The Return of the *Female* Native: Understanding Grace Melbury in Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders*

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Abstract

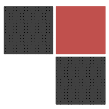
The Woodlanders is one of Thomas Hardy's underrated tragedies. At its centre is the story of the return of Grace Melbury to her native village of Hintock, after an education in the city. In many aspects, her story recalls Clym Yeobright's journey through *The Return of the Native*: yet Grace is often found to be more limited and inhibited than Clym. Read in the context of the norms that governed a woman's life in the nineteenth century, *The Woodlanders* redefines the tragedy of Grace Melbury as the tragedy of a woman who cannot express herself freely until it is too late. This study attempts to understand how Grace Melbury's free will and desires are often compromised by the weight of expectations bequeathed on her gender by the prevailing norms in the nineteenth century, and attempts to trace her evolution into a person in her own right.

Keywords: education, gender, marriage, nineteenth-century, parenting.

'... [C]ultivation has only brought me inconveniences and troubles... If I had stayed at home, I should have married —'[i], states Grace Melbury emphatically to her father in the middle of the novel, and yet hesitates to complete the sentence with the fear of offending her parent by stating her heart's desire. This hesitation, this desire for rebellion cut short by finer filial feelings, sums up the character of Grace in Thomas Hardy's rural tragedy, *The Woodlanders*. Published serially in Macmillan's Magazine from 1886 to 1887, and finally in three volumes in 1887, *The Woodlanders* had been originally intended as a simple woodland story[ii], a sort-of successor to the immensely popular *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874). However, Hardy did not return to his story until the publisher of Macmillan's Magazine asked him for a serial: and thus was published the typical Hardyan tale of mismatched couples, and romances conducted outside of social sanction. The novel follows Hardy's usual pattern of natives in woodland, set against well-educated and cultivated outsiders who have made the woodland their temporary home.

At the centre of the plot is Grace Melbury. The only child of Little Hintock's wealthy timber-merchant Mr. Melbury, Grace is much-beloved by her father. Yet, as the reader progresses through the novel, it becomes disturbingly clear that Grace also serves as a function of her father's wish-fulfilments in life. Though the novel was intended as a corollary to *Far From the Madding Crowd*, and though the plot somewhat follows the pattern of the more popular novel, Grace is a complete contrast to the independent and spirited Bathsheba Everdene. Like Bathsheba at first, Grace is fastidious, and feels that she knows what she wants. On her return from her fashionable school, Grace is not impressed by the homely and rustic Giles. She similarly feels alienated from her native Hintock. Though a woodland girl by birth, on her return, she craves the fashionable life that she has left behind at school. Her situation is complicated by the fact that she is almost betrothed to Giles because her father, Mr. Melbury, had married the lover of Giles' father; and Mr. Melbury intends Grace to be the compensation for *his* misdeed. We learn later that Grace has been well-educated in order to compensate for Mr. Melbury's embarrassment at his own lack of education and refinement, and Grace must marry Giles in order to set right his own past misdeed. There is, thus, a deeply disturbing undercurrent in the father-daughter relationship, where Grace is denied any self-agency, and exists only to carry out her father's wishes.

Grace's life is complicated by an incident in the woods, when she is insulted by a passing huntsman – and her father believes that his presence beside Grace was responsible for the insult. Mr. Melbury believes that 'a woman takes her colour from the man she's walking with' (*TW* 73), and promises that Grace shall have 'somebody to walk with you who looks more dandy than I' (*TW* 73).Grace, though unsure about being a homely wife to the simple Giles, assents to her father's wishes under some distress and pressure. The matter is worsened, when, shortly after this incident, Grace is called to his study and accidentally reads the money receipts and bills of his expenditure for her education. 'I, too, cost a good deal', says Grace sorrowfully, 'like the horses and waggons and corn' – but her father has a more cheerful outlook on the matter: Grace will 'yield a better return' (*TW* 75). This callous, almost heartless commodification of Grace makes even the usually quiet girl start in protest at being thought of a 'chattel' (*TW* 75). Thus, for Melbury, Grace exists not only as a daughter to be loved, but, importantly, as an investment, and a means to right some wrongs. Melbury's primary intention of educating and cultivating Grace, has simply been to raise her social position – and with that, his own. This intention can also be discovered in his enthusiasm to have Grace



