Chapter IV

Anomalistic characters in The Woodlanders

In Hardy’s own Classification of his novels, The Woodlanders appears under the heading of beings “Romances and Fantasies,” and “Novels of Ingenuity and experiment.” In his later years, Hardy declared that The Woodlanders was his favourite story and that this book was both “self-revealing and judicious”. The Woodlanders originally appeared in instalments in a monthly periodical called the “Macmillan’s Magazine”. It was completed in twelve monthly instalments in April 1887. However, a month before the completion of the instalments, the novel appeared in a book form in March 1887. This novel was a product of Hardy’s mature genius. According to a critic, The Woodlanders marks “a moment of distillation” in Hardy’s career as a novelist; and, according to the same critic, this novel shows a “distinctive unity of mood.” The mood here is somber and elegiac, a mood of isolation and resignation.

The Woodlanders is, by no means, one of Thomas Hardy’s greatest novels. The greatest novels of Hardy are: Tess of the D’Urbervilles; The Mayor of Casterbridge; and Jude, the Obscure. However, even The Woodlanders is a high-ranking novel in the history of English fiction. It has an interesting plot; it has characters that have been made to live; and it contains some marvellous Nature – pictures and vivid description. We enjoy going through the story; we find pleasure in meeting persons like Giles Winterborne and Marty south, not to speak of Grace Melbury; and we experience a feeling of exhilaration and upliftment while reading the graphic descriptions of natural scenery. The title of this novel is significant. The setting of the story is rich woodland where the growth of trees and other vegetation is profuse, and where the apple orchards lend a further richness to the scenery. The hero of the novel is undoubtedly Giles Winterborne and he is a woodlander, that is, a native of the woodland which is the background of the story. The heroine is Grace Melbury, the daughter
of a timber—merchant Mr. George Melbury, who too is a woodlander, being a native of the same village where Giles Winterborne was born. Marty South is another important character, and she too is to be classed as a woodlander. Marty South is, in fact, an inseparable part of the landscape. Then there are the rustic characters who too are woodlanders. However, there are two important characters that cannot be regarded as woodlanders. These two characters, Mrs. Felice Charmond and Dr. Edred Fitzpiers, are outsiders, who have been compelled by the force of circumstances to settle in Little Hintock. As the novel contains a very large number of passages describing natural scenes and the wood in general, the title is quite appropriate.

The novel begins with a visit by the barber, Percomb, to the village of Little Hintock and his meeting Marty South, the daughter of a poor working—man by the name of John South. Percomb wants to buy Marty’s hair, and offers her an amount of two sovereigns for it. Marty has a feeling that her hair is wanted by the rich widow, Mrs. Felice Charmond, who has already broken the hearts of many noble gentlemen and who now wishes to add to her attractions by wearing Marty’s hair on her own head. Marty refuses to part with her hair, even though she badly needs the money. Percomb then leaves but inserts the two sovereigns into the frame of a small mirror, telling her that, if she changes her mind, she can call on him at his saloon in the town of Sherton and let him have her hair.

Marty is secretly in love with Giles Winterborne who lives in the same village and who works as a cider—maker. Giles Winterborne is hardly aware of Marty’s secret love for him. He hopes to marry Grace Melbury, the daughter of Mr. George Melbury, a rich timber—merchant of village. Mr. Melbury had, several years ago, given a promise to Giles that his daughter Grace would be married to him. The same night, after the barber has spoken to Marty, Marty overhears Mr. Melbury telling his wife that Grace would now be returning to the village and that, according to a commitment he had made several years before, Grace
would have to be married to Giles. Marty now suffers a great blow to her hope of marrying Giles. She cuts off her hair, and goes to the town of Sherton next day to hand over her rich locks of hair to the barber. The barber passes on the hair to Mrs. Charmond who now begins to wear it on her own head, feeling very proud of it.

Grace returns to the village after completing her studies at a boarding-school. As already pointed out, Giles hopes to marry this girl but she shows little interest in Giles who had specially been deputed by Mr. Melbury to receive her in the town of Sherton when she was returning from her school to her parent’s house. Giles begins to doubt whether Grace would agree to marry him. However, Mr. Melbury tells Giles that so far as he is concerned, Grace belongs to Giles. Mrs. Grammer Oliver, who is the servant in Mr. Melbury’s household, in the course of a conversation with Grace, tells the young girl that a doctor by the name of Fitzpiers has settled down in the village as a medical practitioner. Mrs. Oliver also tells Grace of the mysterious studies and scientific experiments with which the doctor, who is a bachelor, keeps himself busy. However, Grace does not show much interest in the doctor when Mrs. Oliver tells her of these facts.

The rich widow, Mrs. Felice Charmond, lives in a house called Hintock House which is situated on the outskirts of the village of Little Hintock. She is a lonely woman who, on seeing Grace just by chance, expresses her desire to engage the girl as her companion. Mrs. Charmond is planning to go on a journey to foreign lands, and she wishes to take Grace with her. Grace and her father feel very happy at the prospect of the girl’s being appointed by Mrs. Charmond to the position of that lady’s travelling companion. However, soon afterwards Mrs. Charmond drops the idea of hiring the services of Grace, whereupon Grace feels very disappointed.

Mr. Melbury has now begun to have second thoughts about Grace’s marriage to Giles. He thinks that his daughter deserves to marry a superior kind of man because of the
education she has received. As the wife of Giles, she would have to lead a rough kind of life. Besides, Giles suffers a heavy blow to his financial position when he loses possession of the house in which he was living. Mr. Melbury now feels almost certain that Giles is in no position to maintain a wife because he does not now have even a house to live in. He therefore tells Giles that he should regard his betrothal to Grace as having been cancelled. Grace accepts her father’s decision even though she feels deeply sympathetic to Giles. Dr. Fitzpiers, having seen Grace a few times from a distance, has begun to feel interested in this girl. At first he thinks only of flirting with her in order to while away his time, but soon afterwards he makes up his mind to try to get her as his wife. Mr. Melbury readily permits Dr. Fitzpiers to pay his addresses to Grace in order to obtain her consent to his marriage with her. Grace has begun to feel greatly awed by Fitzpiers’s learning and scholarship. In fact, the doctor has begun to exercise a certain psychic influence upon her. The result is that, when the doctor proposes marriage to her, she cannot refuse especially because her father has been urging her to forget Giles and to think of Fitzpiers as her prospective husband. Actually, the doctor is an unscrupulous man who, while desiring to marry Grace, has developed a sexual relationship with Suke Damson, and so she tells her father that she would rather marry Giles Winterborne than Dr. Fitzpiers. However, Fitzpiers, on coming to know of Grace’s suspicion, gives her an explanation which seems to her quite plausible. Her father too urges her once again not to change her mind about the doctor. And so Grace marries Dr. Fitzpiers. Within a few months after the marriage, Fitzpiers develops a love–affair with Mrs. Charmond. One day, the lady summons the doctor to attend to some injuries which she has suffered in a minor accident. She finds that Fitzpiers is the same man who had fallen in love with her several years before when she was yet an unmarried girl and when he was a medical student in Germany. Her mother had at that time removed her to another place after
discovering the mutual attraction between her daughter and the medical student who did not appeal to her as a suitable match for her daughter because of his poverty. Mrs. Charmond’s old passions for Fitzpiers, and his passion for her, now revive. Both feel strongly attracted by each other, and so Fitzpiers, a married man with a wife at home, begins to pay frequent visits to Mrs. Charmond. An effort is made by Mr. Melbury to prevent Mrs. Charmond from continuing this irregular relationship with Fitzpiers; but the effort fails. At a chance-meeting with her, Grace warns the widow that Mrs. Charmond would reap only disappointment and misery in the long run if she continues illicit relationship with the doctor. But Mrs. Charmond, though feeling guilty, and though wishing to end the affair, finds herself helpless.

