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Gender Relations in the Narrative Organization of Four Short Stories by Thomas Hardy

Bachelor's Diploma Thesis

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I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently,
using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.

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Author's signature

I would like to thank Stephen Paul Hardy, Ph.D. for his valuable advice during writing of this thesis.

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1. Introduction

This thesis deals with aspect of the short stories of Thomas Hardy and its central objective is to approach the issue of the author's comprehension of gender relations in his texts. Hardy's works are famous for the depiction of women characters, which is often considered to be revolutionary for his time. His characters refuse to accept the traditional gender roles of the Victorian society and with their deeds often challenge the general social opinion on the matter. Instead of following the predestined path in life they often wander off on their own and they are obliged to accept the painful consequences, which have later often tragic impact on their lives. It is noteworthy that even though Hardy's novels and stories are often rather feminine-centered, he does not avoid the question of ascribed role in society to men as well. On the contrary, the short stories which are the subject of the analyses of this thesis will show quite clearly, that both male and female characters are equally represented in Hardy's minor fiction and through their relations with one another he sends the reader a message of injustices of the world as he perceived it. This thesis addresses the above mentioned themes on the example of the selected short stories - a branch of literary art that is often excluded from the detailed analysis of Thomas Hardy's work. Four short stories to best illustrate his approach to gender relations in depiction of his characters are offered here.

The first chapter introduces Thomas Hardy as an author and places him within the context of other Victorian novelists. His lifework is briefly described at this part of the text in order to get the idea of prevailing tendencies in the narration of his major novels that understandably project into his minor fiction as well. Two issues are addressed with more detail – the theme of two worlds and the issues of gender. The latter needs no further explanation at this point since it is the central theme of the

thesis. The former however is closely tied to the gender matters as well – Hardy in his fiction often operates on the basis of two worlds that go against one another and fail to live in harmony. One stands for the nature (and is often represented by his portrayal of the rural Wessex), the other is the modern industrial civilization. Each of these worlds is based on a different system, whose rules and conventions project onto people and affect their lives. A sufficient attention has to be therefore paid to the way the author incorporates this theme into his narrative construct. The chapter concludes with the general description of notions that repeatedly and frequently appear in Thomas Hardy's short stories.

One of the most significant aspects of Hardy's depiction of female characters in minor fiction is the ambiguity of his approach. He certainly does not prefer only strong women (as one might think based on the reading experience of his novels); on the contrary, his short stories offer the reader a wide variety of female characters both weak and strong, submissive and revolting. The choice of stories in this thesis reflects this quality of his writing. In each one is the reader faced with an entirely different comprehension of a woman character.

The first chapter based on the story *The Distracted Preacher* opens both the question of gender as well as the theme of two worlds. The forced penetration of the expanding civilized world into the rural areas is demonstrated here on the fate of a strong female character named Lizzy Newberry. Her somewhat obsolete morality and view of the world is confronted with the main male protagonist – Mr. Stockdale – who functions in the story as representation of modern world. Their clash of opinion regarding moral values belongs among the most interesting aspects of the story.

The second chapter analyses the story *An Imaginative Woman*. Its heroine – Ella Marchmill – is the very opposite of the previous female character. Throughout the narrative, she is portrayed as a woman fulfilling the traditional gender role ascribed to women in the Victorian society. The negative aspects of her personality are stressed in the development of the storyline; and through her flaws is the reader confronted with the negative prejudices towards women in the 19th century.

The third chapter addresses the issue of social conventions through the analysis of the story *The Waiting Supper*. On the life-long story of two lovers – Christina and Nicholas – are the artificial rules of the society depicted as a mere obstacle that stands in the way of expressing natural love. Because of the expectations of the surrounding society, they are prevented from expressing their feelings which leads to a life of waiting, uncertainty and frustration.

The fourth chapter goes back to the theme of the image of the traditional Victorian woman. The main heroine of *A Mere Interlude* – Batista Trewthen – is the very embodiment of the submissive, indecisive woman who silently accepts the role that the world ascribes her. Her character is Hardy's ultimate criticism of the prejudices towards women that dominated the general opinion in the Victorian society.

1.1 Thomas Hardy as an author

Thomas Hardy is considered to be one of the most important English writers of the nineteenth century and, alongside with such major authors of that time as Charles Dickens, George Eliot or William Thackeray, one of the main voices of the English Victorian literature. Hardy is one of the few examples of a person who managed to master two branches of literary art – he is known both as a great novelist and an influential poet. His transgression from novels to poetry historically marks almost

precisely the turn of the twentieth century – a symbolical landmark of an end of a one era and a beginning of a new one. Hardy in this sense was a prophetic voice in the nineteenth century. His opinions, as expressed in his novels, met with much opposition and disagreement from the conservative Victorian public and only later in the years following the author's death would become the subject of scholarly studies. The contemporary criticism would ultimately cause Hardy to lose all love for the fictitious narration altogether and turn to poetry instead. Before this occurred with the publication of his most bleakly accepted novel so far, *Jude the Obscure* in 1895, he published fourteen novels (including *Jude*) and a substantial number of short stories that appeared in periodicals first and were later published in four collections.

Thomas Hardy is most famous for his novels - among his greatest pieces belongs for example *Far from the Madding Crowd* (published in 1874), *The Return of the Native* (1878) or *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). In them he offers his view of the English society as a cruel world where no mercy can be expected and every mistake in life is punished. Hardy's characters are tormented by feelings of love, which cannot be fully expressed because of the strict rules of the world they live in. There is no reward for attempts to defy their own fate, only necessary consequences. Hardy is often cited as one of the authors of the Naturalist movement and his works indeed reflect this offset of literary realism. *Jude the Obscure* is the best example of Hardy's determinism: no matter how hard the main character tries to fight the obstacles of his life, he is still inevitably heading for the tragic conclusion. Same notions of tragedy in the fates of the characters can be traced in most of his works of short fiction as well, though unlike in novels, the tragedy is often lessened by a dash of ironical humor.

1.2 The clash of two worlds in Hardy's fiction

It was not only this complete and utter rejection of free will that shocked the readers of Hardy's books in the nineteenth century - a lot of criticism was also directed at his portrayal of the English society. With the publication of *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin in 1859, much that was up to that point considered by the Victorian public as given was shaken to its foundations. Man was no longer the supreme ruler of the world but merely another link in the chain of evolution. This change of point of view in scientific approach was however not immediately recognizable in literature. The authors who desired to write about people preferred modern cities as a setting for their stories because here could the clearly stated social rules overcome the apparent disorder of nature. Hardy is one of the few writers who stayed outdoors. "Hardy's narrative returns plot and character to rural villages far from urban society, and to nature." (Ermarth 48)

For him however, is nature not only the source of beauty or happiness. On the contrary, Hardy's nature can also be raw, rough and merciless; and the projection of these features into the lives of fictional characters is often the source of their misery. The author often desperately searches for human order and logic in the natural world but fails to find it. Unlike the nature novelists, he has no faith in nature for it is not forgiving and it "stands only for pain and death." (Ermarth 48) But Hardy also rejects social solutions apparent in the works of historical novelists:

> Hardy conspicuously lacks both the faith in nature evident in nature novelists and the social solutions evident in historical novelists. […] Apart from the occasional group of friends, the only organic social group evident is a mechanical legal and economic system which scarcely can be

> called ‘social’ at all and which accommodates human aspirations even less than nature does. (48)

Yet there is a reason why the majority of Hardy’s stories are set into the rural fictitious Wessex and not into the urban society. It is here, in places where people live by the old rules of the natural world, untouched by progress of society, that their qualities and flaws become most apparent. Hardy often incorporates ancient rituals and traditions into his narrative. “Hardy wrote of these rituals as part of his own day-to-day experience as a young man. Their anthropological significance interests him less than their endurance, revealing long human roots in the soil.” (Kramer loc.518) This is only one example of the reasoning behind Hardy’s writing – even though people are leaving the nature to construct their own order of things in civilization, they still remain an inseparable part of nature. Hardy’s construction of his characters through the environment they live in thus remains one of the most notable aspects of his prose.

