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An Exploration of Female Sexuality, Class Status, and Art in Hardy's Short Stories

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine Hardy's treatment of female sexuality as mediated by art in two short stories: "The Fiddler of the Reels" and "An Imaginative Woman." Given Hardy's role as an artist, his noted compassion for women, and his interest in Victorian attitudes toward sexuality, my analysis of these topics in his short stories is particularly relevant. Hardy's investment in class issues is also pertinent, as I consider how Hardy uses his heroines' relationships with art to underline the distinct disadvantages of lower-class women. While Ella, the middle-class heroine of "An Imaginative Woman," uses poetry to channel stagnant sensual energies as a relatively empowered subject, music objectifies and overpowers the lower-class Car'line of "The Fiddler of the Reels." In my analysis, I compare Ella and Car'line's interactions with art, noting art's potential to serve as an emotional outlet, a source of pleasure, or an overwhelming and dangerous force. I argue that middle-class women possess a clear advantage: their access to Victorian discourses that acknowledge female sexuality and their encouragement to engage the creative arts as active agents afford them a level of power. Ella thus uses art as a tool to express her desires and to obtain a degree of sexual satisfaction. On the contrary, the rural, working-class Car'line is completely vulnerable to Wat's fiddle, and its power ultimately causes her emotional and physical deterioration. In my comparison of female sexuality and artistic expression in "The Fiddler of the Reels" and "An Imaginative Woman," I elucidate Hardy's efforts to reveal the distinct disadvantages of lower-class women in Victorian society.

Keywords

Hardy, Victorian sexuality, female sexuality, art, class

Disciplines

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Literature in English, British Isles

Comments

Written for senior seminar English 403: Thomas Hardy Seminar.

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An Exploration of Female Sexuality, Class Status, and Art in Hardy's Short Stories

Erin Lanza

English 403

Professor Flynn

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code:

Erin Lanza

Introduction

Thomas Hardy's novels have attracted a great deal of attention from literary critics. Scholars, and feminist researchers in particular, have taken a special interest in Hardy's textual representation of women. In my own analysis, I will contribute to the vast body of scholarship in Hardy's work by focusing on a comparatively understudied area: his short stories. In particular, I am interested in examining the female protagonists and the manner in which Hardy represents their sexuality through art. To situate my analysis in specific texts, I will perform a close-reading of "The Fiddler of the Reels" and "An Imaginative Woman"—two stories which feature evocative demonstrations of female sexuality as mediated by music and poetry respectively. Although the narrow focus of my analysis limits the extent to which my observations may apply to Hardy's other works, by locating these pieces in the social discourses which contextualized their creation, I will elucidate key ideas regarding the expression and portrayal of female sexuality during the Victorian period and its connection to the creative arts.

"The Fiddler of the Reels" and "An Imaginative Woman" prove especially useful as comparative texts for studying the connections between Hardy's heroines, their sexual expression, and the role of art. In "An Imaginative Woman," the poetry of a stranger seduces Ella Marchmill—a married, middle-class woman—and her passion leads her to worship him and his words in a highly sexual and solitary scene. Hardy emphasizes that the poetry of this man, Robert Trewe, is "impassioned" and "luxuriant," exposing its potential as a source of erotic inspiration (309). However, Ella's relationship with the arts serves as an empowering interest rather than a debilitating force, and she thus channels her sexual energy into controlled expressions. Because Victorians encouraged middle-class women to practice art as a feminine accomplishment and a mark of class status, Ella's interest in poetry affords her a level of agency:

she initiates contact both with him and his poetry, and she maintains an impassioned yet measured degree of sexual pleasure from his verses. Thus, Ella's status as a middle-class woman allows her a greater self-command. In fact, Hardy suggests the power of female sexuality when Ella's erotic imaginings of Trewe superimpose onto the genetic makeup of her baby.