While returning from one of these visits to Mrs. Charmond, the doctor falls down from his horse in the wood and swoons. Mr. Melbury, who had been spying on the doctor and had been following him, picks up the doctor and puts him astride his own horse. Mr. Melbury then also mounts his horse and begins to ride homewards supporting the doctor with one arm. Fitzpiers now begins to mumble something about Mrs. Charmond, saying that he had made a mistake in marrying the daughter of a mere timber – merchant. Mr. Melbury feels indignant on hearing these words and pushes the doctor down to the ground. Mr. Melbury then goes away, thinking that the doctor would be able to make his way home without any difficulty. But the doctor has suffered serious injuries in this fall and, finding himself in great bodily pain, he limps towards Hintock House where he is received by Mrs. Charmond with all the warmth and affection of a mistress. Here Fitzpiers spends a few days, recovering from his injuries. He simply writes a letter to Grace informing her that he would not be able to meet her for some time. But he does not inform her about the place where he is staying at this time.

After getting well enough to be able to travel, Fitzpiers goes away to the Continent whither Mrs. Charmond follows him. Soon Mr. Melbury and Grace get the information that Fitzpiers and Mrs. Charmond are living as lovers in a German city.
Mr. Melbury now decides to try to secure a divorce for Grace from Fitzpiers, so that Grace should again become a free woman and should marry her former suitor, Giles Winterborne. Accordingly Mr. Melbury goes to London and files a petition on behalf of Grace seeking a divorce from her husband. From London he writes a letter to Giles that the petition for divorce would in all probability be granted and that Giles should now get ready to marry Grace. At the same time he writes a letter to Grace, asking her to give every possible encouragement to Giles in case he approaches her with the object of winning her hand in marriage after her petition for divorce has been granted.

Both Giles and Grace are now keen to marry each other. For some time after Fitzpiers had left for the Continent, Grace had been ill. After recovering from her illness, she starts moving about. One day she goes to the town of Sherton where she meets Giles and speaks to him encouragingly. Giles is already thinking that his long–cherished desire to marry Grace would soon be fulfilled. Grace too is now thinking in term of marrying this man. As divorce seems to be a certainty, Giles even tries to kiss Grace though she does not permit him to do so. But, on the very next day, feeling sorry to have refused him a kiss, she expresses her regret to him for having treated him in that manner, especially when they are soon going to get married. This time she herself asks him to kiss her. The hopes of both Giles and Grace are, however, shattered because Grace’s petition for divorce is rejected. Giles had come to know of the rejection of the suit for divorce even before he had kissed Grace; and now he experiences a sense of guilt at having kissed Grace when he had absolutely no right to do so. Grace, on coming to know from her father that her petition has failed, feels somewhat perplexed as to why Giles had kissed her though he had already come to know about the rejection of her suit for divorce. Both Giles and Grace are feeling extremely depressed because their hopes of getting married has come to nothing.
One day Grace suddenly receives a letter from Fitzpiers, asking her to meet him at Budmouth where he would be arriving on a particular day from the Continent. He has also written in this letter that he would take her away to France the same day. Grace completely ignores this letter because she has absolutely no intention to rejoin Fitzpiers as his wife. Fitzpiers arrives at Budmouth on the fixed day and, not finding Grace there, travels to Little Hintock.

As soon as Grace learns that Fitzpiers is coming to her father’s house, she slips out and walks away to Giles’s hut in the wood. After having lost the house in while Giles had originally been living, he had taken up his abode in a hut in the interior of the wood close to the village. His hut is situated at a distance of a few miles from the village, but Grace walks all the way to meet Giles. She tells him that she does not wish to rejoin her husband as his wife and is therefore trying to get away from the village. She requests him to escort her to the town of Ivell from where she would proceed to the city to Exonbury where an old class-fellow of hers is living. Giles gets ready to accompany her to Ivell but at that very moment it starts raining heavily, and so they have to give up the idea of undertaking the journey to Ivell. Grace has now no alternative but to spend the night in Giles’ hut. Giles himself spends the night out of doors even though it is raining. It would not be morally right for him to sleep in the same hut with Grace when Grace is still the wife of another man. On the following day, Giles suggests that Grace should spend two or three more days in his hut because it is possible that during this period Fitzpiers would leave the village and go away to the Continent again or to some other place in England. He tells her that, if Fitzpiers really leaves the village, she can then go back to her father’s house. Grace agrees. During the two or three nights which follow Grace again sleeps alone inside the hut, while Giles has to sleep out of doors on a heap of hay.
Having to sleep out of doors and exposing him to wind and rain, Giles falls ill especially because he had already suffered from an illness and had barely recovered when Grace had come to him. His condition now becomes critical. With great difficulty, Grace brings him into the hut and then hastens to the village in order to get medical assistance for him. There is no other doctor available except her own husband who is at present staying in her father’s house. She immediately contacts him and, without disclosing her identity, and speaking to him in an altered voice, urges him to hurry to a hut in the wood and attend upon a man whose condition is very serious. She gives him the necessary information regarding the location of the hut. She then walks back to the hut in order to attend upon Giles. She is soon followed by Fitzpiers who, on arriving at the hut discovers that the sick man is no other than Giles and that the woman who had approached him was no other than his own wife. After examining the patient, Fitzpiers says that the man’s life cannot be saved. After half an hour or so, Giles dies.

Fitzpiers now has the impression that Grace had developed a sexual relationship with Giles. Grace does nothing to contradict this impression which he has formed. Grace has no desire at all to get reconciled with Fitzpiers. She had genuinely been in love with Giles when Mr. Melbury had suggested that she should marry Giles as soon as her petition for divorce was granted. She had even told the dying man that she loved him as she had loved no other man, and as she would in future also love no other man. Now she starts visiting Giles’ grave regularly to pay her homage to the memory of the man whom she had regarded as her betrothed lover. On these visits to the grave, she also takes Marty along with her because Marty too had been in love with Giles though Giles had not even been aware of Marty’s love for him. Grace at this time has also a sense of guilt because she thinks that it was she who had been responsible for the death of Giles. It was she for whose sake he had been sleeping out of doors and had thus exposed himself to bad weather.
Although Fitzpiers has become suspicious about the possible relationship which had existed between Grace and Giles, he yet cannot believe that Grace had really developed sexual relations with that man. Then he happens to meet Marty who tells him that there had been no such relationship between Grace and Giles, and that Giles had been sleeping out of doors while Grace had slept inside the hut during the several nights that she had been there. Fitzpiers is now desperately anxious to be reunited with his wife. One day he writes a letter to her, beseeching her to meet him. After a good deal of thought, Grace goes to meet him in response to his letter, though she takes Marty with her on this occasion. In reply to her questions about the possible causes of Giles’s death, Fitzpiers tells her that Giles had died of some infection which he had caught, and that his exposure to wind and rain had not really been the cause of his death. In this way Grace feels exonerated of her sense of guilt.

Fitzpiers now wants to meet Grace again and again. As he entreats Grace to meet him, and does so most humbly and lovingly, Grace has no choice but to agree. On one occasion, when they are to meet each other at the appointed place, a man by the name of Tim Tangs lays a man–trap to punish Fitzpiers because Fitzpiers had at one time been having illicit sexual relations with Suke Damson who was betrothed to this man. Unluckily it is Grace whose dress is caught in the man–trap, while Fitzpiers has a narrow escape. Grace manages to tear herself off from the man-trap and begins to wait for Fitzpiers. When Fitzpiers arrives and sees a part of Grace’s dress caught in the man-trap, he utters a cry of anguish, thinking that grace had been caught in the man-trap and had been badly hurt. Perhaps she was dead and had been carried to her father’s house. Just then Grace steps forward to meet him. She finds him in great distress because of his apprehension about her. On seeing her safe and sound, he feels greatly relieved. He then takes hold of her and, keeping her in a tight embraces, begins to kiss her passionately. She too is at this time deeply moved by the anxiety which he has felt on her account. He now says that, from this moment onwards, she would
always belong to him; and she gives him an affirmative reply. It is in this way that Fitzpier’s strong desire to be reunited with Grace is fulfilled.

The story has a happy ending though, in the concluding passage of the novel, the author has described Marty standing beside the grave of Giles and declaring to the dead man that she would continue to love him forever and ever though Grace would now forget him is because she had gone back to her husband. Thus the happy ending of the novel is tinged with sadness.