It is important to observe, that Hardy does not favor any one of the two worlds. Both human social system in urban society and natural order of things in rural environment can be equally harsh and cruel; yet the world of nature seems often more logical to him, since it is after all not an artificial system. More importantly, never do these two worlds in the selected short stories work properly side by side. They always go against one another; the rules of one invade the other; and all in all they contradict each other. Metaphorically speaking, the natural world can be considered as the one where people can follow their heart, whereas in the civilized world, reason plays more important role in one’s decision-making. This ambivalence is often the initial starting point in Hardy’s short fiction from where the author plays out the stories of his characters.

The theme of duality of worlds is closely tied to the depiction of gender matters in the short stories as well because "Hardy's construction of gender difference works in terms not of civilized, Christian codes but of post-Darwinian anthropological theories about social behavior." (Kramer loc.1588) Not surprisingly, this return to nature in motivation of his characters caused uproar of criticism in the Victorian society.

1.3 Thomas Hardy and the issues of gender

The central theme of this text is to approach the question of Hardy's view of the matters of gender. To fully comprehend Hardy's attitude towards women it is first necessary to consider the public opinion on this issue by the common men of his time. The second half of the nineteenth century was quite a blustering period for England. Not only had the country deal with the consequences of the economical crisis in the 1840s only to face another one in the 1870s, but England was slowly losing the status of industrial supremacy and the Franco-Prussian war that occurred in the years 1870-1 gave people notion that peace may not be as secure as they used to think. All in all, the result of these events was a cultural depression that resolved in cultural conservatism in literature. "The sense of cultural depression in late nineteenth-century England has been often mentioned, and certainly it is obvious in a nostalgic and tragic writer like Thomas Hardy, […]" (Ermarth 63) The desire to desperately keep things in status quo can be considered as one of the reasons for the criticism that swept over the works of such authors as Thomas Hardy, whose literary pieces did not follow suit of the demand to depict the idealistic English society.

When considering the changing social situation in England, it is crucial to pay a substantial attention to the issue of women's rights. Women's situation in the 19th century's England was complicated. In the sense of social status, they were in

every aspect inferior to men. They did not have a right to own property and usually did not have a chance for good education as well. The only way to live a decent life that would be accepted by society for a woman was to get married and her only role in life was to be a companion to her male counterpart. Any deviation from the predestined roles was frowned upon by general public. The situation slowly changed in the second half of the century. Divorce, earlier unimaginable even for wealthy people, now became available for everyone by passing the Matrimonial Causes Act by the Parliament in 1857; by 1870 a working woman could check her wage; by 1882 a married woman was an absolute mistress of her property. However, even though this legal and social evolution took place during Hardy's life and he had therefore an opportunity to feel the impact of most of these changes, he repeatedly chooses as a setting for his stories the first half of the 19th century when the differences in social status between men and women were still considerable.

It is without any question that Thomas Hardy was not only aware of this gender inequality, but he was deeply concerned with it. The idea that his work accurately reflects the evolution of gender equality is backed up by Kristin Brady:

> To study the changing responses to gender in Hardy's published works from 1871 to the present is, in effect, to trace a fairly detailed history of the ways in which sexuality has been constructed within the British Isles and North America since the late-Victorian period. (Kramer loc.1549)

It is not an easy task to give a definition of Hardy's attitude towards women for there is no straightforward torrent of thoughts in his work. Hardy's women are strong and weak as well as independent and submissive. As Kristin Brady puts it:

> [O]ur terms of analysis increasingly have become both technically and ideologically complex. We no longer have a one-dimensional

> understanding of Hardy's authorial role, nor do we assume that his texts are perfectly unified. Hardy, his characters, his plots, his language, his images, his narrative devices, his actual and inscribed readers—not to mention his relationships with other texts and with pressing issues of his own time—all are seen to operate in an association of conflict and contradiction: Hardy's texts like women and dislike them; they depict and evoke both pleasure and pain, both arousal and anxiety; they are the source for female readers of frustration and fascination. (Kramer loc.1712)

This ambiguity of opinion will become apparent in the short stories as well. We will see that Hardy as an author does not work with a single prototype of woman, though he does not avoid the categorization in construct of his characters altogether: "Hardy's fiction […] used various gendered types – the fallen woman, the New Woman, the poor man, the artist – as its semantic elements." (Kramer loc.1656) He presents the reader with a wide spectrum of both male and female characters, each one being an individual with his or her own characteristics.

The centrality of gender issues becomes apparent when we ask the question "What are Hardy's stories actually about?" Lance St. John Butler argues that they are more than anything else "about love." (6) If love can be defined as an emotional relation between a man and a woman, this could be true. However, things in Hardy's world are much more complicated. There is perhaps not a single case of a happy marriage in Hardy's writings. Why is that? Because in Hardy's world marriage does not equal love, nor is it even a necessary ingredient. It is through the relation between a man and a woman then, that Hardy's opinions of the strict social rules of the Victorian world becomes apparent.

1.4 Hardy's short stories

Much has been written about Hardy's novels in the past but less attention has been paid to his minor fiction. Understandably enough, a novel offers more space for a substantial analysis, a development of the plot and an examination of the characters. One might even suggest that a short story is but an inferior counterpart to a novel. However, this is not the case. The art of short story telling has been appreciated in the past in works of such authors as for instance Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling or Robert Louis Stevenson as a regular format of fictitious prose. The short story differs from novel in a number of ways – it is usually less complex than a novel, has fewer characters, one setting, only single storyline and must be precisely pointed out to have the desired effect on the reader. Meyer Howards Abrams defines the short story in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* as following:

> […] the short story writer introduces a very limited number of persons, cannot afford the space for the leisurely analysis and sustained development of character, and cannot undertake to develop as dense and detailed a social milieu as does the novelist. The author often begins the story close to, or even on the verge of, the climax, minimizes both prior exposition and the details of the setting, keeps the complications down, and clears up the denouement quickly — sometimes in a few sentences. (332)

Hardy's handwriting is easily recognizable in his minor fictional pieces since they bear the same elements that can be found in his novels. In a remarkably small space Hardy plays out the same scenario that brought him fame as a respected novelist and succeeds in having the same effect on the reader as a several hundred paged novel would have. "They give us, in varying forms and manners, his characteristic vision of life. […] Here,

concentrated into tense and vivid drama, is precisely the same vision of life as that which is wrought into larger and more significant form in the novels. (Abercrombie 42) Apart from the obvious difference in length of text, the most defining aspect of Hardy's minor fiction that makes it stand apart from the rest of his work is the desired effect on the reader. While his novels deal with serious issues in life that often result in tragic conclusions, in the short stories Hardy uses the same schemes with comical subtext. The main purpose to entertain the reader is here dominant over other aspects of his narrative construction. Though all the characteristic elements of his style are present here as well, they are used in a specific way that seems uncommon in the context of his other works. A spoiled young lady with no expectations from life does not function here only in terms of social criticism but primarily as a device of humor. The tragic ending of a story that results in a disruption of a family is not meant to merely shock the reader, but provide the ironical subtext as well. It appears as if Hardy in minor fiction ventures into corners of his literary art that he does not dare to address in his novels. His short stories are often as humorous as they are tragic with brilliant ironical conclusions.

Four collections of short stories have been published during the author's life – *Wessex Tales* in 1888, *A Group of Noble Dames* in 1891, *Life's Little Ironies* in 1894 and *A Changed Man and Other Tales* in 1913. Each of these books collects from eight to twelve minor fictions. The stories selected for this thesis come from *Wessex Tales* (*An Imaginative Woman*, *The Distracted Preacher*) and *A Changed Man and Other Tales* (*The Waiting Supper*, *A Mere Interlude*).