In "The Fiddler of the Reels," a young "woman's man" by the name of Wat Ollamoor seduces Car'line—a pretty, lower-class girl—through the fantastical and intoxicating songs of his fiddle (286). Wat's music quite literally enchants Car'line, and she dances convulsively to his songs, seemingly unable to stop. Car'line's involuntary physical reaction to Wat's music parallels her emotional, psychological, and sexual subjugation; she abandons a stable life with her expected partner, Ned Hipcroft, and she falls pregnant with Wat's child—illustrating her complete seduction to Wat's will. Thus, in contrast to Ella, Car'line abdicates control over her body, mind, emotions, and eventually, her own child as a result of the fiddle's irresistible melodies. Car'line's class status renders her even more vulnerable to Wat's music, as her lack of access to artistic outlets inhibits her ability to process and control her emotional overflow. Car'line's loss of independent will when in contact with the fiddle's tunes corresponds with her class-determined inability to engage art as an active subject.

Though both "The Fiddler of the Reels" and "An Imaginative Woman" feature women whose relationship with art contains explicit sexual overtones, Car'line and Ella experience sexual agency to vastly different degrees. That is, while Wat's music overpowers Car'line and strips her of her power, Ella receives pleasure through her solitary immersion in Trewe's poetry. Because Victorian society typically denied or medicalized female sexuality, art was a powerful resource for women to engage in sensual emotions. As Ella portrays in "An Imaginative Woman," creative arts such as poetry offered an outlet for the sexual frustration of women at this

time. Unlike Ella, who had the means both to admire and to practice poetry as a mode of self-expression, Car'line is vulnerable to the purely passionate impulses of Wat's music. For Car'line, the inaccessibility of alternate modes of sexual expression causes her repressed sexuality to emerge in response to Wat's hypnotic tunes, and she is left defenseless against overwhelming and opposing sensations of sexual desire, pleasure, and the pain of being subjugated. I contend that a comparison of these texts highlights the prevalence of repressed sexuality in women at this time; however, the disparate levels of agency that Car'line and Ella experience reveal the distinct disadvantage that Victorian society presented lower-class women with regards to sexual expression and autonomy. By comparing the sexual experiences of Car'line and Ella as mediated by art, I argue that Hardy exposes the dual oppressions which subjugated the sexuality of lower-class women in the Victorian period.

Context: Victorian attitudes, female sexuality, and art

Contemporary discourses typically portray Victorian sexuality as fundamentally repressed. Dominant thought suggests that Victorians denied their sexuality, invisibilized its role in society, and rendered women as sexless beings. Indeed, many sources indicate a complete denial of female sexuality in the Victorian period. For instance, historians Carol and Peter Stearns state that "female sexuality was seen by many Victorian physicians, clergymen and novelists as abnormal" (627). As such, various modes of cultural transmission promoted a view that pathologized, demonized, or rejected female sexuality. Historical documents support this reality, affirming that Victorian society would have deemed masturbation a terrible sin and denied women informative conversations regarding their anatomy or capacity for sexual pleasure (Stearns 628). Undoubtedly, a large sector of Victorian society maintained a perspective toward women which emphasized their lack of sexual desire.

In his essay, “The Power of Desire and the Danger of Pleasure,” Steven Seidman refutes simplistic interpretations of Victorian sexuality and demands a more comprehensive, contextualized consideration of Victorian sexual discourses. To Seidman, sex played a central role in Victorian society, citing that contemporary thinkers described it as a “powerful force” (48) and a “natural instinct” (50). Indeed, advice literature encouraged married couples to have sex and considered it a physically and emotionally healthy act, as long as individuals did not allow sensuality, lust, or eroticism to overpower its spiritual essence. Further, Seidman maintains that middle-class Victorians did not deny female sexuality; rather, they differentiated it from that of men by defining it as spiritual or mental in nature (48). Although Seidman’s argument highlights Victorian acknowledgement of female sexuality, he contends that this “spiritualization of female desire would surely have created in women a deep anxiety and ambivalence toward their own erotic desires” (48). Moreover, lower-class Victorian women had less access to resources which acknowledged the existence of female sexuality at all, thus promoting a culture which emphasized the abnormality of women with sexual desire. Therefore, to comprehend fully the discourses of female sexuality in the Victorian period, one must consider its coexisting and contradicting interpretations while maintaining a critical gaze toward the ways in which they subjugated women of all social classes.

