his doomed universe. Hardy's search for an understanding of the nature and identity of God is a prominent theme in his poetry. He gives a variety of names to the Power that governs the universe: the Immanent Will, the First Cause, the Supreme Power, the Intangible Cause, the Prime Mover, amongst others. Hardy's poetry offers an exposition of the various ideas he explored in his attempt to make sense of the traditional Christian God of his youth in the context of the rapidly changing world he lived in. These ideas are very disparate and sometimes even contradictory. Hardy himself was aware of the varied and ambivalent nature of the ideas he expressed as he specifically indicated in the introduction to "Winter Words" where he states: "no harmonious philosophy is attempted in these pages — or in any bygone pages of mine, for that matter" (CP 834). Hardy's poetry does not always offer a clear distinction between the forces governing the universe, Nature and the First Cause or God. They seem to have an individual identity in some poems and yet in others they tend to merge and become indistinguishable from one another.

In "Doom and She" Nature and God are portrayed like split personalities of one being. Apparently they are jointly responsible for the creation of humanity. Nature calls humankind "Our clay-made creatures" (13) and worries that she has "schemed a world of strife" (24) while "all creatures who owe thee fief" (34) suggests that God exercises power over all the earth. Nature's workings are imperfect because she is blind. She is sensitive to the suffering on earth audible in the "multitudinous moan" (23), is compassionate, and wishes to understand and improve the lot of humankind. She exhibits the qualities generally associated with the loving God of the New Testament. By contrast, Hardy outlines "God" who is called "Doom" in the title as being entirely neutral, devoid of emotion and unable to recognise joy or pain. Through the "The Mother of all things made" (6) the poet voices some of the existential questions that arose for him as a result of his loss of faith. Importantly, these questions are addressed to the "lord" and pertain to the fate of man, and the nature of grief and right and wrong. The questions remain unanswered because the "Lord" (13) cannot relate to the human experience of suffering and pain.

Hardy was deeply affected by all suffering both human and animal. Little Jude's concerted effort not to tread on any earthworms provides an almost comical example of the author's sensitivity to suffering. It is a theme that is rarely absent from his novels and poems. As an artist he searches for an explanation to the suffering he observed in life. When Hardy rejected the Christian belief in salvation through Jesus Christ, he was faced with a crisis (Kramer 55). The face of God seemed to change from a loving and compassionate Being seeking forgiveness and reconciliation with man to a heartless Automaton ("Nature's Questioning" 17), who is indifferent to man. His art reflects his desire to come to terms with the negative image of God his intellect creates out the god of his youth. In terms of religion, there is an irreconcilable conflict between Hardy's affective side and his intellect. His poetry

and biography suggest that emotionally he clings to the hope that God is a positive force but intellectually he cannot support this idea with evidence of any kind. Therefore, his art, and in particular his poetry, oscillates between hope and doubt while at its heart lies the everlasting and unanswered question about the nature of God.

In an effort to reconcile the idea of an omnipotent God with the suffering of humankind “Doom and She” proposes that if God exists, He must be ignorant of the suffering on earth, or He would, like the “Mother,” desire to intervene and alleviate pain. This perception of God is diametrically opposed to the Biblical view that God became man in order to share in humanity’s suffering and provide a way to redemption and illustrates how Hardy’s views have departed from his early religious perceptions. Inherently he appears to struggle against abandoning the Christian notion imbibed in his childhood that God is good and that He cares for humankind. “God’s Funeral” demonstrates the very practical and intimate nature of Hardy’s youthful faith:

‘How sweet it was in years far hied  
To start the wheels of day with trustful prayer,  
To lie down liegely at eventide  
And feel a blest assurance he was there! (41 - 44)

His relationship with God was part of his daily life, his waking and his sleeping, and the lack of it had a profound impact on his existence. The adverb ‘liegely’ created by Hardy from the adjective ‘liege’ meaning to give feudal service or allegiance (OED) suggests total submission to God who is entitled to receive such submission.

As an agnostic adult he still sought signs that would verify his youthful conception of God. His poetry concerning religious themes is largely a testimony of the fruitlessness of this search. It follows the pattern set in “Doom and She”: questions are asked but there is no answer. This silence on the part of the allegedly omniscient God fills the poet with grief and frustration because it becomes an affective verification of the doubt in the existence of God instigated in his intellect by nineteenth-century science and philosophy.