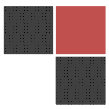
befriend Mrs. Charmond, the widow of the owner of Hintock House – the largest estate in Hintock. Both Grace and her father are suitably impressed by the wealth of Hintock House, and though it is later discovered that Mrs. Charmond had once been an actress – whose origins are little known – Mr. Melbury would rather have had Grace travel to the Continent as a companion to Mrs. Charmond, than to see her married to Giles Winterborne.

It is interesting to read the pattern of Grace's journey in the novel, as it is markedly similar to one of Hardy's most famous male characters, Clym Yeobright in *The Return the Native*. Like Grace, Clym, too, had been educated and cultivated in the city, as a result of the ambitions of his parent (mother). Clym, like Grace, had also been the great hope of his (domineering) parent, Mrs. Yeobright. Yet, a primary – and significant – difference lies in the fact that Mrs. Yeobright intends Clym to be a well-developed individual in his own right. In the case of Grace, however, Mr. Melbury intends Grace's marriage to be a means of the social development of their entire family. In fact, Grace seems to exist for the sole purpose of marrying in accordance with her father's wishes, and to raise the social hopes of the Melbury family. However, Grace, much like Sue in *Jude the Obscure*, is a prototype of the 'New Woman' of the Victorian Age, women whose education was leading them to develop their own thoughts. Thus Mr. Melbury's failure as a parent, is especially highlighted at the very outset by his failure to see how his daughter could put her education to good use instead of simply being a wife to a (rich) man. Indeed, Clym Yeobright wishes to use his education to instil some learning into the minds of the simple Egdon folk, yet Grace must accept that her only role in life is to marry well.

Due to unforeseen coincidences and the hand of Chance so typical in Hardy's works, Giles loses his house to Mrs. Charmond, as it was leased on the life of John South who shortly dies. With the rising interest of the doctor, Edred Fitzpiers, in his daughter, it is only a matter of time before Mr. Melbury wishes that Grace should marry Fitzpiers. It is noteworthy that Grace does not have a clear say in the matter. The reader knows that Grace is not very sure about her feelings, and dithers constantly between her heart's love for Giles, and an inexplicable attraction towards Fitzpiers, that Hardy indicates is based on physical desire. Her love for Giles never really comes into its own, because she, too, is rather self-conscious about her own superiority over Giles. In a telling scene, she cannot distinguish between the types of apples that grow in the woodland that she calls her home, even as she journeys with Giles, much to the latter's disappointment. This leads Giles to wonder whether 'the special attributes of his image in the past had evaporated like these other things' (*TW* 36). In turn, Giles hesitates: in fact, his entire relationship with Grace before her marriage to Fitzpiers is a constant effort by Giles to not disappoint her superior tastes, and to not offend her in any manner. For all of Giles' love for her, he is neither very forward with her, and though he reminds her of their past, her refusal to take up on it makes him silent on the matter: 'It was child's tattle', she states, referring to the promises that they had made in their childhood (*TW* 36). The narrator does not approve of Grace's attitude:

> '[C]ultivation had so far advanced in the soil of Miss Melbury's mind as to lead her to talk of anything save of that she knew well, and had the greatest interest in developing: herself. She had fallen from the good old Hintock ways. (*TW* 37)

This subtle undercurrent of disapproval from the Hardyan narrator can also be seen in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, where Bathsheba Everdene exhibits signs of



whimsicality as far as choosing their partner is concerned. Bathsheba rejects Oak at first, complacent in her own superiority over the humble shepherd. Oak proposes marriage to Bathsheba, offering the comforts of a country home and a domestic life where each would be the other's helpmeet. Bathsheba, however, feels that life she is not yet ready to be 'men's property'[iii] yet, and refuses Gabriel Oak's proposal, stating 'I am better educated than you – and I don't love you a bit' (*FFMC* 39). Her words could almost be a vocal expression of Grace's feelings towards Giles initially, and in keeping with the subtle authorial disapproval, it is almost as if both women are subsequently trapped in loveless marriages with unfaithful husbands, as a sort-of well-deserved punishment.