Victorians warned against the risk of sexual feelings turning sensual and thus instructed an ethics which shunned indulgence in behavior or in arts that evoked erotic sensations (Seidman 63). This policy of self-regulation and cultural reinforcement was a social necessity, as Victorians considered sensuality “to be governed by an internal logic whose dynamic force is lust and whose outcome is personal ruin” (Kennaway 50). Music in particular posed a threat to destabilize society—particularly its more “sensitive” members, such as women and children—by

overexposing people's nerves to erotic stimulation. James Kennaway notes: "Music, like sex, was a stimulant of the nerves, unhealthy in excess, and implying an alarming loss of self-control" (143). The sensuality of music inspired both medical and moral fears, as Victorian thinkers posited that particular kinds of music would inevitably lead to moral degradation or a destruction of the nervous system (Kennaway 142). Anxiety regarding the sensuality of the arts did not limit itself to music; indeed, poetry and "passionate language" in general posed risks to sensitive natures and threatened to spark in its audience an eroticism deemed inappropriate to contemporary Victorian thought (Kennaway 98).

Hardy, music, and "The Body Electric"¹

Despite the popularity of discourses regarding the potential dangers of music and poetry, Victorian society celebrated the creative arts and expressed a great fondness for its aesthetics and power. Hardy himself was a lifelong fiddler, poet, and appreciator of the arts. In *The Life and Works of Thomas Hardy*, Hardy shares the centrality of music in his childhood home: his mother sang, his father played the violin, and his family delighted in jigs and folk-dances (18-9). As he grew older, Hardy remained "extraordinarily sensitive to music" and often incorporated a sense of musicality into his texts either overtly or in their descriptive voice (19). In fact, his experience as a fiddler for country weddings and dances may have informed the vivid descriptions of dance and song that Hardy provides in "The Fiddler of the Reels." While Hardy's sensitivity to music afforded him a lifelong passion, he was—as he was with literature—largely an autodidact, and his journals report an interest in texts regarding musical theory (Grundy 136). Although Hardy often challenged social conventions in his works, Hardy's interest in texts which constituted

¹ "The Body Electric" refers to Walt Whitman's poem, "I Sing the Body Electric" (1855). I borrowed this allusion from James Kennaway's article, "Singing the Body Electric: Nervous Music and Sexuality in *Fin-de-Siècle* Literature."

contemporary discourses is well-documented, and he would have almost certainly been aware of Victorian attitudes toward art, sensuality, and the centrality of the “nerves” in medical theory.

In both “The Fiddler of the Reels” and “An Imaginative Woman,” Hardy incorporates these contemporary discourses of the arts, sexuality, and the female body both to inform his text and to challenge their veracity. For instance, new scientific understandings emphasized the importance of the nervous system for physical and emotional health; Victorians portrayed this system as “electric” in nature and warned against the effect of external stimulus (Kennaway 142). Due to its proposed risk to the nerves, Victorians considered sensual music as “electric music” that could clash with and wear out one’s physical balance. Hardy implements this understanding of the arts and nerves into both texts, weaving electronic imagery and language into the female characters’ bodies and observations. When Car’line first hears Wat² play the fiddle, “she would start in her seat in the chimney corner as if she had received a galvanic shock” (Hardy 289). Hardy refers to galvanism—an “electricity developed by chemical action”—to illustrate the music’s direct effect on Car’line’s nerves (“Galvanism”). Electronic imagery also emerges in “An Imaginative Woman.” For instance, Mrs Hooper describes Trewe—the poet by whom Ella becomes infatuated—as a man with a “very electric flash in his eye” (315). Because it is Trewe’s poetic vision that enchants Ella, positing the electric flash in Trewe’s eye corresponds with beliefs that parallel certain arts with sensuality. Hardy’s likely subscription to Victorian discourses regarding nerves, sensuality, art, and the “electric” renders an analysis of “The Fiddler of the Reels” and “An Imaginative Woman” even more pertinent.