2. The Distracted Preacher

The Distracted Preacher is one of the original five stories that were included in *Wessex Tales* at the time it was first published in 1888. It is an observation of social change in a small rural village, perceived through the eyes of both a local woman and a man from a city. The narrative is constructed with humorous subtext, but the author is inclined to address serious issues as well. The story is a typical example of Hardy's dual viewpoint of the world, aforementioned in the section *1.2 The clash of two worlds in Hardy's fiction*. The personalities of the two main characters of the story – a local woman by the name Lizzy Newberry and an incomer from a city named Mr. Stockdale – are very much shaped according to their social background. Typically for Hardy's fiction is the basic bare plot centered on their relationship – the reader is offered the scenes of their first encounter, he perceives their growing fondness of each other, the trouble they have to endure in order to stay together and also their eventual marriage. However, the real message of the story lies in the environment in which the story takes place. Mr. Stockdale functions in the narrative as an observer through whose eyes the reader sees the traditional life in the country. It doesn't take long though and the peace of the place is disturbed by the introduction of forces from the modern world into the rural areas. On the individual fates of his characters the author then shows the hardness of such changes and the destruction of local traditions that goes with it.

The story opens with the central figure of Mr. Stockdale, a young preacher who just arrived in a village and seeks an accommodation. He finds it at certain Mrs. Newberry's, a local widow. It is this early in the story that the author confronts the reader with the deconstruction of the image of a traditional widow – Mr. Stockdale

is surprised when he finds out that the old woman he first encountered in the household is not the above mentioned Mrs. Newberry, but her mother. When he meets the real Mrs. Lizzy Newberry, he finds out that she is a very young and attractive woman and instantly feels affection for her.

Stockdale is troubled by a cold from his journey and so Mrs. Newberry suggests they go out since she knows of a medicine that would help him. She takes him to a church where hidden barrels of smuggled liquor are located. Stockdale is shocked by the fact that a respected young woman should know about smuggler's hiding places and immediately feels as a moral judge in the situation. Here follows his reaction to the information provided by Mrs. Newberry that her husband as well as her father knew about these activities and kept them secret:

> 'I see the hardness of it,' he continued, like a man who looked far into the moral of things. 'And it is very cruel that you should be tossed and tantalized between your memories and your conscience. I do hope, Mrs. Newberry that you will soon see your way out of this unpleasant position.' (*Wessex Tales* 228)

Hardy at this point plays out several motifs at once: Mr. Stockdale as a newcomer from a city is not acquainted with the country life, and common things that people have been doing here for decades seem bad to him, even criminal. This is a typical clash between natural and social rules among people from different backgrounds. Those from rural places feel little obligation to the king's laws, since they live out of reach of influence of the state authority. More importantly, there is an explicit emphasis on Stockdale's moral high ground, when he instantly feels he can decide what is good and what is not for Mrs. Newberry.

At the same time however, we can observe a humorous and ironical submersion of Mr. Stockdale to his emotions – a thing that would be in the Victorian literature usually characteristic for a woman – when he later feels that his role as a lover to Mrs. Newberry is threatened by another man. Suddenly he does not care so much about the obligation to the king as he does about the feelings of the woman towards him: “Stockdale sighed, and said that he thought hers a mistaken generosity when it extended to assisting those who cheated the king of his dues. 'At any rate, you will let me make him keep his distance as your lover, and tell him flatly that you are not for him?'” (236-7)

Later in the story, Hardy uses subtle indications in order to move the storyline forward and captivate the attention of the reader – Mr. Stockdale soon notices that the habit of getting up in the morning of Mrs. Newberry is highly irregular. Often she is up at seven o’clock and then again some days she is not seen until afternoon. She also appears to be tired or sick, and avoids this topic when asked about it. One day, male clothes with fresh mud on them are found in the house by Mr. Stockdale and his house lady again refuses to give him an explanation. This creates suspense and mystery behind the behavior of Mrs. Newberry.

Finally, Mr. Stockdale decides to figure out the matter for himself and stays up one night. He sees a figure in man’s clothes going out of the house and follows. As he expects, it is Mrs. Newberry. He follows her to the shore and there he discovers the disturbing truth – the woman he is in love with is not only aware of smuggler’s activity in the area, she is a smuggler herself. Back in the house he tries to talk her into discontinuing this venture, but she refuses to do it. As can be observed at this point, Mrs. Newberry becomes the representative of a strong woman character, living by her

own rules without a need for a husband and ironically enough, the reader is inclined to believe that the more she refuses to listen to reason of Mr. Stockdale, the more he is attracted to her despite her illegal activities:

> Stockdale sighed as she enumerated each particular, for it proved how far involved in the business a woman must be who was so well acquainted with its conditions and needs. And yet he felt more tenderly towards her at this moment than he had felt all the foregoing day. Perhaps it was that her experienced manner and hold indifference stirred his admiration in spite of himself. (258-9)

This inclination of a respected man towards a woman, who defies her traditional role in society and his affection for her that he feels even more strongly when he learns about her independence, is exactly the kind of theme that Hardy's work is famous for and at the same time was the subject of criticism at the time of publication.

Despite his feelings for her, Mr. Stockdale still feels the need to gain control over Mrs. Newberry's life and take her away with him from her homeland. This clash between expectations of a man from the city and a reality of the people from the country is a typical representation of contrast between two social backgrounds. Stockdale is the typical Victorian man who carries in himself all the prejudices towards women of the time, and Mrs. Newberry on the other hand is a representation of the New Woman who defies the strict gender categorization that the society predicates her. It is ironical that these feelings between the pair of the main characters does not surface immediately after the whole situation with smuggling becomes clear, but rather later when Stockdale believes his position is threatened by another man of the name Owlett who wishes to marry Mrs. Newberry in the future as well, despite her reassuring that she is not

interested. What is happening here then is a very natural conflict between two men over the right for a woman. Stockdale, despite his social background, is not as enraged by the illegal venture in process as he is afraid of losing the woman. He does not love her as she is now though; he wants to shape her according to his expectations:

> Her companion could not blind himself to the fact that where tastes and pursuits were so akin as Lizzy's and Owlett's, and where risks were shared, as with them, in every undertaking, there would be a peculiar appropriateness in her answering Owlett's standing question on matrimony in the affirmative. This did not soothe Stockdale, its tendency being rather to stimulate in him an effort to make the pair as inappropriate as possible, and win her away from this nocturnal crew to correctness of conduct and a minister's parlour in some far-removed inland county. (260-1)

The gender inequality in this story is backed up by moral inequality on every step of the way. Not only does Mrs. Newberry not refuse the position of the immoral person, but she openly acknowledges it:

> 'I thought you might be on the side of the king,' said Lizzy, with faintest sarcasm.
>
> 'I am,' said Stockdale. 'But, Lizzy Newberry, I love you, and you know it perfectly well; and you ought to know, if you do not, what I have suffered in my conscience on your account these last few days!'
>
> 'I guess very well,' she said hurriedly. 'Yet I don't see why. Ah, you are better than I!' (263-4)

Until now the viewpoint of the story was quite neutral. The reader has observed the clash of the two worlds with Mr. Stockdale as a neutral figure serving as a reporter from the new world on the soil of the old one. But with the introduction of king's excisemen (tax collectors) to the picture, we see a clear intrusion of the new rules to the old world and distortion of the balance. Suddenly there are good guys and bad guys in the story (while the decision which side is which depends only on the reader himself) and Mr. Stockdale forms the only solid and neutral point between them:

> 'What, be you really one of us?' said the miller.
>
> 'It seems so,' said Stockdale sadly.
>
> 'He's not,' said Lizzy, who overheard. 'He's neither for nor against us. He'll do us no harm.' (272)

The situation in the village gradates when the smuggled kegs are found by the excisemen. At first it appeared that the smugglers can do nothing about it from their position since they are being forced to hide in order to not get arrested and they will silently accept the loss of their goods. But later they ambush the king's men and take back their kegs from the wagon by force. This situation is an illustration of the way the old rural world is being forced to violent defense by the oppression coming from the growing influence of the civilization. Mr. Stockdale unwittingly functions in this story as a vanguard of the coming of an age and a herald of the new order. As the reader observes in the conclusion of the story, the practices that were happening here for a number of generations are not meant to last in the future.