_The Woodlanders_ has several themes, apart from its story-content. According to a critic, “passion and money, beauty and ambition” are the themes which are lightly but firmly touched upon in the opening chapters. And we agree that these themes do emerge from our reading of the opening chapters of the novel. We also agree when the same critic tells us that, above all, Hardy wishes to convey to us the inter-connectedness of the characters who figure in the story. We further agree that at the heart of this novel there exists a profound isolation. Early in the novel, Hardy speaks of the “lonely courses” of certain characters whose destinies soon become inter-twined. Human loneliness is, in fact, the leading theme of the novel. The other themes, which have been specified above, prove to be subsidiary as compared to the theme of human loneliness which really dominates. Another subsidiary theme of the novel is that of possession and dispossession. Some characters in the novel find themselves deprived of some of their possessions, while certain other characters come into the possession of certain things of which they are again dispossessed. In fact, dispossession and possession occur in several cases in the course of the novel.

As already pointed out, _The Woodlanders_ has an interesting plot, every novel of Hardy deals with the passion of love. All his novels are love-stories. In _The Woodlanders_ we may identify four distinct love-stories which have been inter-woven to form a wonderful pattern. Giles is in love with Grace who, in the early stages of the story, does not care much
for him. Fitzpiers falls in love with Grace who, though not very much in love with him, feels fascinated and awed by some of his abilities and skills. Pressed by her father, Grace soon marries Fitzpiers. Then Fitzpiers falls passionately in love with a widow, Mrs. Charmond, who fully reciprocates his love. The love—affair between Fitzpiers and Mrs. Charmond wrecks the married life of Fitzpiers and Grace. Grace has by now begun to appreciate the merits of Giles, and she falls deeply in love with him. In fact, she had never loved Fitzpiers so much as she now loves Giles. Another thread in the story is the love of a humble village girl, Marty South, for Giles. Marty’s love is steadfast, deep, and unwavering though it proves to be utterly futile because Giles is hardly aware of Marty’s love for him. Giles sacrifices his life to make Grace comfortable in his hut. Mrs. Charmond dies. Fitzpiers once again seeks the love of Grace, but she does not want to have anything to do with him. However we find Marty standing beside the grave of Giles and expressing her undying love for the dead man.

The point to note about the plot-construction here is that the love—affairs, and the marriage of Fitzpiers and Miss Grace, have been so closely interwoven that none of the characters can be removed from the novel without disrupting the whole.

Hardy’s portrayal of characters in his novels is always masterly; and *The Woodlanders* is no exception. The persons most elaborately drawn here are Grace, Giles, Fitzpiers, and Melbury. These characters have really been made to live before us. We became acquainted not only with their physical appearance and their visible movements and actions, but also with the invisible working of their minds. In this connection it is pertinent to point out that there are a large number of passages in which Hardy depicts the states of minds of the various characters. The psychological passages not only enhance the realistic effect but also impart a certain depth to the novel. The inner thoughts and feelings of all these characters on various occasions have been described most convincingly. The portrayal of Mrs. Charmond is also quite successful. Marty South has only been briefly drawn but she
makes a most powerful impression upon our minds by her sincerity and devotion to the man with whom she is in love.

*The Woodlanders* tells a tragic story which, however, has a happy ending. An atmosphere of sadness pervades the whole novel with the exception of a few situations in which the rustics provide an element of comedy. Marty South’s whole life is unhappy on account of the frustration of her love for Giles Winterborne who does not even become aware that she is so deeply in love with him. Giles’s own life is unhappy throughout because of the non-fulfillment of his love for Grace. He certainly has a few happy moments when Grace falls in love with him and would like to marry him; but his hope of marrying her proves illusory. Eventually, he dies a premature death; and his death is partly due to the fact that he exposes himself to foul weather in order to accommodate Grace in his hut in the wood. Felice Charmond’s life is also unhappy, with the exception of a brief interlude of happiness when she is having a love–affair with Fitzpiers. Grace’s life becomes not only unhappy but miserable after her marriage with Fitzpiers because of Fitzpiers’s disloyalty to her. Mr. Melbury too finds little happiness in his life. The novel ends with the reconciliation and reunion of Grace and Fitzpiers; but even here we are not absolutely sure that Fitzpiers will now prove to be a faithful and devoted husband to Grace. Hardy’s outlook on life is dark: and this novel amply illustrates that. Every novel by Hardy tells a story of human misfortunes and human disappointments; and *The Woodlanders* is no exception though it is not as dark or sombre a novel as certain others by his pen.

As already pointed out, the rustic characters in *The Woodlanders*, as in certain other novels by Hardy, provide a comic element. The conversation of the rustics is a source of much amusement to us. Among the rustics, Robert Creedle is the most outstanding character. His talk and some of his actions are very amusing. The rustics contribute somewhat to the development of the plot also. In this connection the role to Tim
Tangs is noteworthy. By laying a man-trap to punish Fitzpiers, Tim Tangs unwittingly brings about reconciliation between Fitzpiers and his estranged wife. The rustics, headed by Mr. Melbury, also take part in the search for Grace when one evening she does not return home and is eventually traced to the Earl of Wessex hotel whether she has gone with Fitzpiers. After the search is over the rustics sit down to refreshments in the course of which they talk in their usual way which is very amusing from our point of view. Apart from the comedy provided by these rustic characters, Hardy occasionally makes a humorous remark also in the course of his narration of events. Such remarks also serve to relieve the general gloom of the story, thus supplementing the comedy provided by the rustics.

*The Woodlanders* contains a large number of passages describing natural scenes. All the novel’s most important event and situations occur against the background of the wood, or in the wood, surrounding the village of Little Hintock. Hardy gives us vivid description of the natural scenery around the village. To go through these descriptive passages is a real delight to a nature-lover. Nature in some of the novels of Hardy serves not only as a background for the action of the story but even plays a role in the development of the plot. Nature also serves a symbolic purpose. For instance the elm tree growing outside the house of John South becomes a symbol of death for him. The wood in which Grace and Mrs. Charmond confront each other seems at this time to be a sinister influence in their lives. They both lose their way in the wood, and feel miserable. But the most important role which nature plays in this novel is to bring about the death of the novel’s hero, Giles Winterborne, Giles dies because of his exposure to wind and rain; this exposure to the elements proves destructive. Thus Nature in *The Woodlanders* plays a cruel role, not a benign one. And yet the descriptions of natural scenery in the novel provide a source of exquisite pleasure to us.
There is plenty of suspense, and there are a large number of dramatic situations in the novel to enhance the interest of the novel. Some of the incidents and situations are melodramatic, and they too add to the interest of the story. We experience a lot of suspense when Grace’s betrothal with Giles has been cancelled, and when Fitzpiers begins his pursuit of Grace in order to marry her. Then we experience a lot of suspense when Fitzpiers, after having married Grace, begins visiting Mrs. Charmond with whom he has developed a love – affair.

We experience a lot of suspense when Mr. Melbury goes to Mrs. Charmond to plead the case of his daughter. Grace’s confrontation with Mrs. Charmond in the woods is perhaps the most dramatic situation. This situation is, indeed, one of the memorable highlights of the story. Fitzpiers’s falling down from his horse, his being picked up by Mr. Melbury, and his being pushed from horseback down to the ground by Mr. Melbury soon afterwards-these constitute a gripping sequence of events. Fitzpiers’s getting badly hurt, his limping to Mrs. Charmond’s house, and his beings attended to by her in complete secrecy constitute a melodramatic incident. There is a lot of suspense in our minds when Giles falls ill, and when Grace, feeling almost crazy with grief walks all the distance to the village in order to get medical assistance for him. The death of Giles is the climax of a series of melodramatics situations which include Grace’s Journey to the village and her urging her husband to attend upon the dying man. Perhaps the most dramatic or melodramatic situation is the laying of the man – trap, and Grace’s being caught in it, though it had been intended to trap Fitzpiers. Fortunately only Grace’s dress is caught in it, and no part of her body. The melodramatic incident of the man-trap leads, however to a happy development which is the reconciliation between Fitzpiers and Grace.