² Whether an intentional naming by Hardy or purely incidental, I would like to observe here the peculiar similarity between the name “Wat” and the term used to describe and measure electric power: “Watt.” In fact, these two words are homophones—producing the same sound when spoken aloud. I propose that Hardy’s naming of Wat is an intentional allusion to both the “electric” and to the seductive potential of sound on the physical body.

Car'line and Ella: sexual agency and socioeconomic status

Notwithstanding the similarities in language between these two short stories, the nature of the sexual and/or sensual experiences of Ella and Car'line differ greatly. Ella, unlike Car'line, has a level of control over the unfolding of her sexual expression. That is, while Car'line's physical reaction to Wat's music compels her to dance against her will, Ella carefully restrains her indulgence and chooses appropriate, solitary moments in which to engage her feelings. After Mrs Hooper discloses the presence of Trewe's poetic scribbles by Ella's bedside, Ella was "anxious to read the inscription alone; and she accordingly waited till she could do so, with a sense that a great store of emotion would be enjoyed in the act" (312). Likewise, Ella does not immediately satisfy her desire to view Trewe's photograph: "preferring to reserve the inspection till she could be alone," Ella once again controls herself while entertaining "a serene sense of something ecstatic to come" (316). As such, Ella maintains agency over her own body, sexuality, and rationality. Her familiarity with poetry informs her that she will obtain sensual satisfaction by engaging these works, and she can thereby postpone her enjoyment in a rational, measured way. Though her passion grows for Trewe, a man whom she never met, Ella demonstrates a maturity and capacity for self-control which is inexistent in Car'line.

Car'line and Ella's differing capacities for maintaining sexual agency connect largely to their individual levels of sophistication. First, while Hardy casts Car'line as a pretty, simple, lower-class country girl with no sexual history, Ella Marchmill is a middle-class married woman with children. As such, Car'line's emotional and physical arousal to Mop's music is presumably her first encounter with sexual feelings: as Joan Grundy posits, this "sexual awakening is at the root" of Car'line's behavior (143). Ella's position as a middle-class woman, however, also signifies that she had access to discourses which acknowledged female sexuality. Although these

discourses defined female sexuality as spiritual and mental in nature, they nonetheless would have provided Ella a vocabulary to define her feelings and a justification to perceive them as natural. Consequently, Ella can identify “the stagnation” of her emotions in marriage and she actively seeks an outlet for her stifled passion—illustrating her awareness of the importance of emotional release (Hardy 306). Ella’s ability to recognize her repressed sensual feelings stems from her class position and affords her a greater propensity to accept and mediate her desires in a healthy way.

Contrary to Ella, Car’line’s status as a rural, working-class girl abets her lack of autonomy while confronting art’s sensual forces. In fact, Car’line’s own father resorts to gendered medical discourses in an attempt to explain his daughter’s response to Wat’s music: “her father, knowing her hysterical tendencies, was always excessively anxious” and he feared her emotional reactions to represent a “species of epileptic fit” (290). Indeed, even the narrator pathologizes Car’line’s behavior, claiming that “it would require a neurologist” to explain the young woman’s experience (289). By reducing her sexual awakening to a hysteric fit, Car’line’s father—symbolic of the dominant, masculine discourses of the time—leaves Car’line vulnerable to her own overwhelming feelings without an outlet, proper education, or the vocabulary to perceive them as natural. Interestingly, Hardy follows the disempowering analysis of Car’line’s father with feminine insight; Car’line’s sister, Julia, makes her sole contribution to the story when Hardy explains that she knew “what was the cause” of Car’line’s behavior (290). While the only other female in the text—besides Car’line’s own child—quietly recognizes Car’line’s sexual expression, her silence and subsequent disappearance in the story further isolates Car’line in a society that strips lower-class women of their power by denying their sexuality. Car’line’s

class status, and the consequent inaccessibility to discourses which acknowledge female sexuality, furthers her vulnerability to the powerful feelings which eventually consume her.