This difference in the comprehension of right and wrong also escalates the quarrel between Mr. Stockdale and Mrs. Newberry:

> 'Why should you side with men who take from country traders what they have honestly bought wi' their own money in France?' said she firmly.
>
> 'They are not honestly bought,' said he.
>
> 'They are,' she contradicted. 'I and Owlett and the others paid thirty shillings for every one of the tubs before they were put on board at Cherbourg, and if a king who is nothing to us sends his people to steal our property, we have a right to steal it back again.' (281)

As mentioned above, the conclusion of the story offers no courtesy for the village people. However, there is some hope for Mrs. Newberry. Towards the end it becomes obvious that in order to stay together either Stockdale or Newberry has to change. Stockdale at first repeats his initial offer, but Lizzy still refuses to move from her homestead. Then she offers him to stay there and stop being a preacher. He cannot do that either and so they part their ways. Two years later Stockdale returns and finds out that time has not been kind to Lizzy or the ill business of her village friends. "'It is all over now,' she says. 'The officers have blood-money for taking a man dead or alive, and the trade is going to nothing. We were hunted down like rats.'" (289-90) So only now she agrees to become his wife and leave with him.

This is a clear distinction from the rest of the story because the events of narration are no longer open for interpretation. Beforehand, pros and cons could be found in doings of both sides of the cause, but ultimately at the end there is only one winner. One of the few who managed to escape the trial of time was Mrs. Newberry and she did so by changing her opinion as well as her way of life. The last article reflects this change of attitude and it also presents Mr. Stockdale in an ironical tone as an all-knowing person who could have saved her a lot of trouble, had she listened to him from the very beginning:

> He took her away from her old haunts to the home that he had made for himself in his native county, where she studied her duties as a minister's wife with praiseworthy assiduity. It is said that in after years she wrote an excellent tract called Render unto Caesar; or, The Repentant Villagers, in which her own experience was anonymously used as the introductory story. Stockdale got it printed, after making some corrections, and putting in a few powerful sentences of his own; and many hundreds of copies were distributed by the couple in the course of their married life. (290-1)

A certain paradox is evident in these lines. Hardy on one hand presents the reader with an image of a new society where the old ways are no longer applicable and the rules of the industrial civilization represented by the king's laws eventually reach everyone. The only way out is either to follow suit or flee. The latter is in the story represented by the character of Owlett who is forced to leave his home for America in order to escape the punishment for his illegal activity. The former is represented by Mrs. Newberry herself. However, despite the author's introduction of the new, civilized and presumably in every respect better world into the environment of the old one, the woman in the story is still forced to acknowledge herself as an inferior to her male counterpart. Mrs. Newberry tried her best to be an independent woman and live without a man, but this quest would ultimately lead her only to poverty and misery. It was Mr. Stockdale who literally rescued her from the consequences of her old life. As presented in the very last paragraph of the story, he even projected himself into her literary work; and there is a subtle notion for the reader that it was because of these "few powerful sentences of his own," that the work was successful and sold well. This forced transgression of character into a new role that was brought about by the change of the outside world is a characteristic feature of the social novel. As Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth writes:

“The social novel acts literally as an experimental laboratory for considering the role of new constituent elements in a newly identifiable social entity.” (126)

This message of the story is in clear contradiction with the idea of women rights that the feminist movement came up with. The fact that presence of gender equality is in the story more apparent in the traditional old world rather than in the new civilized forms the ironical subtext and the conclusion of the story. Consequently (and despite the historical reality), it rejects the idea of the modern society as being more tolerant to the matters of gender. The reason for this deliberate twist from the author’s part is hidden criticism of the new order of things. Hardy was never very fond of the newly emerged social system in Britain and always preferred the tradition rural environment, as can be observed by the setting of most of his novels. This conclusion is his revolting shout against the forcible penetration of the industrialized world into his beloved Wessex.

3. An Imaginative Woman

An Imaginative Woman was added to the reprint of *Wessex Tales* in 1896, but it was moved to another collection *Life's Little Ironies* in 1912. This story demonstrates the author's entirely different approach to the perception of female character. For the sake of the humorous subtext and ironical conclusion Hardy used all of the contemporary prejudices towards women of his time when he was writing the character of Mrs. Marchmill. Through the features of her personality he forces onto the reader an idea of male superiority and then deconstructs this very idea when the flaws of his female heroine are revealed in other male characters as well. Unlike in the previous story there are no contradictory tendencies present in the main female character here. Whilst Mrs. Newberry in *The Distracted Preacher* contained in herself both the characteristics of a traditional submissive woman of the 19th century as well as the progressive tendencies of a feminist, Ella Marchmill who is the main figure here has characteristics that fit entirely into the former category. As the storyline develops, we will observe that the key aspects of her nature are identical to the typical negative prejudices ascribed to women in the 19th century – she is indecisive, lets her emotions control her actions and she is altogether dependent on her husband.

The beginning of the story introduces the reader the Marchmill family – Mr. Marchmill who is a gunmaker and his occupation requires him to travel from one place onto another; and Mrs. Marchmill who follows her husband on his journeys as a caretaker of their three children. The personal past behind the character of Ella Marchmill is a good example of the conditions that women in the 19th century had to conform to in order to step out of their traditional gender role:

> …she had during the last year or two taken to writing the poems, in an endeavour to find a congenial channel in which to let flow her painfully embayed emotions, whose former limpidity and sparkle seemed departing in the stagnation caused by the routine of a practical household and the gloom of bearing children to a commonplace father. (*Wessex Tales* 7-8)

There is a clear reason for this closer look at Mrs. Marchmill's past later in the story, but nonetheless this extract illustrates the centralization of the plot on the female figure since the personal background of her husband is nowhere to be found. The element of poem writing by Mrs. Marchmill comes up again when she finds out that the lodgings that she and her husband recently acquired used to belong to a poet Robert Trewe – a name she is familiar with. One of her poems was published on the same page as one of Trewe's who chose the same topic as she did as the inspiration for his poem.

There is an amusing subtle criticism present here in form of a contradiction – Hardy both judges the social inequality based on gender preferences but at the same time he suggests that the skills of the male poet are better than those of the female one: Not surprisingly, Ella Marchmill chose to publish her works under a masculine pseudonym – John Ivy – in order to prevent premature judgment upon her work. She herself justifies this decision by the argument that "nobody might believe in her inspiration if they found that the sentiments came from a pushing tradesman's wife, from the mother of three children by a matter-of-fact small-arms manufacturer." (8) We can observe here that the very quality of being a woman, a wife and a mother is by public opinion considered as a liability. However, Hardy also exerts a significant effort in order to make the reader aware of the fact that in this specific case the default circumstances for both authors were the same. They were both inspired by the same

tragic incident reported in the paper and the publisher had no way of knowing that there is a woman behind one of the names and yet, he chose to print Trewe in large print at the top of the page while her own poem was in smallish print at the bottom. There can be no doubt then that the reasons behind the publisher's decision were not based on gender prejudices but rather plainly on the comparison of the literary skills of both authors.

Ever since she read the Trewe's poem, Mrs. Marchmill has become somewhat obsessed by him. She admired his literary skills and tried to match them with her own only to fail time and time again. "[…], So much stronger as it always was than her own feeble lines. She had imitated him, and her inability to touch his level would send her into fits of despondency." (9) When her rival publishes a book of his poetry that meets with sufficient success to pay for printing, she again blindly follows his steps and does the same with her own poetry. Her publication however remains unnoticed and the cost of the printing must be paid by Mr. Marchmill. The literary career of his wife is consequently put to an end by the expectation of their third child.