Chance and coincidence play a prominent role in almost all the novels of Hardy. In some of the novels, like *The Mayor of caster-bridge* and *The Return of the Native*,
chance and coincidence play a decisive role in the action at several points. Chance and coincidence are a manifestation of the working of supernatural power to which we may give the name of Fate or Destiny. Fate generally plays a spiteful role in human life as depicted by Hardy. However, in *The Woodlanders* chance and coincidence do not play a major role in the plot. Chance happenings do take place in the course of this story also, but here chance does not play a malicious role. For instance, Fitzpiers sees Grace at least three times just by chance before he meets her actually.

Similarly, Grace meets Mrs. Charmond just by chance when Grace is returning in her father’s company from an auction of timber. But in none of these cases does chance play any malicious role. There are only two occasions on which chance or coincidence plays a decisive role. Grace, after having cancelled her betrothal to Winterborne at her father’s behest, suddenly changes her mind and would like to honour her original commitment to marry Giles. But just before that Mr. Melbury has met Giles and pointed out to him that Giles now, having lost his house, is now in no position to marry because he would not know where to keep his wife. A little later, on the same day, Giles writes a letter to Mr. Melbury confirming Mr. Melbury’s termination of Giles’s betrothal to Grace. Therefore, when Grace now tells her father that she is prepared to marry Giles, her father shows her the letter which he has received from Giles: and Grace has therefore to keep quite. The receipt by Mr. Melbury of Giles’s letter almost coincides with Grace’s decision to marry Giles. If this letter had been delayed or had not been written at that particular time, Giles would have come to know of Grace’s revised decision to marry him; and the whole course of the story would have been different. Here certainly coincidence plays a crucial role. Then there is another occasion when coincidence plays a decisive role, though here the outcome is happy and not tragic. Suke happens to meet Fitzpiers just after she has got married to Tim. Tim’s jealousy is aroused and he lays a man-trap to teach Fitzpiers a lesson. Suke’s meeting with Fitzpiers
almost coincides with Fitzpier’s contemplated visit to a spot close to Tim’s cottage. Fitzpiers has to meet Grace at this spot. Tim’s scheme goes awry and the outcome is reconciliation between Fitzpiers and Grace. As already pointed out, here coincidence does not play the hostile role which coincidence most often play in human life in Hardy’s novels, though here also the coincidence does give rise to some anxious and even excruciating moments for the characters.

The problem of genre has been the centre of critical controversy over the tragic novels of Thomas Hardy, novels such as *The Return of the Native* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. This problem of genre has not been examined so carefully in the two novels which critics have called pastoral, *Far from the Madding crowd* and *The Woodlanders*. In fact, the critics agree that the two novels are indeed pastoral. Part of the reason for this unanimity among critics is that pastoral does not have an authoritative definition or model as tragedy does; thus many critics have labelled the two novels pastoral for no other reason than that they take place within a rural setting which embodies the same values at that of pastoral, and that the characters and the central theme of both novels are essentially engaged in the life of an agricultural countryside. This insistence on the traditional pastoral form of the two novels may be due to the mood of nostalgia felt in many of Hardy’s novels, particularly in *The Woodlanders*, for a lost ground of meaning and value. This longing for a return to a natural good life is of course the essential characteristic of pastoral.

The pastoral is a genre that idealizes country life through a sharp contrast between city and country, combined with “the intense nostalgia for a Golden – Age past, and the creation of a circumscribed and remote pastoral world characterized by harmony between man and nature and by an atmosphere of idyllic contentment”. (MS 303)This definition has been used by various critics to make the following points about at least four important elements of *Far from the Madding crowd* and *The Woodlanders*: 
1. Generally, critics agree that nature in the two novels is a sympathetic force, that the rural society of both novels, retains much that is valuable in the old tradition, and that the rustics serve as a positive moral force. John Holloway even goes further in asserting that “the single abstraction which does most to summarize Hardy’s view is simple enough: it is right to live naturally ….. to live naturally is to live in continuity with one’s whole biological and geographical environment” (JH 281)

2. Gabriel oak and Giles winterbourne are the pastoral heroes of the novels. They are completely satisfied with their position in life and at one with it; both are true Arcadians.

3. Sergeant Troy and Fitzpiers are typical anti-pastoral forces, representative of the sophisticated city life that invade the pastoral world and destroy it. They disrupt the existing harmony.

4. Bathsheba and Grace are the central characters caught in the conflict between pastoral values and the anti-pastoral ones.

Although Hardy uses certain pastoral patterns in Far From the Madding Crowd and The Woodlanders, his vision is incompatible with the traditional pastoral. The sense of happiness, self-fulfilment and communion with regenerative nature experienced by the characters of a traditional pastoral are replaced by unhappiness, unfulfilled desires, estrangement and isolation from stunted nature experienced by most of Hardy’s principle characters. In the following discussion of The Woodlanders, assertions which the ‘pastoral critics’ have made about the four major elements are taken and tried to show that the novel is a distortion of pastoral, it can appropriately be called “pastoral elegy” (DL 9)

Many critics have observed that The Woodlanders is a particularly rich mixture of Hardyan modes and moods and that it “draws on genres so widely desperate as to be at times incompatible.” (PB 98) In the earlier novels, most notably in Far From the Madding Crowd, the separate modes lived together, not so much in harmony with each other as in a happy state
of natural indifference. Hardy himself seems neither to know nor to care that comic, pastoral, pathetic and tragic modes – to name only the most obvious ones – are all collectively at work, in spite of the fact that he was conscious and ambitious in the matter of genre frequently reminding the reader of his novel’s affinities with the traditions both of classic tragedy and of dramatic comedy.

_The Woodlanders_ is such a mixture of modes that Hardy describes a traditionally pastoral view of the woodland country and its denizens and a contemporary Darwinian view of both wood and woodlanders locked in the struggle for survival. In the same way there is the distinction between woodland life and polite society with Grace “in the middle”. Marty South’s image of splitting gads by night in her cottage and Winterbone’s image of planting the young pines typify woodland ways, like those of Gabriel Oak and Bathsheba in _Far From the Madding Crowd_, and the novel seems balanced between country pursuits and urban restlessness, Sergeant Troy and Fitzpiers supplying the same sort of disruptive influence. Episodes such as Grace’s skirt being clutched in the man-trap, and the foray of the maidens into the wood seem variations on the memorable scenes in the earlier novel of the sword exercise in the dell of ferns, and of Bathsheba catching her dress in the dark wood on Sergeant Troy’s spur. Grace’s flight and sojourn in winterbourne’s hut parallels Bathsheba’s night in the wilderness after the drama of Fanny Robin’s coffin and Troy’s departure.

However, _The Woodlanders_, in an unprecedented way, is quite explicit in its descriptions of unhealthy natural world. Little Hintock is a waste land, a world of darkness, isolation, and human cross – purposes. Every time one steps, there is the sound of leaves crunching and twigs snapping. When one looks up there is no sun visible, only the thick thatch of leaves. The heavy smell of dead leaves, rot and fermenting cider fills one’s nostrils. One cannot breathe in this world. The wintry woods in which Grace walks with her father, near the beginning of the novel, do not constitute an idyllic refuge or a source of renewal:
the leaf was deformed, the curve was crippled, the
taper was interrupted; the lichen ate the vigour of the
stalk, and the ivy slowly strangled to death the
promising sapling. (WL 83)

A world in which the wind makes trees “rub each other into wounds” (WL 47) and a sunless winter day emerges “like a dead – born child” cannot be called a world where one can live in pastoral bliss. From the very start, we are introduced to a deserted, isolated and secluded world. The narrator pursues a deserted coach-road and ponders the distinction between the empty highway and the empty woodlands which border it:

The physiognomy of a deserted highway expresses
Solitude to a degree that is not reached by mere dales
Or downs, and bespeaks a tomb-like stillness more
Emphatic than that of glades and pools. The contrast of
what is with what might be, probably accounts for this.
to step, for instance, at the place under notice, from
the edge of the plantation into the adjoining
thoroughfare, and pause amid its emptiness for a
moment, was to exchange by the act of a single stride
the simple absence of human companionship for
an incubus of the forlorn. (WL 35)

This “loneliness’, the “tomb-like stillness”, “emptiness”, “absence of human companionship” and “incubus of the forlorn” characterize the lives of the characters throughout the novel. The community of Little Hintock is a community “which can no longer cohere; in the sense that it is vulnerable to forces beyond its control, it is devoured by its isolation”. (IG 144) The setting of the novel is “one of those sequestered spots outside the
gates of the world where may usually be found more meditation than action, and more listlessness than meditation”. (WL 38) The woods play a part similar to that of Egdon.