While Ella equally possesses strong sexual and emotional desires, her position as a middle-class woman affords her an awareness of and an ability to take advantage of appropriate outlets. This level of privilege allows Ella to harness the power of the creative arts with intention, and she pursues poetry with specific goals for self-improvement. For instance, Ella practices poetry “in an endeavor to find a congenial channel in which to let flow her painfully embayed emotions, whose former limpidity and sparkle seemed departing” due to her passionless marriage (309). Ella employs art as a subject, and as a result, she maintains a level of order and control over her sexuality. While Ella becomes increasingly engrossed with Trewe’s words, Trewe never subjugates Ella to his will as Wat controls Car’line. Rather, Ella actively seeks out Trewe’s work, initiates contact with him, and emulates his poetic style in an attempt to bring herself closer to him. Ella’s familiarity with poetry as a woman in the middle class allows her to wield the creative arts in a productive, meaningful, and empowering way.

Middle-class Victorian values defined female sexuality as a spiritual and mental matter, and Ella’s immersion in these discourses allows her to express her sexuality in an erotic yet spiritually-infused manner. In fact, Ella’s sexual embrace with Trewe exists so much on the spiritual plane that the two never touch; rather, “Ella is permeated by his spirit as an ether” as she lays alone in bed (318). Ella’s preparation for this sensual indulgence parallels religious ritual. As if approaching pages from a sacred script, Ella sits at her desk to contemplate “several pages of Trewe’s tenderest utterances” (316). Ella then gazes at Trewe’s portrait and muses that his eyes seemed “as if they were reading the universe in the microcosm of the confronter’s face,” thus assigning a God-like power to his image (316). Ella’s setting also mirrors religious imagery:

she lights candles as if constructing an altar and expresses a need for silence and solemnity. Yet Ella's actions blend into the erotic as well; Ella begins her ritual by stripping into her "dressing-gown," and as she lays in bed, she imagines her body merging with Trewe's by imitating his motions: "He must often have put his hand so – with the pencil in it. Yes, the writing was sideways, as it would be if executed by one who extended his arm thus" (317). Ella's internal dialogue suggests that she put her *own* hand "so" and extended her *own* arm "thus." That is, Ella responds and mirrors Trewe's imagined physical movements as if they were indeed merging physically. The spiritualization of female sexuality in middle-class Victorian discourses thus provides Ella a means through which she can express erotic desire whilst complying with gender expectations.

In lower-class Victorian society, however, the invisibilization of female sexual desire in public discourses renders Car'line unable to express her sexuality through socially accepted avenues. Consequently, the imagery in "The Fiddler of the Reels" contrasts greatly with the religious and spiritual undertones of Ella's behavior. Rather than engage her sexual desire by merging the religious and the erotic, Car'line's sexuality suggests a subjection to demonic or supernatural forces. For instance, the narrator parallels Wat's power with threatening, antireligious forces: he explains that Wat's fiddle had a "touch of the weird and wizardly in it" and adds that Wat had not "bowed a note of church-music from his birth" (287). Car'line's lack of access to middle-class discourses causes her to submit entirely to Wat's art because she had no platform through which to construct her own concept of sexuality. Unlike Ella who creates a spiritual ritual to appreciate Trewe's verses in accord with middle-class values, Car'line becomes the subject of Wat's sadistic desires. Helpless to the fiddle's "unholy musical charm," Car'line unwillingly enters a five-person reel—a dance that constructs the shape of a cross (303). As if

she were a sacrificial object, Car'line soon finds herself in the center of this cross and incapable of escaping—despite her deepest desire. Hardy's positioning of Car'line in this scene emphasizes her subjection to dangerous forces and her powerlessness to resist. By incorporating supernatural and even demonic energy into Car'line's subjugation, Hardy portrays the great dangers to which lower-class Victorian society renders women vulnerable.