This development of the situation by Hardy's design reflects the typical view of status of the Victorian women as dependent beings who are unable to match their male counterparts in any skill but making children. The poet Robert Trewe is basically Mrs. Marchmill's male alter ego who manages to be successful in everything where she fails. She imitates his own actions in hope that she could match up to her idol's image, only to be disappointed by her failure until her maternal duties prevent her from following her dreams any further. With every consequent disappointment Mrs. Marchmill's depression of her own feeble skills as a poet grows stronger. She cannot find a consolation in her marriage either – it is explicitly mentioned in the story that his husband's love for her died years ago as well as her own for him. But Hardy

stretches this example further and makes of this particular situation of two unhappy people a prototype for every marriage – he sees the institution of marriage as unnatural, devised by the civilized world and at the same time going against the rules of nature: "In the natural way of passion under the too practical conditions which civilization has devised for its fruition, her husband's love for her had not survived, except in the form of fitful friendship, any more than, or even so much as, her own for him." (12)

One might at first feel sympathy for Mrs. Marchmill and her emotional affair with the poet she has never seen, but all sympathy is quickly suppressed by revelation that with her growing feelings for Robert Trewe she is not only drifting away from her husband, but distancing herself from their children as well – the following lines describe the feelings she is experiencing when she has to deal with a false hope of meeting the poet in person for the first time: "When the children came in with wet stockings, and ran up to her to tell her of their adventures, she could not feel that she cared about them half as much as usual." (14-5)

It is important to state that Mrs. Marchmill's husband is in every sense a good man – he treats her well, provides for the family and loves their children. Apparently they were also in love at the time of their wedding. Therefore there is no explicit reason for Mrs. Marchmill's unhappiness and her surrender to her emotions perhaps only underlines her weak character. She herself is aware that a man of her dreams cannot be her own husband because of practical terms – romantic soul of the poet she admires could hardly be found in the practical man who can earn enough money to support the family in real world:

> "She knew his [Trewe's] thoughts and feelings as well as she knew her own; they were, in fact, the self- same thoughts and feelings as hers,

> which her husband distinctly lacked; perhaps luckily for himself; considering that he had to provide for family expenses." (17)

It is therefore just to be judgmental towards Mrs. Marchmill's affection for the strange man, especially since her feelings towards him and her growing dislike of her own husband project onto the relation to her own children: "[She] tried to let off her emotion by unnecessarily kissing the children till she had a sudden sense of disgust at being reminded how plain-looking they were, like their father." (25)

The contrast between Mr. Marchmill as a practical man and Robert Trewe as an idealistic dreamer becomes more apparent when Mrs. Marchmill finds out from a newspaper that the poet she tried to get in touch with so desperately committed suicide and her wish of meeting him will therefore never be granted. Robert Trewe was apparently very tormented by the lack of close friends, family members or presence of a female spouse in his life and that was his reason for committing suicide, or so says the letter that he left behind. He addresses this letter to the imaginary woman alone which is his image of a perfect woman that he dreamt for himself and failed to find. Mrs. Marchmill is understandably crushed by this discovery, even more now that she realizes she perhaps could have changed the poet's unfortunate decision, had she only signed her letters by her own name.

This tragic end of the poet however strengthens his unpractical quality and inability to survive in the real world. Mr. Trewe dreamt for himself the perfect life with a woman of his dreams and the clash between his imaginations and the real world caused him to transfer his frustration into the poetry at first, and then take his own life. The parallel between his fate and the situation of Mrs. Marchmill is very obvious – she is also unhappy with her own life because she dreams of a better one. However, unlike Robert Trewe she does have a family, but instead of focusing on what she has,

she despairs on the account of what she could have had and now never will. She feels more and more depressed and she dies after the birth of her and her husband's fourth child.

There is an ironical conclusion to the story for which we must first turn our attention to the very beginning to understand the title – *An Imaginative Woman*. Clearly, this is a reference to Mrs. Marchmill and her ideas of the perfect man. However, she is not the only one who allows her imagination to get the best of her. Robert Trewe as a male character has exactly the same issues which ultimately cause his death. And in the very last scene of the story, we see the widower Mr. Marchmill going through the things of his deceased wife and finding the photo of the poet she admired. He then compares the looks of the man to his youngest child and realizes that the dates of their staying at the lodgings would fit the date of his conception. He then banishes the child as not being his and curses his wife for having an affair. This reaction is very surprising because Mr. Marchmill was aware of the feelings his wife kept towards the poet, but during her life was under the correct impression that the two of them never met in person, and so this emotional affair did not startle him. Only now when there was nobody to oppose his imagination, he could freely blame her for being intimate with another man not only emotionally, but physically as well.

In this story Hardy slowly and methodically destroys the prejudice that only women let emotions control their actions. In case of Mrs. Marchmill this is definitely true, but as the story goes on the reader is faced with the same issue in personalities of two very different men. A poet is understandably sensitive to his emotions but Robert Trewe allows his own feelings to destroy him completely and his overpowering imagination eventually kills him. Mr. Marchmill seems at first to be a complete opposite

of the poet Trewe – he is a practical man, a gunmaker who seems to be blind to any kind of emotions, either his owns or his wife's. This is however also the cause for her unhappiness in the marriage. Only at the very last paragraph of the story is the reader faced with the scene which proves that Mr. Marchmill is not immune to his feelings or imaginations anymore than his wife was, and he unfairly banishes his own child because of that. The carefully built image of a weak woman and a strong man that the author has been constructing in the case of the married couple throughout the whole story is in the last paragraph destroyed for the sake of the ironical conclusion. The revelation of the same features in personalities of both of these people leaves for the reader a notion of gender equality.

4. The Waiting Supper

The Waiting Supper appeared in the collection *A Changed Man and Other Tales* that was published in 1913. It approaches closely the topic of marriage and analyses the purpose and the usefulness of this institution in the Victorian society. Hardy traditionally does not offer his reader any finite conclusion of his thoughts, but rather creates a number of situations where marriage either fulfills its function as a mean for two people in love to be together permanently, or it does not. This story also deals with the issue of social conventions that every man and woman should follow in order to be respected and accepted in the Victorian society. The two young lovers whose relation forms the central backbone of the storyline are faced with number of obstacles on their path to happiness because they deviate from the standard expectations of the society. Their decisions will eventually lead them to a lifelong series of doubt and uncertainty in their relationship. The reader is forced to search for the cause behind this emerging situation and ask himself question whether their troubles could have been somehow avoided. The tragic life story of the couple is in the story eased by gentle humorous language that the author deliberately uses in order to reduce the impact of the plot on the reader. The tragic tendencies common in Hardy's novels are here presented in much more subtle form so that they would not shock the reader and rather amuse him by irony of the conclusion.

The first chapter introduces to the reader a couple in love – a young lad named Nicholas and a girl by the name of Christina – who is faced with a dilemma. The trouble is that she is of a better social status than he is. Christina's father is a wealthy tradesman who has connections with high society while Nicholas is merely a farmer and by his own words "an untamed, uncultivated man, who has never seen London, and knows

nothing about society at all." (*A Changed Man* 31) It is because of this reason they keep their love hidden for they fear that Christina's father would not accept Nicholas as her daughter's fiancée. This is a common starting point for Hardy's storytelling - two young people are in love, but social conventions stand in the way of their luck and they are forced to find a way around them.

Christina insists that Nicholas has to go away and travel for some time, get an education, study books and art; and when he comes back her father would surely accept him then. But Nicholas cannot do this for two reasons – he is afraid that such a long time of seclusion would weaken their love and more importantly, he currently does not possess enough money to allow him to travel very far. Christina then offers him her own finances, but Nicholas strictly declines her offer:

> '…you have hit a sore place. To speak truly, dear, I would rather stay unpolished a hundred years than take your money.'
>
> 'But why? Men continually use the money of the women they marry.'
>
> 'Yes; but not till afterwards. No man would like to touch your money at present, and I should feel very mean if I were to do so in present circumstances.' (32)

This is a very ironical conversation where Hardy cunningly touches the subject of morality of men who consider the assets of their wives after the wedding as their own. We can see from the Nicholas' speech that this is a traditional perception of this matter among people. He hesitates to take even a little sum of money from her lover now but obviously would have no scruples to touch her possessions after they are married. It is noteworthy that Nicholas in the story is not described as a bad person but on the contrary he is very likeable. This fact alone only underlines the notion that

appropriation of wife's property by her husband was not considered a bad deed but a social standard.