In *The Return of the Native*, one similarity between the two novels is, the woods have a distinctive significance in the novel and give substance and coherence to its theme. By “distinctive significance” I mean that the woods have a continuous presence in the novel, “a multi-dimensional presence which is both outside man and within him too”. (IG 164) The woods shape the lives of those who live there. We cannot think of Melbury without thinking of him as a successful timber merchant or of Giles without thinking of him at work on the trees.

The community of Little Hintock is devoured not only by isolation but also by melancholy, reinforced by the sombre atmosphere permeating the woods. The woodland itself may seem as important as any of the characters, and is, indeed, personified in the figure of Winterborne who seems more important than the female characters. We are told at the beginning that in such an isolated woodland community “dramas of a grandeur and unity truly sophoclean are enacted in the real, by virtue of the concentrated passions and closely-knit interdependence of the lives therein” (WL 38) This suggestion is finally made explicit when Marty south, as “Chorus”, utters her requiem over Winterborne’s grave. Images such as “two overcrowded braches… which were rubbing each other into wounds” (WL 47) or “a half-dead oak, hollow and disfigured with white tumours, its roots spread out like claws grasping the ground” (WL 241) reflect the gloom of the woods. It is as if Hardy wanted to say that nature is diseased, life is thwarted deformed, and suffering prevails. This mood extends beyond the flora and fauna and invades the woodlanders themselves. The most dramatic instance of this is the tall tree which grows outside John South’s house and which he feels will fall and crush him. The tree does fall and he dies of shock when sees it is gone. The tree is not only the cause of south’s death but it also drastically affects the lives of the major
characters of the novel. On South’s death, the life-hold on his property expires, and both South’s house and Giles’s whose lease lasted as long as South lived, revert to the owner of the estate, Mrs. Felice Charmond. Then Giles loses his house, his last hope that he might marry Grace vanishes and his tragedy follows. The woods, then, establish a pervasive atmosphere of deep melancholy; they crystallize the fears of the characters. It is even more evident when we find Grace hiding in Giles’s hut unaware that he is dying close by.

The rot and sickening nature of the woods may appear most clearly in the following passage:

She continually peeped out through the lattice, but could see little. In front lay the brown leaves of last year and upon them some yellowish green ones of this seasons that had been prematurely blown down the gale. Above stretched an old beech, with vast arm-pits, and great pocket-holes in its sides where branches had been removed in past times; a black slug was trying to climb it. Dead boughs were scattered about like in ichthyosauri in a museum, and beyond them wee perishing woodbine stems resembling old ropes. From the other window all she could see were more trees, in jackets of leeches and stockings of moss. At their roots were stem less yellow fungi like lemons or apricots, and tall fungi with more stem than stool. Next were more trees close together, wrestling for existence, their braches disfigured with wounds resulting from their mutual rubbings and blows. It was the struggle between these neighbours that she had heard in the night. Beneath them were the rotting stumps of those of the group that had been vanquished long ago, rising from their mossy setting like black teeth from green gums. (WL 338-339)

Not only plant life but also animal and human lives are caught up in fierce struggle for survival. Owls and stoats prey upon mice and rabbits; and men prey upon foxes
and rabbits (WL 54) Men, moreover, fell the trees of the forest for their fibre and bark, subdue horses and dogs to their will, and struggle among themselves for economic, social and sexual pre eminence. Hardy takes pains in *The Woodlanders* to show that people are like trees. He continually presents scenes of the Darwinian world to reinforce the tragedy of the human situation. In the opening scene of the novel, Marty south works with blistered, bleeding hands to make wood spars for George Melbury, she overhears the sounds of a similar ordeal among the trees around her cottage:

A lingering wind brought to her ear the creaking sound
of two over – crowded branches in the neighboring wood,
which were rubbing each other into wounds, and other
vocalized sorrows of the trees, together with the
screech of owls, and the fluttering tumble of some
awkward wood pigeon ill-balanced on its
roosting – bough. (WL 47)

Grace’s desolation, after the discovery that her husband is a liar, that Suke Damson has ever had a tooth pulled, that her marriage has been a terrible mistake, is reinforced by Hardy’s description of the disfigured and half-dead Oak. Staying in Giles’s hut, Grace, feeling absolutely lonely, envies the small creatures wandering around.

*The Woodlanders*, like the poem “yell’ham-wood’s story”, signifies “a thwarted purposing”; “life offers –to deny!” (JG 298) The dominant idea of the novel is made explicit in this passage:

on older trees still than these huge lobes of fungi
grew like lungs. Here, as everywhere, the unfulfilled
Intention, which makes life what it is, was as obvious
as it could be among the depraved crowds of a city
The novel is an explicit expression of the “Unfulfilled intention which makes life what it is”, and the relationships among the characters have in common an acute sense of self estrangement. The six major characters share a common sense of estrangement, each in his/her own way. On the one hand, we have the extraordinary and fruitless self-abnegation of Giles winterbourne and Marty South, no longer in tune with the modern world. On the other hand, we have the blind selfishness of Edred Fitzpiers and Felice Charmond whose sterile fulfilment never extends beyond themselves. Grace Melbury, a young and bright girl, cut off from her environment and sent away to be educated, comes back after a considerable number of years to find herself an alien among her people and community. George Melbury, the rich timber merchant, spends much money to educate his only daughter in the hope that she may marry “well” and raise, consequently, the social standard of her family, but discovers at the end that his money, his daughter and his dreams have all been wasted. This is the general picture of the world of *The Woodlanders*, a world whose inhabitants are estranged and alienated. The unity of place is complemented by the unity of tone. Pain is the dominant emotion in the novel. His narrative is elegiac and mournful; an aura of lament, sometimes it is muted, sometimes impassioned, and is all pervasive. A decade after writing *The Woodlanders*, Hardy in the 1895 Preface to *Jude the Obscure*, labelled the story of Jude Fawley, a tragic character of unfulfilled aims, the same idea transformed from nature to man, and from country to city.

In the novel, Hardy’s images of destruction, deformity and death intensify our sense that Hardy’s unfulfilled intention is specifically tragic. Just after starting *The Woodlanders*, Hardy redefined Tragedy to include his concept of the Unfulfilled Intention. He writes on 21-22 November, 1885:
Tragedy, it may be put thus in brief; a tragedy exhibits a state of things in the life of an individual which unavoidably causes some natural aim or desire of his to end in a catastrophe when carried out. (FEH 176)

In *The Woodlanders* the chief victim of the unfulfilled Intention is Giles Winterbourne whose aim of marrying Grace Melbury is thwarted. At the beginning of the novel, there is good reason to expect Giles’s intention to be fulfilled because of their affection for one another and Melbury’s determination to hasten their marriage as an act of expiation for his having cheated Giles’s father in a love affair. But when Grace returns from her schooling she seems in the eyes of her father too precious to marry to Giles. Grace’s indecisive nature too encourages her father to change his mind. The most decisive pressure comes when Fitzpiers arrives in the woodlands and shakes the “great web”. Because Fitzpiers possesses all the advantages of an ancient name and high connections, Melbury’s social dreams for his daughter would come true by her marriage to him. Another reason for the loss of hope of a marriage between Grace and Giles is that Mrs Charmond, the owner of his property, refused to let him retain his holdings for life after he refused to give way to her at the encounter of his timber carriage and her vehicle. The price Giles pays for not submitting to his superiors is his loss of financial and social standing, and with them his hopes for marrying Grace.