The body and the spirit: penetration, pleasure, and class status

The sexual subjugation of Car'line reflects itself in the violent, penetrative language that Hardy employs to describe her erotic experiences. As Car'line dances alone in the center of the five-reel dance, Hardy writes that she was “subject to every wave of the melody, and probed by the gimlet-gaze of her fascinator's open eye” (301). Car'line, “intoxicated” by the fiddle's tune, receives a distinctly penetrative probing of her body through Wat's gaze; the contrast between Car'line's vulnerable state and the strong, piercing eye of her controller parallels the violent possession of one's body through rape (300). Hardy emphasizes the physicality of this violation by describing Wat's “gimlet-gaze.” Significantly, a gimlet refers to “a kind of boring-tool” (“Gimlet”) used to “to pierce, perforate, [or] make a hole in . . . by means of a rotatory movement” (“Bore”). Wat thus obtains power over Car'line by forcing her to dance, and the five-reel figure to which he subjects her creates the ideal “rotary movement” to serve his purpose. That is, the five reel requires the dancer in the middle—Car'line—to dance in both directions, creating a constant “figure of 8” motion (Hardy 300). Nonetheless, Wat waits until Car'line is the sole remainder of the reel to fix “one dark eye” upon her and take advantage of her extreme exhaustion and desperation (301). The violent possession of Car'line's body through music highlights the dangers that lower-class Victorian women in particular face as a consequence of their inability to exercise power over their erotic desires through art.

In contrast to Car'line's violent subjugation, Ella is able to create a sexually and emotionally satisfying experience. While Ella lays in bed to read Trewe's "pencilings," she observes that his words are "so intense, so sweet, so palpitating, that it seemed as if his very breath, warm and loving, fanned her cheeks from those walls" (317). Though these moments arise from Ella's imagination, they nonetheless describe a love scene between Ella and Trewe in which Ella experiences both erotic passion and sensual intimacy. The evocative power of Trewe's words leads Ella to an almost orgasmic state of pleasure. To reflect her growing bliss, Hardy repeats the word "so" in "so intense, so sweet, so palpitating" to create a rhythm which builds in intensity as the description continues. The final adjective, "palpitating," evokes the physical sensation of a quickly beating heart or the pulsating throbs of the physical body ("Palpitating"). While Hardy masks the eroticism of this moment with the delicate image of Trewe's loving breath, the sexual pleasure Ella receives through the arts is undeniable. Ella's connection to poetry—a privilege which corresponds with her class position—allows this art form to serve as an erotic source of inspiration and even sexual bliss.

Whereas Ella's engagement with art fulfills both her body and her spirit, Car'line's interaction with music separates her from her own soul. The hypnotic nature of Mop's music could provoke a "moving effect upon the souls of grown-up persons, especially young women of fragile and responsive organization" (288). This "moving effect" extends beyond the physical form and targets the listener's spirit—especially those of whom society considers most vulnerable. Despite its effect upon the soul, Wat's fiddle does not inspire the spiritual emotions that Ella experiences. Rather, Wat plays "so as to draw your soul out of your body like a spider's thread . . . till you felt as limp as withywind" (290). By removing the soul from the body, Wat denies his listeners authority over their sexual expression—this act particularly disempowers

women, considering the spiritualization of female sexuality during the Victorian period (Seidman 48). Moreover, Victorian discourses indicated that both sensual music and eroticism overwhelms the nervous system and weakens the physical body (Kennaway 142). Wat therefore intentionally strips the soul from Car'line to disconnect her from her power and to dominate her physical form. Because creative outlets can offer insight and familiarity with one's self, engaging the arts as a source of power can promote a greater self-control. Car'line's lack of experience with art as an active agent leads to Wat's total subjugation of her, as she fails to exercise mastery over both her body and her soul. The extreme powerlessness to which Wat reduces Car'line emphasizes the distinct vulnerability of lower-class women to external, sensual forces.