As a reader, one is left wondering about Hardy's attitude towards his women. While he makes them voice their objections to be treated merely as property, it is almost as if they ought to be tamed and chastened by the male protagonist who feels entitled to possess these women as wives. Though both Giles and Gabriel are chivalrous, and do not force the women to marry them, it is the narrator who chastises both these women from time to time. Thus both women must undergo the journey of bad marriages, discover the infidelity of the men they marry, and then seek escape from the trap of a bad marriage. In the case of Bathsheba, the plot constructed by Hardy was similar, though he allowed Bathsheba to escape her marriage through the means of her husband's death. Unlike Bathsheba, Grace is unfortunately not allowed to escape. In both cases, the women are suitably 'chastened' by the experience of marriage. Bathsheba must weather the (literal and metaphorical) storms in her life to realise how Oak had never left her side, and likewise, Grace, too, must face cold rejection from her husband to make a discovery about herself, and her desires:

> She had made a discovery—one which to a girl of honest nature was almost appalling. She had looked into her heart, and found that her early interest in Giles Winterborne had become revitalised into luxuriant growth by her widening perceptions of what was great and little in life. His homeliness no longer offended her acquired tastes;... Having discovered by marriage how much that was humanly not great could co-exist with attainments of an exceptional order, there was a revulsion in her sentiments from all that she had formerly clung to in this kind... (*TW* 182-183)

However, since Grace is not Bathsheba, and Hardy's vision in his novels had become darker by the time that he wrote *The Woodlanders*, a happy ending is far from what Hardy had envisioned for Giles and Grace.

Briefly, though, Grace is granted a respite where she and Giles are together again, both innocently believing that Grace's marriage could potentially be dissolved on account of Fitzpiers' infidelity under the 'new law'[iv]. Notably, this is the only point in the novel when Grace is free to love – though even in these circumstances, the shadow of Melbury looms large. For Melbury, believing fully that Grace could be freed of her marriage has sent Giles to court Grace again: so that Grace may once again find a husband to settle with. When she meets Giles at last, Grace admits to Giles that she is now a changed person: 'Affliction has taken all that out of me', she says, replying to Giles, who asked her if she was still as dainty, as high and proud as she had been when they had met after her return from school (*TW* 231). Her admission is clearly intended more for the reader than for Giles, and it marks the 'return of the native' not only to her woodland home, but to her woodlander lover. In fact, her intuitive love for Giles is deepened because Giles is, in many ways, synonymous with Nature. Hardy's narrator

calls him 'Autumn's very brother' (*TW* 171), and Grace, in her nervous despair, romanticises him alternately as a 'fruit-god' or a 'wood-god' (*TW* 230) – thus cementing her identity as a woodland girl, who needs the gentle care of Nature to bloom again. It is at this point that the reader cannot help but sympathise with the plight of Grace, as this resurrected love for Giles will inevitably be doomed.