Giles’s lack of initiative, his passivity and his over scrupulous observance of social customs and traditions are most vividly revealed when he is encouraged to renew his courtship of Grace after she expects to be divorced from her husband. He soon learns to exercise “the necessary care not to compromise Grace by too early advances” (WL 305) She wishes “to keep the proprieties”, even though she is no longer morally bound to Fitzpiers, become an inviolable law for Giles. We must admit that this cruel observance of propriety, Melbury’s social ambitions to marry his daughter “well” and Mrs. Charmond thoughtless
refusal to let him retain his property for life are insuperable social forces for Giles to resist, but these forces alone cannot account for his strange death, which amounts to suicide. There must be something in his character that affects his fate. When Giles goes to bring Grace from Sherton Abbas and meets her for the first time, the narrator remarks that:

It had sometimes dimly occurred to him, in his ruminating silence at Little Hintock, that external phenomena—such as the lowness or height or colour of a hat, the fold of a coat, the make of a boot, or the chance attitude of a limb at the instant of view—may have a great influence upon feminine opinion of a man’s worth, so frequently founded on non-essentials; but a certain causticity of mental tone towards himself and the world in general had prevented to-day, as always, any enthusiastic action on the strength of that reflection; and her momentary instinct of reserve at first sight of his was the penalty he paid for his laxness. (WL 68)

When Giles invites Grace and her family to a Christmas party “to bring matters to a point” he “in his self-deprecatory sense of living on a much smaller scale than the Melburys did, would not for the world imply that his invitation was to a gathering of any importance” (WL 100) This self–deprecatory sense leads to the damaging failure of his Christmas party and to more complications.

Later, when Melbury tells him about the failure of Grace’s marriage and insists that Giles ought to have married her, Giles says:

She would hardly have been happy with me’ he said,
in the dry, unimpassioned voice under which he hid his feelings. ‘I was not well enough educated: too rough in short. I Couldn’t have surrounded her with the refinements she looked for, anyhow at all. (WL 256)

That Giles himself is responsible for causing many of his own problems cannot be denied. In his relations with George Melbury and Mrs. Charmond, Giles incurs problems by acting in a way contrary to his best interests. In the auction scene, for example, Giles is unaware that his bidding against Grace’s father is making a dangerous tension between them.

Giles is also to blame for the deterioration of his social and financial position a land holder, Giles has the simple legal procedure required to preserve his property for the duration of his life. Thus he should have understood that the last person he could afford to offend is Mrs. Charmond, into whose possession his cottages will fall upon John South’s death. His adamant refusal to give way to her coachman proved disastrous and he paid the price of losing his house.

However, it is only fair to say that Giles’s sense of estrangement is as much to be attributed to Melbury’s social ambitions and Mrs. Charmond’s irresponsible selfishness as to his own failure to secure his foothold in Little Hintock.

The masterly scene where Giles is “shrouding” John South’s tree powerfully evokes his ineffectiveness as a lover and his estrangement as a person. Before Grace comes to tell him that she concedes to her father’s wish not to see him again, Giles is shown climbing a ladder to begin his work and “cutting away his perches as he went, and leaving nothing but a bare stem below him” (WL 124) it seems that Hardy looks back to Giles’s estrangement from Melbury and forward to his estrangement from Mrs. Charmond. At Grace’s repeated rebuffs, Winterbourne’s face grew strange; he mused,

and proceeded automatically with his work. Grace meanwhile
had not gone far …. A sudden fog came on, and she curtailed her walk, passing under three again on her return ….while she stood out of observation, Giles seemed to recognize her meaning; with a sudden start he worked on, climbing higher into the sky, and cutting himself off more and more from all intercourse with the sublunary world”, (WL 125)

When Grace approaches to tell him candidly that they must not think of the engagement, he remains in the tree resting his head on his hand, an embodiment of despair, until “the fog and the night had completely in closed him from her view … Had Giles …. Immediately come down from the tree to her … something might have been done …. But he continued motionless and silent in that gloomy fog land which involved him”. (WL 126)

The novel’s themes of estrangement, isolation and loneliness are nowhere more explicit than in this image of Giles’s self-enclosure in the fogs of Niflheim. The self-enclosure is complete and the only communication between Grace and Giles is that of her voice coming out of the mist. It is a poignant demonstration of the void between them. The difference between Grace and Giles is not as Hardy sees it a simple matter which could have been overcome by a more generous interpretation of the divorce laws,”, argues Ian Gregor convincingly, “what separate them is a difference of consciousness theirs is the crisis of a community as much as the crisis of individuals”. (IG 148)

After Grace tells him they must end their agreement to marry, Giles’s actual self – sacrifice begins. His symbolic cutting away of her perches isolates him from human contact while climbing upward leads him to the motionless silence and glom of death. Though Giles continues to love Grace, yet there is something sterile in that love; his unnatural repression of
his emotions keeps him from expressing any passion for her. After the first and last time he ever kisses her, Grace says, “smiling through her tears. “Giles, if you had only shown half the boldness before I married that you show now, you would have carried me off for your own, first instead of second”(WL 320)

Hardy’s deep psychological understanding of Giles is clear from the description of the two psychological moods dominating Giles after Grace calls down to him from her honeymoon hotel. The first mood is because of “opening old wounds by calling out my name; his second mood was a far tenderer one – that which could regard her renunciation of such as him as her glory and her privilege, his own fidelity notwithstanding.”

This abandoning, crushing and cursing obviously recall Henchard’s will, which concluded, and embodied, the long process of his self destruction. Giles, in fact, destroys himself by his self-imposed restrictions. He accepts the physical torture of staying in a cold and damp hut in the woods. Thus, his heath deteriorates while Grace is hardly aware of the extent of his sacrifice. His refusal of food and shelter and his inability to sleep indicate how dangerously his instinct to cling to life has collapsed. In the violent “devilry of a gusty night in a wood’ (WL 335) Giles dies. Grace’s recognition that she is not worth such self-sacrifice and her call to him to “come to me dearest! I don’t’ mind what they say or what they think of us any more” (WL 337) comes too late.

Giles’s death scene is really perplexing for Giles’s refusal to enter the house incredibly strange; how could a lover deny himself the satisfaction he seeks and needs? Surely there is something unnatural in Giles’s restraint. Most critics are dissatisfied with the scene. Hardy does not seem to agree with Giles moral fastidiousness which cares for society’s laws at the expense of human nature. Hardy believes that we cannot live the life represented by Giles, but that we must go forward into a future, represented by Fitzpiers the rationalist and scientist, from which there is no escape. Giles’s alienation from himself, from
Grace and from his traditional milieu stems from his inability to cope with the changing order of his world. Marty south’s voice sounds the characteristic note of *The Woodlanders*. It is she who opens and closes the novel, and she who most clearly embodies the theme of estrangement. Marty is crushed by economic necessity and isolated by unrequited love. She is a woman, unloved but ever faithful, left, at the close of the novel, by the side of the grave of the man who hardly even noticed that she is a woman. The only time she can express her love for Giles is after his death when she, in complete possession of his memory, lays fresh flowers on his grave. Marty and Giles are Victorian images of typical mismatched lovers.

In the episode of Marty’s hair, we feel the pressure on her of a whole economic and social system, so that she withdraws into herself having no relationship with the world, except in work. After a night as dark and void as the ante-mundane Ginning-Gap (WL 46) foretelling her unfulfilled hopes, she has learned from overhearing Melbury’s conversation with his wife that Giles is not for her, she desperately cuts off her hair for the guineas to support her disabled father. She accepts her self-sacrificial role. Marty’s haircut is, in fact, symbolic of de-sexing herself in mourning as well as self – abnegation. Marty instinctively recognizes that it is she who is for sale and clings to her woman hood, “I value my locks too much to spoil ‘em” (WL 44) when she cuts them off, she surrenders her sex, her identity.

Although Marty and Giles are walking together, each is following his lonely course. This profound loneliness characterizes everything in the novel. Absorbed in her work and ignored by Giles, except as a fellow – worker, Marty remains silent about her love, expressing it only when he is no longer alive to hear it.