In contrast, Ella's agency in employing poetry for both emotional and physical pleasure invites a sexual experience which integrates her body and soul. Because this agency arises from her class status, Ella's privilege as a middle-class woman grants her the power to remain a fully embodied individual while confronting her sexual desires. Unlike Car'line, whose soul separates from her body as a result of Wat's music, poetry inspires Ella to merge both her body and soul with those of Trewe on the spiritual plane. While Ella reads Trewe's poetry in bed, Hardy explains that Ella was "immersed in the very essence of him, permeated by his spirit as an ether" (318). The ethereal nature of this description emphasizes the union of their souls. However, Ella also imagines that "her hair was dragging where his arm had lain" and that she "was sleeping on a poet's lips" (318). As such, Hardy also refers to the imagined intermingling of their lips, arms, and hair. The physicality of these descriptions suggests that the meeting of their souls does not occur solely in the spiritual realm but on the very bed on which she reclines. The contrast between Ella's capacity to remain whole and Car'line's subjugation to a mere physical form highlights the advantage that being a middle-class woman affords Ella: her experience with the

creative arts empowers her spirit and opens the possibility for her to explore her sexuality as a complete and embodied individual.

Double-consciousness, pain, and pleasure

Despite Ella's successful integration of body and soul to engage sexuality through art, Victorian discourses complicate her experience of pleasure. As I addressed earlier, the strict interpretation of middle-class women's sexuality as "spiritual" generated a profound "anxiety and ambivalence" in women towards their sexual feelings (Seidman 48). Ella's awareness of the proper manifestation for her erotic desires creates a split in her consciousness which simultaneously enjoys and judges her sexual satisfaction. Gazing at Trewe's portrait, Ella "fell into thought, till her eyes filled with tears, and she touched the cardboard with her lips. Then she laughed with a nervous lightness, and wiped her eyes" (Hardy 317). While Ella contemplates her thoughts, the reader can only examine Ella's face as it reflects various, ambiguous feelings. For instance, although Ella cries, Hardy does not explicitly state which emotion incites her tears. Ella's subsequent decision to "[touch] the cardboard with her lips," however, suggests a connection between her overwhelming emotion and the expression of her physical desire. Ella's mixture of laughter, tears, and "nervous lightness" indicates an internal tension between pleasure and self-judgment. Hardy's insight into Ella's thoughts affirms the existence of her double-consciousness: "She thought how wicked she was, a woman having a husband and three children, to let her mind stray to a stranger" (318). Ella reprimands herself for acting on the erotic desires that Trewe's poetry evokes. Although Ella's social class affords her the liberty to experience sensuality through art—as seen in her subsequent immersion in his poetry—Victorian discourses complicate women's ability to experience sexual pleasure regardless of social class.

While Hardy reveals the constraints that Victorian society imposes on all women, he emphasizes the distinct disadvantage of lower-class women in using art for sexual pleasure. Hardy's language thus highlights lower-class women's amplified feelings of "anxiety and ambivalence" as a result of the disempowerment that unfamiliarity with the arts produces (Seidman 48). Car'line's opposing sensations of bliss and pain reflect the heightened vulnerability of lower-class women to unsatisfying and unpleasant sexual experiences. Hardy describes these contradictory sensations: as Car'line dances slavishly, the fiddle's "pathos [were] running high and running low in endless variation, projecting through her nerves excruciating spasms, a sort of blissful torture" (300). In contrast to the ambiguous emotional responses of Ella, Hardy employs starkly contrasting language: the pathos run both "high" and "low" and she experiences a paradoxical mix of joy and torment: "blissful torture." While Car'line's interaction with Wat's music does incite bliss, she receives this pleasure along with unmistakable pain: "excruciating spasms." As such, Car'line does not reach the peak of satisfaction that Ella experiences but ends "in convulsions, weeping violently" (302). The complete destruction of Car'line's emotional and physical well-being underlines the marked disadvantage of lower-class women. While Ella must confront the stifling internalization of gender roles, Car'line's powerlessness to employ art as an agent leads to her complete victimization.