In fact, the career of Grace's existence in *The Woodlanders* is as a shuttle between the men in her life. She is wooed by Giles, and forced to acquiesce because her father decides that it must be thus – at a phase in her life when she is freshly back to her village from the city, and still adjusting to the old ways of life. She is in a phase of exploration, and examining her own desires, particularly in relation to the rustic Giles, after being educated in the genteel ways of a lady. As circumstances change and Giles loses his property, Melbury intervenes to 'rescue' Grace from a potential life of poverty – and agrees to let the mysterious doctor Fitzpiers court his daughter. A month before the intended marriage is to take place, Grace wakes up early one morning to find the figure of Suke Dawson – a local village girl – emerge from the residence of Fitzpiers, with her nightgown visible under her cloak. Though no evidence could prove Fitzpiers' unfaithfulness in that instant, Grace instinctively realises that she does not wish to marry this man. When she approaches Melbury with her decision of not marrying Fitzpiers, she is at once rebuked for being an ungrateful daughter, accused of having met Giles on the side, and finally, has her doubts over Fitzpiers casually dismissed. She is reminded strongly about the shame that she would bring to her family, as Melbury had informed almost all their relatives about Grace's impending wedding – and being of a docile nature, she submits.

The marriage proves disastrous after the initial exhilarating experiences of Grace as a sophisticated doctor's wife: Fitzpiers' relationship with Mrs. Charmond becomes public knowledge, and Grace also becomes aware of Fitzpiers' dalliance with Suke Dawson. When Fitzpiers is seriously injured on account of Melbury, Fitzpiers abandons Grace indefinitely, and travels the Continent in the company of Mrs. Charmond (they are later seen together in Baden). Melbury feels humiliated, more on account of the scandal surrounding Grace, than his realisation at his having been the primary cause of Fitzpiers' humiliating desertion of Grace. When a lawyer's assistant offers him a solution under the 'new law'[v], Melbury jumps at it, and decides that Grace must divorce Fitzpiers – without even consulting Grace on the matter. When the 'divorce' seems possible, Melbury, in his peremptory and imperious manner, permits Giles to court Grace once again, and writes intense letters instructing Grace to encourage Giles and to make him her husband, should the situation so arise. Yet, when the hope of divorce fails, and Fitzpiers once again appears on the horizon – requesting Grace to join him in France – Melbury is quick to dismiss Giles from her life, and to disallow Grace from moving abroad, instead instructing her to live with Fitzpiers as before, in Melbury's house at Hintock. As before, the motivating factor in this decision is not Grace's well-being, but rather his own self:

> *I* [italics mine] don't like this state that you are in – neither married nor single. It hurts *me* [italics mine], and it hurts you, and it will always be remembered against us in Hintock. There has never been any scandal like it in the Melbury family before. (*TW* 246)

This time, however, Grace has mustered enough determination within herself to leave, abandoning Fitzpiers as he had done her – and she lives in Giles' cottage for a while, even as Giles magnanimously lives outside, in the wind and the rain, and

eventually dies. In the final moments before Giles dies, Grace calls him inside, crying '*Come to me! I don't mind what they say or what they think any more!*' (*TW* 257) This is her rebellion, her act of defiance against the social norms that she had so timidly followed throughout her life. Yet, it is too late: when she finally gathers enough courage to express her love for Giles freely, Giles is already on the way to a sure death. Ironically, she calls on Fitzpiers to save Giles – and when Fitzpiers asks whether she had been living with Giles in all the days since she left, Grace defiantly lies to him that she had. True to her intrinsic nature of submissiveness, however, Grace instantly half-repents for lying to her husband.