“A Sign Seeker” personalises the theme of questions asked but not answered. While “Doom and She” views life on earth from the viewpoint of the creative force, “A Sign Seeker” offers a subjective view. The speaker in “A Sign Seeker” possesses a great deal of knowledge about Nature and Science, yet the knowledge he seeks, which is of a spiritual nature, eludes him “But that I fain would wot of shuns my sense —” (24). The issues he seeks signs for are recurring themes in Hardy’s work. They relate to life after death (26 - 32) and suffering (33 - 36). It would be “best enlightenment” (28) to be assured that death is “Not the end!” (27) and that suffering is recorded in Heaven (36). It seems important to Hardy that suffering is not futile. If Heaven takes note of suffering, it is to be assumed that Hardy imagines it would result in a positive outcome such as intervention or recompense.

The poem moves on to concede that “— There are who, [ . . . ] / These tokens claim to feel and see,” (37 - 38). There are people who, unlike Hardy, experience supernatural “evidence” in answer to the existential questions Hardy poses. But the poet’s desire remains

unfulfilled: "Such scope is granted not to lives like mine" (41). He calls and indeed "pants" for a response. "But none replies;" (44 - 45). The crucial point here is that the poet is "not granted" or "denied" these signs. This implies that it is not so much a question of whether the proof exists in reality or not, but rather that God, or the Being in whose power it lies to allow Hardy access to this proof, fails to do so. The signs are the property of the believers. Hardy in his unbelief perceives himself to be on the outside of the community of believers who through their faith are open to spiritual experiences.

"The Impercipient" is another subjective poem in the first person that expresses distress at being excluded from the community of the faithful. Looking in from the outside at the "bright band of believers" in their cosy faith cocoon, the poet feels miserable because God seems to have placed Himself out of reach: "He who breathes All's Well to these/ Breathes no All's - Well to me," (15 - 16). His misery is accentuated by the comparison of his mental state with that of the believers. When they see "the glorious distant sea" the poet sees "yon dark and wind-swept pine". "The Impercipient" reverberates with whys:

Why thus my soul should be consigned  
 To infelicity,  
 Why always I must feel as blind  
 To sights my brethren see,  
 Why joys they've found I cannot find  
 Abides a mystery. (7 - 12)

According to the poet, his soul is handed over to unhappiness by a greater power. He wants to know why he is condemned to faithlessness which leaves him in the darkness of despair.

The New Testament specifies that faith is not something a person can achieve through his own effort. It is a gift (Ephesians 2.8), "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God". The concept of faith is not rejected as humbug. "A Sign Seeker", "The Impercipient" and "The Voice of Things" suggest that Hardy, despite his doubts, appears to retain an acceptance of the New Testament teaching that faith exists and is imparted by God. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that his lack of faith can be attributed to God who remains aloof. "Doom and She" expounds one reason for this aloofness, namely, that God is callous and unaware of man's needs.

The contrast between the believers' felicity and the poet's misery intimates the possibility that Hardy inadvertently associates his inability to find happiness with his loss of faith. In "A Sign Seeker", "The Impercipient" and "In a Whispering Gallery" it is particularly faith that relates to the supernatural that is pertinent. Most critics agree that Hardy's loss of faith in the supernatural, specifically salvation and eternal life, gave rise to a depressive and gloomy perception of life, what Lance calls Hardy's "negative metaphysics" (175). The source of Hardy's negative outlook on life would seem to lie in his imaginative awareness of the possibilities of good in life, which he appears to link with faith, and his conviction that these possibilities are out of reach for him as a result of his unbelief. Importantly, this unbelief is not of Hardy's seeking. It is possibly caused, as has been shown, by the Immanent Will



remaining deaf, dumb and blind to man's needs. There seems to be no consciousness which connects God to society's state of need and therefore no hope for merciful intervention could exist for Hardy.

The qualities of the Biblical God described in the Sermon on the Mount are conspicuously absent in the Immanent Will or God as revealed in Hardy's poetry. The Bible claims that God knows the individual needs of man (Matthew 6.32) and "gives good things to them that ask him" (Matthew 7.11). "The Bedridden Peasant," and "God-Forgotten" portray God as "The Immanent Doer[']s that Doth not Know" ("The Blow" 24). In these poems God fails to intervene in order to alleviate suffering due to ignorance.