Hardy’s point is that “intercourse with nature is not to be equated with the intelligent intercourse of man with man, or man with woman, if such discourse is to include love.” (IG
Marty’s and Giles’s relationships are defined only in terms of their shared work in the woods;

In spite of their ‘intelligent intercourse with nature’ their physical and spiritual communion with the trees in the wood, Giles and Marty remain emotionally isolated from one another. They seem to place a high moral value on the intimacy with the woods and the life of the woods and skill in the woodland crafts, but a negative response seems to be implicit when it comes to their personal relations. Nothing is more pathetic than Marty in the final chapter, as deserted, totally alone and lost in memories, she tends the flowers on Giles’s grave. By the end, she has become “the repository, the residuary legatee of all the sorrows of the Hintock world.” (MM 260)

If Giles and Marty can exist only in the woodlands and are unfit for the modern world, Fitzpiers, Mrs. Charmond and Grace are exceptionally aware of the growing forces of change. Giles and Marty are remembrances of the past, Fitzpiers, Mrs. Charmond and Grace are glimpses of incipient intellectual, sexual and economic consciousness looming in the modern world. In the relationship between Grace and Fitzpiers, just as in the relationship between Eustacia and Clym, we catch an explicit suggestion of a complexity in sexual and intellectual feelings that foreshadows Tess and Angel or Sue and Jude. If Giles and Marty are noted for their abnegation, Fitzpiers and Mrs. Charmond are noted for their selfishness. Giles’s and Marty’s isolation finds expression in their absorption in their work; Fitzpiers’ and Mrs. Charmond’s isolation finds expression in their complacent enclosure within their own fantasies. We may recognize in Felice Charmond a familiar character, the wealthy lady of mysterious origin who has surrendered to boredom in her search for life’s purpose. She, as well as Fitzpiers, is a victim of restlessness and isolation. She lives alone in a large house, seeking comfort in a curtained room from frustrated emotions.
This keenly felt isolation comes as a result of herself, Centeredness. The most important thing in her life is to satisfy her sensual desires and her relationship with Fitzpiers brings her down to Suke’s level in the eyes of a scornful community. Chance plays its customary role in their fortuitous meeting at little Hintock. The reappearance of Fitzpiers recreates for Felice Charmond the lost days of her youth; and he also sees in her the young girl and not the embittered mature woman. Partnering in disillusionment, each fulfils the other’s needs until they wear themselves out. Felice Charmond can relate to neither place nor person. She is out of tune with her environment not only in her dislike of the rusticity but also in her failure to “connect” she is insulated from contact with the woodlanders by wealth, her rank, her carriage and her fine house, whose curtains are drawn in daytime while candles are lit within. Hintock house lies in an absolutely isolated “hole”. Felice Charmond’s inabilities to interest herself in her surroundings, her physical and spiritual isolation from Little Hintock demonstrate her inner emptiness.

Her rootlessness extends to her lack of regard for others. As lady of the manor she controls the economic life of the woodlanders and oppresses them by enclosing their land and pulling down their houses. She loses sympathy for Giles and destroys him and Marty. Her purchase of Marty’s hair only indicates her falseness and superficiality. When Fitzpiers first sees her, he sees “a woman of elegant figure reclining upon a couch in such a position as not to disturb a pile of magnificent hair on the crown of her head”( WL 217) and it is not until he receives Marty’s note that he discovers the spuriousness of her feminity.

In a final desperate search for human communication, Felice Charmond expresses her wish to have someone like Grace as a companion who might act as secretary. In her spiritual and geographical isolation, she craves closeness, and although that wish is dropped, both women meet, later, in a scene unique in English fiction where they discuss the man whose presence deepens the chasm between them. Drawn irresistibly to Fitzpiers, Felice
Charmond finds it hard to agree to Grace’s request to release him, and the meeting ends with each feeling more alienated from the other.

Felice Charmond’s end is fitting, if melodramatic. Not only has she lived as an alien in Little Hintock, but also, in her death, she is killed by an alien, a mysterious South Carolinian exile, in an alien country. Fitzpiers’ estrangement, like Felice Charmond’s, emanates from his self – enclosure within a circle not extending beyond himself. Like a butterfly he flirts from one source of interest to another, from Grace Melbury to Suke Damson to Felice Charmond. Fitzpiers seeks isolation not only in the remoteness of “one of those sequestered spots outside the gates of the world”. But also in the inwardness of his mind, “I am in love with something in my own head, and nothing-in-itself outside it all” (WL 147) Tense self-consciousness leads Fitzpiers into his restless, peripatetic and unpredictable life; to his sudden preoccupation with Grace, culminating in his marriage, the sudden shift in his attentions to Felice Charmond, his amoral relationship with Suke Damson, and his final return to Grace. In all these relationships, Fitzpiers, like Felice Charmond, sees the world as existing only for his own purpose, and where he buys Grammer Oliver’s brain, she buys Marty South’s hair. There is a desperation about their characters, which suggests the fundamental instability of their inner lives.

Fitzpiers’ estrangement from the people of little Hintock, whom he supposedly comes to sere, is most explicit throughout the novel. He regards the woodlanders as inferior beings, and does not wish to mix with them. Just after his marriage and while still in the honeymoon, he tells Grace, “We must come to an understanding about our way of living here. If we continue in these rooms there must be no mixing in with your people below. I can’t stand it, and that’s the truth.”(WL 213) Grace is sadly surprised at his “distaste for those old-fashioned woodland forms of life which in his courtship he had professed to regard with so much interest” (WL 213) The woodlanders in their turn, regard him “no more as a superior
hedged by his own divinity; while as doctor he began to be rated no higher than old Jones, whom they had so long despised” (WL 213-214) Cut off from the people around him and despised by them, Fitzpiers, driven by isolation and loneliness, seeks destructive relationships with Suke Damson and Felice Charmond. Fitzpiers is “the only full–fledged intellectual in the Wessex novel”, writes David De Laura in an essay very relevant to present purposes. (DDL 392) Half-baked rather than “fully-fledged”, I would say; and I do not share De Laura’s view that Hardy is “curiously hostile to Fitzpiers from the first”, and that Hardy is “querulous with regard to Fitzpiers” intellectual pretensions”. He is a kind of third – class Shelley, a poet he is fond of quoting, and idealist, a scientist, a philosopher and a man of letters.

Fitzpiers, devoted to the abstract and the ideal, is willing to stay up all night to pursue his unspecified studies. The rustics see him a devil, challenging God to learn what no man should know. But Hardy’s point is that Fitzpiers’ dedication to abstract knowledge is neither good nor evil; rather, it is a shallow interest in experimentation that indicates modern scientific and intellectual consciousness.

In The Woodlanders the narrator has assimilated shelleyan terms and poetic impulses to a striking extent. Fitzpiers and Mrs. Charmond quote Shelley directly. Some critics have somewhat hastily concluded that a parody of shelleyan idealism is intended. However, Hardy’s concern is the distinction between appearance and reality; the ironic discrepancy between Fitzpiers’ words and actions underlines the depth of his corruption. On the other hand, Fitzpiers’ modernity gives him a sense of being different from everybody around, increases his self-pity, as for one doomed to live in a miserable little “hole” like Hintock. Although, at the end of the novel, he promises “to burn – or at least get rid of – all my philosophical literature” in order to claim reunion with Grace, the spirit that these philosophical books represent is still implicit in his character. Fitzpiers has not really
reformed; he has only become more conscious of what he is, more sensitive to himself and his particular world.

The whole question of “free thought” begins to dawn on Wessex through Fitzpiers, and I agree with De Laura in seeing him as an “unfocussed first study of a less ethical Angel” (DDL 392) and in associating him with Clym and Jude as intellectuals out of their element – as Grace sees him, before they meet, “a tropical plant in a hedgerow, a nucleus of advanced ideas and practices which had nothing in common with life around” (WL 80-81)

Giles and Marty are alienated because they belong to a world which can no longer be made communicable, a world, where Fitzpiers and Mrs. Charmond are alienated characters because they are possessed entirely by a new world, a world for which they can find no reality beyond themselves. Grace hovers between these two worlds, being torn between a world represented by the woodland and a world represented by her schooling.