Nicholas then presents Christina with a solution he came up with: he suggests they get married in secrecy which would allow him to travel away in peace because he could be sure that she is only his now. It is interesting how strong language the author uses when Nicholas describes the nature of the pact he proposes: at one point he is literally saying: "My great gain would have been that the absolute possession of you would have enabled me to work with spirit and purpose…" (33-4) and elsewhere is Christina replying:

> 'You would have me safe enough in your trap then; I couldn't get away!'
>
> 'That's just it!' he said vehemently. 'It IS a trap—you feel it so, and that though you wouldn't be able to get away from me you might particularly wish to! (34)

The choice of words here alone is a substantial basis for criticism of the institution of marriage – the terms "trap" or "absolute possession" suggests the nature of marriage as it was comprehended by Hardy. However, as the plot of the story develops we can observe that the author manages to find a positive side of the matter as well – in this case specifically, the marriage can help the young couple to strengthen their relationship and justify it in the eyes of the outside world. Unfortunately their plan fails when Mr. Bealand, the rector who is supposed to marry them at night in secrecy, enters the scene. He rejects to proceed with the ceremony on the basis of several formal issues but it is clear that he does not want to enrage Christina's father by marrying his daughter without his knowledge. It is the local religious authority then what represents another obstacle for the young love. Ironically enough, the rector who should be

generally in favor of a marriage as an institution speaks of it in far harsher words than any of the young lovers before him:

> '…The tragedy of marriage— [says Mr. Bealand]'
>
> 'Tragedy?'
>
> 'Certainly. It is full of crises and catastrophes, and ends with the death of one of the actors.' (39)

In the next chapter the story continues at the nearby manor where a feast is being held on the occasion of christening a child. Christina and her father are among the invited and she meets another suitor at the dance. By introducing the character of Mr. Bellston into the storyline the author creates a complicated situation with two, perfectly mirrored worlds: Mr. Bellston is the very opposite of Nicholas Long – he is a well travelled scholar who has seen the world and by his own words "he knows more of the Parthians, and Medes, and dwellers in Mesopotamia—almost of any people, indeed—than of the English rustics." (42) Bellston is a representation of the modern educated man from the civilized world who has no real knowledge of the workings of the real world around him and who is more interested in the history and philosophy that is taught at universities. He also demonstrates his knowledge of the social customs by asking for the hand of Christina by going to her father first, so that his real proposition for marriage to her the next day would be well announced. It matters not that the two of them has met at the dance for the first time and exchanged only a few polite sentences. The convention here is that both of them are from the same social level and therefore well suited for one another. The matter of emotion has no place here since this is more a question of reason. On the other side of the cause is Nicholas, a common man with

a lower social status who cannot offer Christina more than a romantic gesture – when he heard she would be attending the dance, he walked ten miles just to dance with her.

Christina is well aware of the choice she is forced to make. The absence of love in the choice for Bellston and contrary the absence of reason in the choice for Nicholas becomes apparent in the conversation with her father:

> ‘There’s nobody whom I should so like you to marry as that young man. He’s a thoroughly clever fellow, and fairly well provided for. He’s travelled all over the temperate zone; […] you would be nowhere safer than in his hands.’
>
> ‘It is true,’ she answered. ‘He IS a highly desirable match, and I SHOULD be well provided for, and probably very safe in his hands. (48)

It is clear, that Christina is torn between the safe choice for her future, and her love for Nicholas. Despite the fact that her current lover, if exposed openly to the world, would be considered a socially unacceptable spouse, she justifies her love for him to herself in desperate effort to find logical arguments for her feelings:

> ‘But, after all,’ she said to herself, ‘he is a young man of Elsenford, handsome, able, and the soul of honour; and I am a young woman of the adjoining parish, who have been constantly thrown into the communication with him. Is it not, by nature’s rule, the most proper thing in the world that I should marry him, and is it not an absurd conventional regulation, which says that such a union would be wrong?’ (46-7)

Once again we can feel an obvious reference to Hardy’s opinions regarding social rules where his world view is divided between the natural world and the human society. This theme is extended in the story further because Christina’s father soon feels the pressure of the local society to make things clear about the supposed engagement of

his daughter. So far, the young lovers had to deal only with the parental disapproval but now they find themselves under great pressure from the whole local society. And to make the matters worse, this does no longer concern only the two of them, but both of their families too because it seems that someone had spotted the young couple at night on their unsuccessful venture to get married and spread the rumor that the lady Christine has already married the young Nicholas Long in secrecy. Consequently it become very hard for both of them to justify themselves in front of their families and other people as well and explain that they are in fact not wed. This reaction of Christine's father shows the seriousness of this issue and how the negative image of a person in the eyes of the society can have an undesired effect on the whole family: "'You are within an ace of ruining yourself, ruining me, ruining us all!' he said" (54)

The first half of the story concludes with Nicholas' reasoning regarding the arisen situation. Much like Christine before him he tries to find logical arguments for his further actions. He has received a letter from Christine's father asking him to marry his daughter at once and prevent the scandal that would surely follow otherwise. Though the marriage with her was his goal from the beginning, he now hesitates. Nicholas has understood now that his lover's family is ashamed of his supposed marriage with Christine and they would be ashamed of him still if the marriage was real. He now sees that there is no way to escape the thing he was trying to avoid from the very beginning – he makes up his mind and in two days he travels away towards Melchester and London in expectation to become a respected man and in time to return and as such claim Christine as his own.

We jump fifteen years to the future. Nicholas returns to the homestead as a respected businessman and meets Christine again for the first time since he had left. The roles have changed – he is wealthy now and his lover from youth became poor.

Such development of the storyline presents the reader with a subtle notion of social criticism: Nicholas could have married Christine when he had the chance so many years ago and he would probably end up as he began – a simple farmer with no substantial wealth, but with a woman he was in love with. Instead he went to the world to earn a respect and by all means he succeeded. But since he had to live without the woman he loves, it is somehow a bitter victory. After all he returned to his former home in the end because he could not have found anything that would compensate the loss of his lover. Christine on the other hand carefully calculated her future and made an informed decision to marry Mr. Bellston in order to be provided for the rest of her life. And yet she finds herself poorer than before and living as a tenant in the homestead her family used to own. In both cases then, should the characters decide according to their heart rather than reason or social demands, they could have lived a much more joyful life.

Christine, being officially a widow now since Mr. Bellston has been missing for nine years, is happy to see Nicholas once again, although after such a long time the two lovers must find a way to each other: “She was still beautiful, though the years had touched her; a little more matronly—much more homely. Or was it only that he was much less homely now—a man of the world—the sense of homeliness being relative?” (62) Ironically enough, at this point of the story Hardy in fact rejects the social progression that comes with the change of time and rather overstresses the traditional gender roles. At the beginning of the story we have observed that in the marriage of Nicholas and Christine would the vast majority of assets come from the bride’s part and Nicholas would therefore gained materialistically much more than he would have given. However, for various reasons this marriage did not happen. Now, fifteen years later we can see that the situation have changed and the author is returning

to the traditional image of a heroic man, who figuratively speaking rescues the lady from poverty and life on the edge of society:

> ‘I’ll lay the table myself,’ said Christine, jumping up. ‘Do you attend to the cooking.’
>
> ‘Thank you, ma'am. And perhaps ‘tis no matter, seeing that it is the last night you’ll have to do such work. I knew this sort of life wouldn’t last long for ‘ee, being born to better things.’
>
> ‘It has lasted rather long, Mrs. Wake. And if he had not found me out it would have lasted all my days.’
>
> ‘But he did find you out.’
>
> ‘He did. And I’ll lay the cloth immediately.’ (70)

Hardy really does give his reader the notion of a happy ending for the two lovers but at the same time lives up to his reputation of the great tragic author by swiftly taking all hopes away by introducing the long lost husband of Christina back into the picture. One evening when Christina is expecting Nicholas for dinner, a porter knocks at her door carrying a coat and a travel bag of Mr. Bellston and announcing that her husband shall arrive here shortly. Christina is understandably shocked by the message as well by the timing of the announcement. She regretfully passes this information on to Nicholas who sees this as a final blow to his chance of ever being with her permanently and leaves her homestead. Crushed Christina stays up all night in expectation of her husband, but no one comes.