This idea is developed further in "The Blow" which investigates the cause of pain and sorrow and expresses Hardy's hope that man is innocent "of this foul crash our lives amid" (16). The notion here that suffering may possibly not be attributable to the fault of man is consistent with his novels. Characters do not suffer as a result of their own wrong doing. Their suffering is due to an external cause. "The Blow" suggests that the external cause responsible for pain and sorrow is God

But the Immanent Doer's That doth not know,  
Which in some age unguessed of us  
May lift Its blinding incubus,  
And see, and own:  
"It grieves me I did thus and thus!" (24 - 28)

In this poem it seems to be important to Hardy that God does not wilfully inflict sorrow on humanity: "thankful yet/ Time's finger should have stretched to show/ No aimful author's was the blow" (20 - 22). Yet, the poet wishes God to admit guilt and repent for causing suffering. The use of the word "grieves" is a direct echo of Genesis 6:6 "And it repented the Lord that he had made man on earth and it grieved him in his heart." Here Hardy subverts the Old Testament assertion that man's wickedness caused God to regret having created him. This illustrates how Hardy experimentally mutates Biblical themes in his search for answers to life's questions. According to Scripture, man's disobedience causes his separation from God and the curse of the earth which brings about suffering. But it appears that in this poem Hardy imagines man to be innocent and God to be guilty<sup>10</sup>. Curiously, he retains the Biblical view that suffering did not just happen like the Big Bang, it is caused by someone and there is guilt involved. But in this poem he reverses roles, putting the blame on God.

"By the Earth's Corpse" reaffirms the idea that God regrets having created "Earth, and Life and man" (31), but suggests that suffering is not directly caused by God. Instead, God mourns that his "oft too unconscious hand/ Let enter undesigned" the evil "endured by earth's patient kind". Again, ignorance on the part of the Immanent Will functions as a possible cause for suffering.

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<sup>10</sup> In "The Mother Mourns" and "God-Forgotten" God/Nature makes humanity responsible for the separation between God and humankind.

“The Subalterns” undermines the concept that God does not know about man’s plight on earth. It contends that the evil that befalls humanity in the form of the elements, sickness and death are predetermined by God: “there are laws in force on high” (4) which determine what is to be. There is a complete absence of loving care or goodness on the part of the Immanent Will. The relentless laws take their course and cannot be diverted to suit any individual. Alternatively, “The Lacking Sense” proposes that Nature “Brings those fearful unfulfillments, that red ravage through her/ zones/ Whereat all creation groans” (28 - 30). However, the poet states that “all unwittingly she wounds the lives she loves” (24). Like The Immanent Will, she is presented as being unaware of her fault but unlike the Immanent Will, she loves humanity.

Another concept Hardy explores is the idea that man created God. According to Robert Schweik he derives this idea from Feuerbach’s view that “the Christian God is the product of man’s need to imagine perfection” (Kramer 66). “A Plaint to Man” and “God’s Funeral” elucidate Hardy’s interpretation of this concept. In both poems Hardy intimates that man created God as a “solace” to the “gloomy aisles/ Of this wailful world” and in “God’s Funeral” God’s purpose includes the exercise of justice and “to bless those by circumstances accurst”. “A Plaint to Man” is written in direct speech with the man-made god addressing its creator, questioning its right to exist. The reason given for the creation of God is the need for a “mercy seat”. Man cannot bear the sorrow on earth and creates in God a coping mechanism for this sorrow and hopelessness.

“Such forced device,” you may say, “is meet  
 For easing a loaded heart at whiles:  
 Man needs to conceive of a mercy-seat  
 Somewhere above the gloomy aisles  
 Of this wailful world, or he could not bear  
 The irk no local hope beguiles.” (13 - 18)

Hardy’s use in this context of the specifically Biblical term “mercy-seat” (sic) is important. The suggestion that man needs a “mercy-seat” if life on earth is to be at all tolerable, or indeed bearable, is perhaps indicative of a subconscious reliance on the Scripture as a frame of reference in seeking answers to the meaning of life.