This submissiveness, added to her personality of being 'a gentle woman of strong devotional sentiment' (*TW* 294), gradually leads her to wonder as to the true nature of the vows that she made during her wedding to Fitzpiers. The doctor, too, slowly woos her back into his trust over time, even as Grace gradually heals from the death of Giles. In a fitting symbol of final defiance, Grace is found by Melbury and his party from Hintock in a hotel with Fitzpiers, after she had gone missing from her home: and Melbury is at once embarrassed and disappointed by Grace's action. This disappointment is echoed by the narrator, when it is pointed out that Grace had forgotten to visit Giles' grave in only eight months after his death. Hardyan critics are also critical at what is perceived to be Grace's fickle and whimsical self: Ian Gregor calls Grace Hardy's 'first sketch for Sue Bridehead [in *Jude the Obscure*][vi]. Like Sue, Grace is educated, and can think for herself, and is given to nervous despair in times of stress, and much like Sue, Grace flees from her husband in a crucial moment – yet their differences end there. Grace is expressively sensual, and submits to her desires, even allowing Giles to kiss her when her marriage is not yet dissolved. Grace is also decidedly religious from the start – and maintains her stance on religion till the very end, when she takes her marriage vows seriously. These instances do not indicate a fickle mind, but, on the contrary, a woman in possession of herself. Grace's tragedy, then, lies in her docility, her submissiveness, her timidity, and a strong filial bond that allows her to always place her father's wishes above her own. It is clear that her opinions, wishes, desires are almost always trampled upon by her father – or subject to the agency of Giles or Fitzpiers. She is no Bathsheba, or Eustacia, or even a Tess, lacking the fiery spirit of a Hardyan woman, but more in tune with the softer spirits of a Fancy Day or a Thomasin. Grace thus exhibits, all too clearly, the signs of what Barbara Welter describes as 'True Womanhood' in the nineteenth century:

> 'The Attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife – woman.'[vii]

In her study of the New Woman in Hardy's novels, Gail Cunningham interprets Grace's return to Fitzpiers as Grace 'sink[ing] steadily towards conformity'[viii], presumably toward the attributes of 'True Womanhood' as outlined in Welter's seminal essay on Victorian womanhood. However, within the circumstances, one cannot help but wonder what real choice did Grace have? She could either continue living with her father as she was (as most of the villagers agree after discovering her with Fitzpiers), neither single nor married in the restrictive Hintock community. She could also return to Fitzpiers, salvage her status as a married woman, and make a fresh start at life. She clearly chooses Fitzpiers, and indicates that she is a little tired of her father on account of his increasing

irritability with age. This final decision, though unfair to the memory of Giles and to the wishes of her father, is finally something that she chooses of her own volition; and in the final scene when she chooses to stay on at the hotel with her husband, is liberating in the sense that she finally casts off the shackles of control exercised by her father over her. Her happiness in marriage is a matter of conjecture, as the novels ends thereafter, but as a reader, one is almost relieved that Grace finally finds her voice, and has found within herself, the spirit to decide her life for herself. Thus, the return of the *female* native in *The Woodlanders*, is vastly different from the return of the *male* native in *The Return of the Native*: for Clym Yeobright is the agent of his own life and tragedy, despite the ministrations of a domineering mother, whereas Grace is denied any agency by the men in her life, and must first learn to claim herself as a person in her own right.

Notes:

[i]Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders,* p. 185. All further references are to this edition (abbreviated as TW), and will be mentioned in parentheses.

[ii]William H. Matchett, '*The Woodlanders*, or Realism in Sheep's Clothing', *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 9:4 (Los Angeles: University of California Press, March 1955), pp. 241-261, p. 241.

[iii]Thomas Hardy*, Far From the Madding Crowd*, p. 37 All further references are to this edition (abbreviated as FFMC), and will be mentioned in parentheses.

[iv]The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 is referred to here. It introduced a simpler divorce procedure, but it was heavily slanted in favour of men. The Act did not treat women's and men's grounds for divorce equally. Thus a husband could petition for divorce on the sole grounds that his wife had committed adultery, whereas a wife could only hope for a divorce based on adultery combined with other offences such as incest, cruelty, bigamy, desertion, etc. (or based on cruelty alone). Grace Melbury is not granted a divorce as Fitzpiers had not been 'sufficiently cruel' towards her

[v]See note iv, above.

[vi]Ian Gregor, *The Great Web*, p. 156

[vii]Barbara Welter, The Cult of True Womanhood, p. 152

[viii]Gail Cunningham, 'Thomas Hardy: New Women for Old', *The New Womanhood and the Victorian Novel*, p. 93

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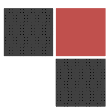

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