Grace Melbury provides the most explicit instance of isolation and estrangement in the novel. Literally speaking, she is isolated by her education from the community in which she has been brought up. Hers is a second return of the native. Sent away from little Hintock to be educated by a social climber of a father, she finds it difficult to adjust to life on her return. Fancy day has no cause to regret her education; it has qualified her to earn her living. But Grace’s education has left her between two worlds, neither of which can accommodate her. Grace is significant as the focus of the novel and the unifying centre of the book. The conflicting elements are brought together in her because she is trying to belong both to the ancient, traditional, isolated world of Little Hintock and to the mobile, “cultivated” world beyond.

When Giles comes to bring her home from Sherton Abbas she feels uneasy because she does not want to meet him under his specimen tree in the city square. As they
ride to Little Hintock she thinks of fashionable suburbs, of cities, lawns and girls “whose parents Giles would have addressed with a deferential sir or Madam” (WL 73) she has temporarily lost her roots in the good old little Hintock, and ultimately agrees with her father that life with Giles would have been “too rough for her”. Melbury’s utilitarian view of education as an investment in the marriage – market is not an anomaly in the late nineteenth century, nor is his ambition to ascend the social ladder. Fitzpiers’ basic advantage as his prospective son-in-law is not his being a physician, but his having old aristocratic connections. Melbury is even willing to sacrifice personal dignity, family and friendship to marry him daughter well.

Grace does marry Fitzpiers, but shortly after she expresses her disillusionment in a remarkable scene where she sees him off on what is supposedly a professional call, but which she knows to be another appointment with Felice Charmond. Grace contemplates the irony of her faithless husband’s riding to his mistress on a horse give to her, Grace, by her first and faithful lover.

What makes The Woodlanders a particularly modern novel is its consideration of specific social problems such as education, social mobility and divorce, which are also characteristic of his two subsequent major novels, Tess and Jude. Grace’s problems stem from the self-division engendered by her education, and her inability to reconcile her opposing tendencies. The blunt, straight forward country girl speaks in simple and strong sentences; whereas the society lady uses a language with elaborate sentence structure and affected diction.

The price of Grace’s education is deeper isolation and estrangement. Grace is railing at what education has brought about in her, at the finer sensibility she has got, the deeper consciousness she has acquired and the more acute temperament she has developed. When we contemplate the relationship between Grace and Fitzpiers before their marriage, we
cannot say it was love. “In truth, Grace’s ante-nuptial regard for Fitzpiers”, the narrator tells us, “had been rather of the quality of awe towards a superior being than of tender solitude for a lover” (WL 233) Grace even does not “celebrate” her marriage to Fitzpiers. Her marriage is not an impressive episode in the novel.(IG 158) Yet, it is not surprising that Grace veers towards Fitzpiers for her conscious desires are, of course, for a socially higher partner and the parental pressure to which she has always submitted is also strongly towards accepting him. But even more important, the hypnotic effect which he exerts over her is irresistible to a girl trained for submission. He, 

exercised an almost psychic influence over her…

Fitzpiers acted on her like a dram, exciting her, throwing her into a novel atmosphere which biased her doings until the influence was over, when she felt something of the nature of regret for the mood she had experienced (WL 188-189)

Hardy indicates the blank negative quality of the responses. She exists only as a response to outside influence. Her indifference to Fitzpiers’ departure with Felice Charmond and her equal indifference to his return to her after the loss of Charmond can only be explained by her lack of positive feelings about anything most of the time and her muted and confused emotions about Fitzpiers at the time of the marriage. Submissiveness to others and to convention is the guiding force of her nature when Giles invites her to a meal in an inn at Sherton:

she was in a mood of the greatest depression. on arriving and seeing what the tavern was like she had been taken by surprise but having gone too Far to retreat she had heroically entered and sat down
on the well –scrubbed settle, opposite the narrow
table with its knives and steel forks, tin pepper
boxes, blue salt cellars, and posters advertising the
sale of bullocks against the wall. (WL 312)

Grace sees in “knives and steel forks’ and “tin pepper – boxes” a style of living
she is no longer at ease with, and the effect is not so much out of rejection, as one of shame.
Her instincts are at war with each other; or rather she is at war with herself. (WL 25)

This internal conflict is just a stage in her gradual estrangement. When she
resolves the conflict by running away to Giles, “Autumn’s very brother”, she is also rejected.
Grace’s rebellion against society’s laws, represented by Fitzpiers, is met with, quite
ironically, by even stronger laws of “propriety” which consign her to cottage while Giles
stays in the shed. This final rejection makes her uncertain of the value of any action she might
take. The storm is a climatic representation of her self-division and estrangement. The outer
landscape becomes inner, and Grace is driven from within by force she cannot name, so that
she sees her consciousness seemingly separated out from her body, “a vacuous duplicate
only”. The experience undergone by Grace here recalls similar experiences expressed in
many of Hardy’s poems in” Wessex Heights” for example. In this poem the protagonist says:
“I seem where I was before my birth, and after death may be”. (JG 319) He “makes himself a
lack of being in order that there might be beings”. (GN 212) This description fits Grace’s
experience in the storm. Hardy’s conception is echoed by certain twentieth-century
psychologists. Grace’s feelings that she is “a vacuous duplicate” of herself, for example, is
recapitulated almost word for word in R.D. Laing’s The Divided Self. Laing describes the
various forms of “ontological insecurity” in which “the individual may come to feel he is
merely a vacuum.”(RDL   75)
In this experience of existence and non-existence, of estrangement and self-division, Grace foreshadows Hardy’s more complicated characters Tess and Sue. Through Grace, Hardy describes accurately the conflict between “modern nerves” and “primitive feelings” which he is to explore more deeply in his last two novels. Hardy renders Grace’s inner conflict just before she decides to run away to Giles thus;

In the darkness of the apartment to which she flew
nothing could have been seen during the next half-hour;
but from a corner a quick breathing was audible from
this impressionable creature, which combined modern
nerves with primitive feelings, and was doomed by such
cO-existence to be numbered among the distressed, and
to take her scourging to their exquisite extremity. (WL 325)

The elements that make up Grace’s complex character are “modern nerves” “primitive feeling”, “a vacuous duplicate only”, “propriety” and “the unexpected vitality of the fastidious”. The ending of *The Woodlanders* upsets many contemporary readers and still upsets modern ones. Some modern critics have supposed that Hardy was fixing up a “happy ending” for his heroine in accordance with his readers’ expectations. This is not far from the truth. Hardy himself says that

the ending of the story – hinted rather than
stated – is that the heroine is doomed to an unhappy
life with an inconstant husband. I could not accentuate
this strongly in the book by reason of the conventions
of the libraries, etc.” (FEH 220)

In a sense, *The Woodlanders* has alternative endings, appropriate to each of its competing genres. Marty’s elegy is the pastoral ending and Grace’s reunions with her
husband are the realist ending. She returns a different woman. Fitzpiers survives because he is fitter to survive in a ‘modern’ age. Grace “chooses a man with the future in his bones over a man whose death symbolizes an old order passing. But the life, the future that awaits her is only bourgeois prosperity and respectability, eaten away by the worm of sexual distrust”. (DL 21)

The price of this future is high. Marty, now utterly deserted, speaks her monologue to a dead man; Melbury, the disappointed father has lost his most precious investment in educating his only daughter; Grace, doomed to a life a marital infidelity in a world void of values, resumes a marriage of dubious success; Fitzpiers will continue in his inconstancy.

*The Woodlanders* reflects Hardy’s themes: a rustic, evocative setting, poorly chosen marriage partners, unrequited love, social class mobility, and a happy ending. As with most his other works, opportunities for fulfilment and happiness are forsaken or delayed. The novel is ‘something of an anomaly’, in comparison with the tragic depth in the plot and a touch of estrangement within the characters of both its preceding novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and its succeeding novel *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. 