In the Bible (Exodus 25.17), the mercy seat is the golden throne placed above the Ark of the Covenant. On the Day of Atonement, blood is sprinkled on the mercy seat as a sign that the sentence of the law has been carried out in accordance the Scripture: “And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without the shedding of blood there is no remission” (Hebrews 8.32). Thus the judgement seat is transformed into a mercy seat which becomes the place of communion with God (Exodus 2.27). It is symbolic of God’s great mercy to his people because it provides a solution to the problem of sin and reconciles God to man. In the New Testament the same Greek word for mercy seat is used of Christ

(Romans 3.25). Through the shedding of his blood he becomes the mercy seat<sup>11</sup>. The term “mercy-seat” in the poem therefore implies that there is possibly a deeper concern than initially meets the eye, namely, Hardy’s preoccupation with sin and atonement.

Hardy’s assertion that man can only bear living on “this wailful world” with the aid of a “mercy-seat” suggests a latent consciousness of sin and judgement which nothing on earth can resolve. A supernatural force seems necessary to provide a means to deal with these issues, which leads to the creation of God. “A Plaint to Man” describes the demise of man’s need for God through a system which Hardy called evolutionary meliorism<sup>12</sup>, however, it leaves the question of guilt, sin and atonement unanswered.

The poem declares that man’s need for a god has dwindled to extinction because man has come to realise that he is capable, without divine intervention, of initiating loving-kindness and brotherhood amongst men. Man can achieve morality and ethics without theology:

The fact of life with dependence placed  
On the human heart’s resource alone,  
In brotherhood bonded close and graced  
With loving-kindness fully blown,  
And visioned help unsought, unknown. (28 - 33)

Hardy himself proposes a George Eliot-style theory of humanistic meliorism that the world can be improved through love and the brotherhood of man. He recognises that loving-kindness is essential to man’s existence and in “God’s Funeral” the mystical form of God’s corpse symbolically represents the ideal of “loving-kindness full blown”, (“Yet throughout all it symbolized none the less/ Potency vast and loving-kindness strong” [15-16]). The poet’s specification “none the less” implies that whether God be a reality (for believers), or imagined, He remains an ineradicable emblem of the law of love, humanistic or Biblical, to the poet.

However, it seems his fiction does not support Hardy’s meliorist theory. Evidence of this principle in operation in Hardy’s work is not blatantly obvious as it is in George Eliot’s novels. In fact, the contrary appears to be the case. Tess is by the narrator’s own definition the incarnation of love as described in 2 Corinthians 13, she is also likened to the most perfect woman in the Bible (Proverbs 31), yet all these qualities do not serve to ameliorate her life or the lives of those around her. To men she is a fatal temptation and disaster befalls her wherever she goes in spite of her good qualities and pure intentions. Hardy’s characters demonstrate that this principle does not operate in their lives. The “human heart’s resource alone” fails dismally as a tool for improvement in Hardy’s world. Angel Clare’s father is a sterling example of Christian love in action, yet he is unable to influence his own children. His sons are all selfish and judgemental and the one strong convert whose life he helps change,

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<sup>11</sup> For this information I am indebted to notes on the mercy seat in the Scofield King James Study Bible and the NIV Study Bible.

<sup>12</sup> Hardy’s theory of meliorism is discussed on page 26 and 54 of this dissertation.

reverts back to his old sinful ways. Clym Yeobright and Jude both desire to learn and be useful to others and fail.

Another example of a similar failure of this principle is the long-suffering and utterly unselfish Charlotte De Stancy. She personifies the Victorian Christian virtues of love, self-abnegation and habitual self-denial. These virtues do not lead to personal fulfilment and happiness; rather they result in Charlotte's joining a nunnery and removing herself from the real world. Hardy's attempt to intellectually rationalise the ethics of Christianity outside of deism through his idea of the melioration of man based on the sole effort of man appears to remain purely theoretical with no practical application in the fictional universe he creates.