Since there is no news about Bellston for several days, both Christina and Nicholas consider the message to be a prank. Nicholas stills visits her regularly but the uncertainty of Christina’s husband’s return is still there:

> …and still on his arrival the form of words went on—'He has not come?'
>
> 'He has not.'
>
> So they grew older. The dim shape of that third one stood continually between them; they could not displace it; neither, on the other hand, could it effectually part them. They were in close communion, yet not indissolubly united; lovers, yet never growing cured of love. (81)

Then one day after many years of their mutual cohabitation, a skeleton is found at the bottom of the local river. The golden watch on his hand proves that the remains belong to Mr. Bellston. He probably fell in there by accident, presumably on the evening of his supposed return. One might assume that this would be a perfect opportunity for Nicholas and Christine to finally anoint their relation in marriage but they both realize there is no longer any need. They have been living happily together for so long now that a marriage license would make no difference. This realization from their part regarding the needlessness of making love of two people official in any way is then the final point of the story: "'We are fairly happy as we are—perhaps happier than we should be in any other relation, seeing what old people we have grown. The weight is gone from our lives; the shadow no longer divides us: then let us be joyful together as we are." (85)

The comical subtext of this story is very apparent in the presence of a number of coincidences and improbable events throughout the narrative. They are used in order to push the storyline forward as well as to stress the irony of the situation. The conclusion however does not surrender its thematic content to the style of the narrative. The criticism of the strict rules of society regarding marriage is both accurate and ironical and therefore has the desired amusing effect on the reader.

5. A Mere Interlude

A Mere Interlude was published in the collection *A Changed Man and Other Tales* in 1913. Much like in the case of the other stories the central core of the narrative is the theme of marriage. It follows the life of a young woman named Baptista Trewthen who is described as a very unsympathetic person. She basically embodies all of the negative stereotypes of the Victorian women and the author does a good job in presenting her to the reader as repulsive as possible. However, toward the very end of the story a certain development in her life causes her to change her personality entirely. What appears to be a bittersweet conclusion at first is then transformed into a true happy end for Batista. In essence is this a story about rectification of a person, a necessary life-lesson and the consequences of a single bad decision. Much like the other Hardy's minor fiction presented in this thesis, *A Mere Interlude* is written with a humorous subtext that gradates towards the end of the story where it becomes the dominant aspect of the narration. This comical notion of the narrative structure is underlined by the presence of a substantial number of improbable events in the development of the plot and the storyline often moves forward on the basis of coincidence. Through the description of the main female character Hardy constructs the portrayal of the traditional Victorian woman in very negative light. Marriage - even though arranged and therefore not based on love - functions for Batista surprisingly as a mean of salvation. This is Hardy's typical ambiguity in interpretation of a particular issue – by careful construction of a very specific situation around the characters of his story he presents the reader with a situation where the common subject of criticism in his earlier works is used in an entirely opposite way and the marriage in this case therefore works against all circumstances very well in bringing happiness to the people involved.

The predominant feature of the beginning of the story is the depiction of the main heroine and her personality which appears to possess few positive attributes. Since Baptista Trewthen comes from a good social background, she had the privilege to acquire a good education in order to prepare herself for her profession of teacher. Yet the thought of being one thrills her a little. It is mainly because by her own words: "I simply hate school. I don't care for children—they are unpleasant, troublesome little things, whom nothing would delight so much as to hear that you had fallen down dead." (*A Changed Man* 269) Considering the Victorian ideal for a woman was preferably a good mother, these harsh words can hardy add popularity to the character of Baptista in contemporary reader's eyes.

The only escape for the young woman from this lifelong service she does not care for appears to be through an arranged marriage – her parents suggest her to wed an elder gentleman Mr. Heddegan who is an old acquaintance of theirs and who showed interest in marrying her ever since her childhood. Contradictory to the traditional image of Hardy's strong female characters, Baptista is quite submissive and the idea of marrying a twenty years older stranger does not scare her at all. In fact she sees this situation as an opportunity to avoid the occupation she hates. Hardy emphasizes Batista as being a weak and obedient person with very low expectations from life. Also noteworthy is the fact that the element of love is here entirely eliminated from the institution of marriage which is depicted as a social construct that has nothing to do with the emotional relationship whatsoever.

By an accident on her way home to the wedding is Baptista delayed by missing a steamboat and therefore is forced to stay in a local town for several days before the next boat would take her. Her nearly apathetic personality is expressed again by her bland reaction to this unfortunate incident: "…she did not much mind the accident. It

was indeed curious to see how little she minded. […] But her manner after making discovery of the hindrance was quiet and subdued, even to passivity itself." (271-2)

However, she finally expresses an emotional reaction when she runs into an old friend of hers by the name of Charles whom she has always fancied. Having always feelings for her as well, Charles when hearing about the engagement attempts to fight back her submissive approach and force her to express her attitude towards the matter clearly. He himself presents the interest in marrying her but at the same time however he projects the very same kind of possessive behavior onto her as is the object of his criticism in case of her another suitor:

> 'I must do it now,' said she.
>
> 'Why?' he asked, dropping the off-hand masterful tone he had hitherto spoken in, and becoming earnest; still holding her arms, however, as if she were his chattel to be taken up or put down at will. (276)

Charles fails to force Baptista to speak her true mind but succeeds in convincing her to marry him rather then Heddegan. It is noteworthy that he does not present any new arguments to her. He simply analyses her life situation and consequently makes the ultimate decision for her. She only silently obeys or replies in simple one-word affirmative:

> […] and so you wouldn't suffer a lifelong misery by being the wife of a wretched old gaffer you don't like at all. Now, honestly; you do like me best, don't you, Baptista?'
>
> 'Yes.'
>
> 'Then we will do as I say.' (277)

They indeed get married in only two days' time and then wait in the town for the same boat in order to get home and inform Baptista's parents of the sudden development

of things. Their marriage has however a short duration and tragic ending – while waiting for the steamboat Charles decides to ease the heat of the summer day in the sea and there he drowns in a turmoil caused by two opposing currents. Baptista is understandably crushed but not only by the death of her husband, but by the realization of her newly emerged situation. She became a married woman and a widow at the very same day. This tragic outcome of things is to some extent the result of her decision to resist the will of her parents and take her fate into her own hands. She then boards the boat alone and travels home in bitter mood.

The submissiveness of Baptista to the occurrence of events is underlined by the ambiguity with which she is now retrospectively thinking about Charles: “A sort of cruelty, an imperiousness, even in his warmth, had Characterized Charles Stow. As a lover he had ever been a bit of a tyrant; and it might pretty truly have been said that he had stung her into marriage with him at last.” (282) The reader can sense from these lines that Baptista was aware of the attitude with which Charles projected his will onto her. She did not in fact choose one man over another; she was forced to settle for one. Again, the element of love is not even vaguely mentioned in their relationship. The improbable development of events in the story however underlines the humorous undertone of the narrative and to certain extent makes up for the nature of the main female character which is the very opposite of the author’s ideal image of a woman.

Once back at her parent’s homestead Baptista hesitates to give the news of the outcome of her poor decision in the last days either to her parents or her soon-to-be husband. Enlightened by the mistake that the change of her attitude caused she returns to her previous apathetic state. “Everything around her, animate and inanimate, great and small, insisted that she had come home to be married; and she could not get a chance to say nay.” (286) The pressure of the world around her causes her to ignore

the events of the recent past and carry on to marry Bellston as she intended at the beginning. Even though she realizes that "she had come home with much to say, and she had said nothing," (286) she finds it easier to keep her mouth shut as was expected of her for most of her life. There are even notions in the text that she would not had the strength to give the news of her marriage herself even if her husband was still alive: "It was now growing clear even to herself that Charles being dead, she had not determination sufficient within her to break tidings which, had he been alive, would have imperatively announced themselves." (286-7) These notions show the absolute lack of effort from Baptista's part to make any decision for herself and her preference to let other people give the course of her life. The marriage with Charles was entirely his own doing and her big revolting shout against her parents lied merely in nodding her head and accepting the consequences. Now that she was alone again and forced to take action herself she does nothing and rather waits how the situation entails on its own. She eventually marries Heddegan against her will merely in order to not cause a scandal.