"God's Funeral" is an attempt to describe the impact on humanity of a decline in a belief in God. Bailey points out that Hardy was disappointed that this poem was received as an attack on religion. He intended it as "an attempt to point toward a faith acceptable to the twentieth century" (287). He is acutely aware of that gnawing something in human nature, that seeks fulfilment which it cannot find in the intellectual or physical realm of existence. This is the "latent knowledge" he feels "stirring" within him (6 - 7). It is this irrepressible feeling in man that reaches out into the universe desiring to find a response, an echo, a dwelling place external to himself, which answers his need for spiritual communion. It is the reason why the "Darkling Thrush" chooses to "fling his soul/ Upon the growing gloom" (23 - 24). The earth is desolate and barren. No "cause" for "ecstatic" "carolings" is to be found there. Yet, something causes the thrush to sing out joyfully. Hardy calls it: "some blessed Hope" (31). The overtly religious connotations of the words "blessed" "carolings" and "evensong" emphasise Hardy's acknowledgment of the possible existence of a hope, religious in nature which sadly eludes him.

In "God's Funeral" the narrator is a man deprived of God whose presence is described as marvellous and glorious and whose disappearance leaves humanity and the poet bereft. In contrast, "A Plaint to Man" details the process whereby an unneeded God slips away into oblivion, unheeded by man. These two poems should be viewed in context as their composite meaning can only be comprehended if they are read as part of a whole. (William Morgan<sup>13</sup> stresses the importance of viewing Hardy's poetry in the context he placed them within each book of poems.) Each poem sheds light on the other enhancing the aggregate meaning. Although they share the same theme, the tone of the language in each poem sends conflicting signals. The speaker in "A Plaint to Man" is resigned and accepts that through the intellectual process of evolution man is no longer dependent on God, but on the "resource" of his own heart, whereas the tone in "God's Funeral" is one of poignant regret and sorrow. The poet describes himself as "dazed and puzzled 'twixt the gleam and gloom" (67). His defection from belief to unbelief is reluctant and places him in the spiritual twilight zone so typical of the Victorian agnostic. Hardy "mechanically" follows the mourners, not the believers, with whom he has great empathy, indicating that neither his heart nor his intellect

<sup>13</sup> Morgan, W. "Contextual Poetics in Hardy's Volume of Verse: the example of Time's Laughingstocks." Thomas Hardy Conference, Cambridge University, Cambridge, 29 July 2003.

supports his defection. Against his will, he chooses “gloom” that comes with unbelief. Hardy’s fiction and poetry demonstrate that this gloom overshadows his views on life and exerts a pessimistic influence over his work.

In line 67 of “A Plaint to Man” the poet equates unbelief with gloom while faith is described as “gleam”. Hardy’s desire to retain the “gleam” that apparently accompanies faith is expressed in “Darkling Thrush”, “The Oxen”, “In a Whispering Gallery” and “To Life” amongst other poems. He is loath to relinquish faith, but acknowledges that he cannot subscribe to Christianity like the “bright believing band” in “The Impercipient”. However, the poem “Survival” indicates that even at the age of eighty-one, in spite of his professed agnosticism, Hardy’s philosophy of life retains recognisably Christian elements. The poem serves as an example of Hardy’s tendency to judge life, also his own, according to Christian principles. It takes the form of a dialogue between Hardy and his inner man and is a reflection on the Biblical principles of truth and justice (Philippians 4.8), long-suffering love and the all encompassing importance of charity (Corinthians 13.4, 7, 13). Hardy valued these principles and incorporated them in his theory of meliorism and in the characters of Angel Clare’s father and Tess. Yet, on measuring his own life against them he admits to falling short.

His inner voice chides: “*Whatsoever was just you were slack to see;/ Kept not things lovely and pure in view*” (9). This is significant because of its bearing on Hardy’s creative output. The poet acknowledges that he has failed to recognise and dwell on the good in life. As an artist committed to honesty and realism, Hardy wishes to face the negative side of life without flinching. This is clearly expressed in “In Tenebris II”: “if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the worst” (18 - 19). However, it appears that he has become inexorably trapped in the quagmire of the image of “the Worst” and is unable to dislodge himself and open his mind to see the other side. The final stanza of “In Tenebris I” epitomises Hardy’s pessimism:

Black is night’s cope;  
But death will not appal  
One who, past doubtings all,  
Waits in unhope.

An illustration of Hardy’s propensity for dwelling on the worst and losing sight of the best can be demonstrated by comparing the lives of Tess and Jude with that of Job. Hardy’s frequent references to Job, the proverbial figure of woe, in connection with both these protagonists invites such a comparison. Tess’s and Jude’s lives follow the pattern of Job’s with regard to suffering, but not with regard to the end. They suffer and then die unhappy, whereas Job, having endured indescribable suffering, receives a double blessing from God: “the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before” (Job 42.10) and “the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than the beginning” (Job 42.12). He dies old and full of days, unlike Tess and Jude who die young and unfulfilled. Hardy’s pessimism forges his vision of life on earth as a sojourn in the Valley of Humiliation where all the earth is fated to “Groan in their

bondage till oblivion supervene" ("To Meet, or Otherwise" [21]). In "Survival", a poem of retrospection in old age, he expresses regret that he disregarded "*things lovely and pure*".

"The Self-Unseeing" indicates that the poet seems to recognise that happiness eludes him partially due to his habit of dwelling on things gloomy. Hardy recalls happy times as a child and acknowledges that he was unable to appreciate the happiness at the time:

Childlike, I danced in a dream;  
 Blessings emblazoned that day;  
 Everything glowed with a gleam;  
 Yet we were looking away! (9 - 2)

Only as an old man does he become aware of what was good in his life. This is true too of his relationship with his first wife Emma. Their marriage was fraught with tension and unhappiness (Gittings 492). It was only after Emma's death that Hardy released a stream of poems of regret honouring the love that once was.

Hardy's inherent predisposition toward gloom and depression coupled with his extraordinarily sensitive nature deeply affect his perception and experience of life. Happiness and contentment appear to be the most fragile and transient of conditions that are doomed to be short-lived, as depicted in the lives of Tess and Jude. The themes of unappreciated valuable moments in life, thwarted desire and hope "unbloomed" are prominent in "After the Visit". The poet dwells on the imperfection of his perception of life, his blindness to the "charm in the changes of day" until the moment of revelation:

And I saw the large luminous living eyes  
 Regard me in fixed inquiring-wise  
     As those of a soul that weighed,  
     Scarce consciously,  
 The eternal question of what Life was,  
 And why we were there, and by whose strange laws  
     That which mattered most could not be. (17 - 24)

These questions recur repeatedly in Hardy's work. Tess and Jude suffer under the same laws that deny them a relationship with their soul mates. Here the poet departs from the view that a person's fate is determined by chance. "Strange laws" are responsible for thwarted happiness. Thus Hardy's preoccupation with the law that thwarts happiness also surfaces in his poetry. The likelihood of achieving even a measure of happiness or joy in a lifetime is practically non-existent.

In "Hap" joy is not only denied, it is brutally murdered: "How arrives it joy lies slain,/ And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?" (10 - 11). Hardy's negative philosophy of life is reflected in his language usage. He frequently creates new words by negating the common form. For example, hope "unblooms". This image is very powerful. It suggests that the life force of the blossom that brings forth new growth in spring is not cut off; it is aborted before it can develop. The "best" hope, one that by its superior quality should have been fit to survive in Darwinian terms, is denied existence. The "purblind Doomsters," Crass Casualty and Time

purposely obstruct the poet's chances of happiness. He despairs that they "had as readily strown/ Blissed about my pilgrimage as pain" (13 - 14), lamenting the unfairness that by chance he is chosen as a vessel for misery on this earth. Perhaps Hardy sees himself bound by the same law that governs Tess and Jude. The innocent are destined to suffer "unmerited" and are powerless to influence their own destinies.

In the search for the cause of pain, Hardy suggests that it would be easier to bear if it were due to the *Schadenfreude* of God. Then martyr-like in the fact that he endures pain "unmerited" he could "clench" himself "and die". It would be acceptable to him if "a Powerfuller than I/ Had willed and meted me the tears I shed" (7 - 8). But, it is "not so". He seems to shy away from the possibility that God is purposely malevolent.