The expectations of Mr. Heddegan regarding the arranged marriage summarize the general view of the Victorian gentry of the marriage between a man and a woman – it is not a happy event motivated by love between the two, but rather social necessity that one has to endure in order to gain prestige in the society:

> Mr. Heddegan forgave the coldness of his bride's manner during and after the wedding ceremony, full well aware that there had been considerable reluctance on her part to acquiesce in this neighbourly arrangement, and, as a philosopher of long standing, holding that whatever Baptista's attitude now, the conditions would probably be much

> the same six months hence as those which ruled among other married couples. (288)

Very soon after the wedding, the couple is travelling to the same town where the unfortunate death of Baptista's latter husband occurred. They find an apartment to spend the night in a local inn and Baptista by mere coincidence finds out that in the room next to theirs lies the corpse of deceased Charles waiting there for the inquest the next morning. Horrified by this revelation she is again forced to be quiet and conceal her emotions inside of her, this time in order to keep her current husband from discovering the truth.

On the day of the burial, Baptista manages to escape her husband for the whole afternoon and give her last farewell to Charles. She remains tense for the rest of the honeymoon and even after they return home she lives in a constant fear that the secret behind the nature of their wedding would come up. Several weeks later, a witness from her first wedding appears at the premise of their homestead. She cannot stop him from discovering the truth and consequently buys his silence with money. But the man decides to exploit her situation further and begins to blackmail her. Again Batista approaches the problem with as little action from her part as possible and hopes that the problem will simply go away on its own. It takes no less than three other visits from the man until she realizes that no one but her can solve this matter now.

She finally breaks down the secret to her husband and is ready to accept the consequences. To her surprise, Heddegan does not react to her revelation with anger, but rather with pleasure because the situation plays into his own scheme. The comical subtext indicated by the number of coincidences and accidental meetings throughout the story becomes more apparent with the approach of the conclusion. It is revealed to the reader that Mr. Heddegan had a secret of his own – he is a widower as well and even

has four children from his secret marriage. He explains his willingness to marry Batista because of her qualities as a teacher since his four girls are not educated and now too grown up to be sent to school. He expects his wife to take over their education and immediately sends for them. Batista is crushed because her own single reason to get married was only to avoid this particular activity. Heddegan sees her secret only as an excuse good enough for her to not oppose his plans. Ironically enough, Batista remains blind to the fact that they both deluded each other and sees this as a betrayal from her husband's part only: „[…] she wept from very mortification at Mr. Heddegan's duplicity. Education, the one thing she abhorred; the shame of it to delude a young wife so!" (304)

Considering the development of the story so far the conclusion might seem somewhat surprising. The sudden presence of four children in Batista's life has actually a positive influence. Her existence now has a purpose and she even grows to like the girls. She herself begins to see the world through the eyes of the children who – untouched by the education of the modern world – see things objectively. The young woman with ambiguous attitude to life was transformed into a caring stepmother and an educator and this change helped her to find purpose in her marriage as well: "[…] They formed an unexpected point of junction between her own and her husband's interest, generating a sterling friendship at least, between a pair in whose existence there had threatened to be neither friendship nor love." (306)

The conclusion of *A Mere Interlude* symbolizes a typical approach of Hardy to a short story. He sheds a brand new light at the development of the plot in the very last paragraph and succeeds in surprising his reader. The tragic notions of the story that can be found in every chapter ends up in unexpected happy end. Similarly the character of

Batista is throughout the story faced with a number of significant events in her life and yet it is the very last paragraph where her personality actually undergoes an important transformation. Hardy deliberately uses Batista to create an image of the traditional Victorian woman. The fact that her personality must seem very repulsive to the reader is one of his means for criticism of this particular issue. At the same time he addresses the matter of the institution of marriage. Even thought it eventually helps Batista to change for better, the plausibility of this development is undermined by the improbable development of the narrative throughout the whole story.

6. Conclusion

This thesis attempted to present examples of Thomas Hardy's treatment of gender issues in his minor fiction. While his comprehension of this topic in the novels has been a subject of attention of a number of scholar works in the past, the short stories often escaped further attention. The primary focus of this thesis was to address the theme of gender in this inseparable part of the author's literary legacy as well. The four examples of short stories featured here illustrate the way of approach of Thomas Hardy to the construction of his characters. It was observed that the interpretation of certain particular issues differs significantly from the portrayal of the same matter in his major fiction. Hardy uses different style in the narrative of his short stories in order to acquire a humorous effect on the reader which is a device he rarely uses in his books. Yet the nature of the depicted events that form the center of his attention remains the same. This results in a unique insight into the writer's mind that this often marginalized literary format of his bibliography has to offer.

Thomas Hardy belongs among the most progressive authors of the 19th century and his depiction of the unjust conditions in the English society caused much criticism of his works. The readings of his novels give us the notion of the way he perceived the social status of women and disagreed with the ascribed gender roles. The same issues project into his short stories as well but here are they handled with humor instead of fatality and hope instead of determinism. The author plays with his reader by offering him a traditional scheme known from his novels which raises adequate anticipations. Those are however fulfilled in a new and unexpected ways.

Hardy's construct of the short story narrative differs significantly from the narrative of his novels, yet the repeatedly emerging themes form the uniting element of his work. This reveals the importance that the author attributed to the matters he

wrote about. Hardy was transcending the gender stereotypes of his time by constructing strong independent women and his works bear the same importance in literature as the feminist movement does in society. His tradition of strong female characters in his novels is in the context of short stories disrupted by introduction of a number of weak women as well, yet Hardy always finds a way to project his true opinion on the matter into the text. The different approach to the construction of the narrative in the four stories presented here underlines his qualities as a great writer.

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8. Czech Resume

Tato bakalářská práce s názvem “Gender Relations in the Narrative Organization of Four Short Stories by Thomas Hardy” si klade za cíl identifikovat genderová témata na příkladech z krátké tvorby Thomase Hardyho, jednoho z nejvýraznějších spisovatelů Viktoriánského období. Prostřednictvím analýz čtyř povídek je autorův přístup ke genderové problematice doložen na způsobu budování jeho mužských i ženských postav. Jejich charakteristiky a osobnostní rysy tvoří hlavní aspekt narativní organizace všech čtyř povídek v této práci. Hardyho romány jsou známé svým na svou dobu neobvyklým ztvárněním ženských postav a kritikou společenských konvencí Viktoriánské společnosti. Tato práce ilustruje způsob, jakým se centralita genderových témat projevuje také v jeho krátkých povídkách.

První kapitola představuje Thomase Hardyho jako autora a umísťuje ho do kontextu Viktoriánské literatury. Dva klíčové aspekty jsou na tomto místě zdůrazněny především – genderová problematika a téma dvou světů v Hardyho fikční literatuře. Kapitolu uzavírá obecná charakteristika autorových krátkých povídek. Další čtyři kapitoly jsou zaměřeny každá na analýzu jedné konkrétní povídky. Tyto příklady autorovy práce jsou záměrně zvolené tak, aby ilustrovaly jeho uchopení genderových otázek v narativní konstrukci krátkých povídek. Každá z těchto kapitol je uvozena obecným shrnutím dané povídky a základním výčtem témat, které obsahuje. Následná analýza rozebírá tato témata blíže.

9. English Resume

This thesis titled “Gender Relations in the Narrative Organization of Four Short Stories by Thomas Hardy” is aimed to address the theme of gender in minor fiction of Thomas Hardy, one of the most important Victorian authors. Through the analyses of four stories is the author’s approach to the matters of gender illustrated on the construction of his characters, both male and female. The characteristics and personalities of these characters form a central aspect of the narrative organization in all four examples of the stories featured in this thesis. Hardy’s novels are famous for his unusual depiction of women of his time and criticism of social conventions of Victorian society. This work illustrates the way the centrality of gender relations project into his short stories as well.

The first chapter introduces Thomas Hardy as an author and places him within the context of Victorian literature. Two key aspects of his work are described here – the matters of gender and the theme of two worlds in Hardy’s fiction. The chapter concludes with general characteristics of the author’s minor fiction. The next four chapters deal each with analyses of a particular short story. These examples of his work are deliberately chosen in order to illustrate the author’s comprehension of the matters of gender in the narrative organization of his short stories. Each of these chapters opens with a general summary of the concrete story and a basic characteristic of the themes it addresses. The consequent analysis deals with these issues more closely.