"Hap" is reputedly one of Hardy's most pessimistic poems. In his commentary on this poem, Bailey raises the issue of pessimism and quotes Hardy in response to the accusation that he is a pessimist saying:

"if it is pessimism to think, with Sophocles, that 'not to have been born is best,' then I do not reject the designation. [ . . . ] But my pessimism, if pessimism it be, does not involve the assumption that the world is going to the dogs, and that Ahriman is winning all along the line. On the contrary, my practical philosophy is distinctly meliorist. What are my books but one plea against 'man's inhumanity to man' — to woman — and to the lower animals?" (180). Hardy claims that he does not believe that Ahriman is winning the battle of good and evil, but the evidence to the contrary abounds in his novels and poems. Ahriman is a Middle Eastern mythological figure who represents the personification of the devil and is the God of darkness<sup>14</sup>. Hardy's mature fiction and much of his poetry reflects Darkness triumphing over light.

Hardy's assertion that his work reflects "man's inhumanity to man" is problematic. A close reading of his novels reveals that the fate of Hardy's characters cannot unequivocally be attributed to the evil actions of other men and women. The evil that befalls them can be seen as a direct result of the operation of a universal law and malicious turns of fate. Sue defines this law as " something external to us which says, 'You shan't!' First it said, 'You shan't learn!' Then it said, 'You shan't labour!' and now it says, 'You shan't love!'" (Jude 355). Hardy's protagonists are subject to this law which determines their pilgrimage on earth. If Hardy had been able to believe in salvation, he could have provided his characters with a mercy seat. Since this was not the case, their fates unfold in a spiral of misery culminating in annihilation.

The comforting firm texture of the earth for the Christian who rests in the belief that there is forgiveness of sin and life everlasting becomes quicksand for the unbeliever who sinks into an abyss under the burden of sin with no way out except death. Hardy himself was prey to this sentiment. In "In Tenebris II" he expresses regret that he did not die while he was still a child and lived in happy ignorance of "the groan of creation". "Then might the Voice that is law have said 'Cease!' and the ending have come" (27 - 28). Other poems like "To an

Unborn Pauper Child" echo this view as do the characters Tess, Jude, Little Father Time and Mrs Yeobright.

In view of the doom and gloom that pervades Hardy's writing it is difficult to accept his statement that his philosophy is "distinctly meliorist". Part of Hardy's meliorist theory involves the operation of free will and the "equilibrium" of "the mighty necessitating forces" (CP 558). Hardy states in "Apology to Late Lyrics" that free will is "conjecturally possessed by organic life". There is then, a possibility that it might exist. In his poetry Hardy expands his ideas concerning free will. "He Wonders about Himself" introduces the concept that the individual will was part of the Immanent Will and could perhaps be used to function as a force for good and affect change:

Part is mine of the general Will,  
Cannot my share in the sum of sources  
Bend a digit in the poise of forces,  
And a fair desire fulfil? (9 - 12)

In "God's Education" the idea that the will of a human being might be able to influence God is developed further. God reflects that although He is the Master, men have the "teaching mind" and He can learn from them. "The Lacking Sense" describes Nature as the creative force which harms man and the earth, albeit unwittingly. The poet's advice is "Assist her where thy creaturely dependence can or may/ For thou art her clay" (40 - 42), thus placing humankind in the role of an ameliorating force with superior knowledge to Nature.

There does not appear to be substantiation for these theories in Hardy's work. A search for a character that influences the Immanent Will through the exercise of his or her free will is in vain. This study attempts to show that Hardy's characters do not show any signs of possessing a free will and that in Hardy's universe there is very little likelihood of the "mighty necessitating forces" ever being in equilibrium, which leaves humankind doomed and damned. In other words, Hardy's work shows that evolutionary meliorism through free will or humanity using knowledge to influence life is a utopian concept which can possibly never be attained.

"The Year's Awakening" is a poem that raises questions about the workings of Nature, and the knowledge inherent in nature whereby migrant birds are able to find their way across the earth, and plants can recognise the seasons and respond accordingly. The speaker asks repeatedly "How do you know?" He is seeking the source of knowledge which he recognises in Nature and desires for himself. But like all the other questions the poet puts out into the universe, no answer is forthcoming. None of the poet's enquiries brings him a step closer to the knowledge he is seeking. Knowledge in Hardy's world is a double edged sword. On the one hand he sees it as fatal because with knowledge comes the consciousness of suffering. "Before Life and After" expresses the thought that knowledge makes man vulnerable and opens him to experiencing sorrow and pain. These were absent before knowledge was available:

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<sup>14</sup> 25 September 2003 <<http://www.deliriumsrealm.com/mythology/Ahriman.asap>>



A time there was [. . .]  
 Before the birth of consciousness,  
 When all went well.

None suffered sickness, love or loss, (1 - 5)

This “time” of innocence or ignorance possibly refers to the time in the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve had eaten of the tree of knowledge. Genesis 3.5 states that the result of eating of the tree of knowledge is that “your eyes shall be opened and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.” Eating of the tree of knowledge is the first sin and brings with it banishment, punishment and death. The condition of joy prior to sin described in the first stanza is lost with the advent of knowledge or “consciousness”:

But the disease of feeling germed,  
 And primal rightness took the tinct of wrong;  
 Ere nescience shall be reaffirmed  
 How long, how long? (13 - 16)

There is a Biblical quality to line 14 suggesting that innocence is perverted through knowledge or feeling, allowing evil to prevail.

In this poem the poet yearns for a reversal of knowledge and a return of nescience, which contradicts his wish for the knowledge that will furnish him with the answers to the existential questions that plague his soul. On the one hand ignorance is bliss, yet on the other, lack of knowledge is a handicap especially in spiritual matters as is evident in “A Sign - Seeker”. He looks for signs that will aid his spiritual knowledge and asserts that he:

[. . .] panted for response. But none replies;  
 No warnings loom, nor whisperings  
 To open out my limitings,  
 And Nescience mutely muses: When a man falls he lies. (45 - 48)

The absence of a response that would furnish the necessary knowledge the poet seeks in a sign leaves him to conclude that there is no life after death. Yet as is usual with Hardy, this assertion is subverted by the statement that it is “Nescience” or lack of knowledge which makes the statement: “When a man falls he lies.” There is an underlying hint that true knowledge may have led him to a different conclusion.

Ultimately Hardy resigns himself to the fact that his questions will remain unanswered. In “A Dream Question” Hardy refers to God as “the Inscrutable, the Hid,” acknowledging that God is unfathomable and that the meaning of life and death, suffering and pain will always be shrouded in mystery. Hardy’s art delineates his mental pilgrimage toward an enlightenment that he wished to achieve but which eluded him to the very end of his life.

In his book Dying to Know. Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England, George Levine entitles his chapter on Thomas Hardy “I think therefore I’m doomed”. This could perhaps be rephrased to read “I doubt, therefore I am doomed” to illustrate that Hardy’s fatalistic philosophy of life and the doomed characters and universe he creates in his novels can possibly be attributed to the influence exerted by Biblical principles on his

imagination. Hardy's fiction and poetry appear to contain elements of Genesis and the Mosaic Law. His work also reflects the doubt that his agnostic leanings caused, which pertains to the supernatural and miraculous described in the gospels. Unlike his contemporaries Swinburne and Edmund Gosse, Hardy was unable to reject Biblical theology in its entirety. Unlike George Eliot and Mrs Humphrey Ward, he did not reinvent Christianity to suit the modern framework. Uniquely, he struggled to map out humanity's search for happiness on earth. If the laws of the universe followed the pattern laid out in the Old Testament, and the Biblical plan for salvation from the curse on humankind and nature proved untrue, then it would follow that the universe and its inhabitants were doomed. Hardy's deep pessimism is possibly the result of his interpretation of these fundamental Biblical issues.

The compassionate and sensitive way that Gaskell and Eliot treat their characters, contrasts sharply with Hardy's treatment of his characters and illustrates how his "negative metaphysics" influenced him as a writer. Particularly Jude and Tess indicate that Hardy's characters are subjected to pitiless universal laws of suffering and death. They are deprived of a free will and there is no possibility of redemption through mercy. The public outrage that Jude produced (Life 2: 39) reflected, amongst other things, the Victorian reading population's resistance to the unsparing ruthlessness of the author. Even Hardy's friend Swinburne was so affected by Jude that he wrote to Hardy "How cruel you are. Only the great and awful father of Pierette and L'Enfant Maudit was ever so merciless to his children" (Life. 2 :40). Hardy himself describes Jude as "my poor puppet" (Life. 2: 41). It can be argued that the absence of hope, contentment or amelioration in Hardy's novels marks him as a Maker of doom.

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