Car'line and Ella: sexual power, degradation, and death

Hardy demonstrates Ella's advantage in using the arts constructively by highlighting the lasting power of her sexual experience with poetry. Years after Ella's death, her husband recalls Ella's interest in Trewe and compares his youngest son to Trewe's portrait. Hardy explains: "By a known but inexplicable trick of Nature . . . the dreamy and peculiar expression of the poet's face sat, as the transmitted idea, upon the child's" (330). As I delineated earlier, Ella experiences

an overflow of erotic desire the night that she reads Trewe's poetry. Significantly, as Ella engages Trewe's work, she gazes at his portrait. As a consequence of Ella's passion for and feelings of intimacy for this "stranger," her son grows to resemble Trewe. Hardy thus suggests that Ella transmits the image of this man onto the genetic makeup of her baby at conception. In fact, Hardy even defends the plausibility of this occurrence. In the preface to his 1896 re-issued *Wessex Tales*, Hardy states that Ella's projection of Trewe's appearance onto her child is "a physical possibility that . . . is well supported by the experiences of medical men and other observers of such manifestations"³ (vi). Hardy's belief that a woman's sexual feelings for another man could overpower the genetic contribution of her physical partner reveals his perspective on the power of female sexuality. Moreover, as Michal Ginsburg points out, "the tradition that attributed to the mother's imagination the power to imprint an image on the fetus saw the mother as an artist" (284). By assigning Ella this ability and emphasizing her role as an artist, Hardy stresses the connection between female sexuality and art. Additionally, because Ella's empowered sexuality emerges from middle-class norms, I contend that Hardy directly reveals the advantage that middle-class women wield by using art as active agents.

Nonetheless, Ella's death exposes the constraints which plague middle-class women regardless of any self-mastery obtained through art. While the child who reflects Trewe's image lives on "fat and well," Ella deteriorates after its birth: she is "pulseless and bloodless, with hardly strength enough left to follow up one feeble breath with another" (329). Hardy's language in this scene opposes the earlier imagery of Ella engaging Trewe's poetry—Trewe's verses are "palpitating" and feel like "loving breath" against Ella's face (317). These allusions to breathing and beating hearts relate Ella's sexual desire with aliveness. Although Ella mourns Trewe's

³ Here, Hardy refers to a theory of generation popular during the Renaissance period "according to which what a woman imagines during the sexual act or during pregnancy (or the images she gazes upon) gets imprinted on her child" (Ginsburg 284).

death, I contend that she is able to live on because she transmits his spirit onto her fetus. After the child's birth, however, Ella separates both physically and energetically from the one being for whom she exhibits erotic desire. Thus, Ella must once more confront the "stagnation caused by the routine of a practical household and the gloom of bearing children to a commonplace father" (309). The dreariness of this life—amplified by the symbolic loss of her sexual desire—strips her of her will to live, and Ella dies six weeks after her child is born. Ella's disinterest in her social role and passionless marriage reflects the reality of many Victorian women. While art serves as an outlet to express these frustrated sexual feelings, Hardy reveals its limitation: art cannot substitute genuine intimacy or entirely negate life's hardships. Through Ella, Hardy testifies to the devastating effects of passionless partnerships and illustrates the inability of art to counteract the "stagnation" of unfulfilling motherhood or loveless marriage.

Because Car'line occupies a lower social class than Ella, her fate not only reflects the limitations of art in aiding her sexual expression but underlines its ability to serve as a destructive force. Despite the advancement that Car'line obtains in her marriage to Ned, as soon Car'line reencounters Wat's music, she falls into "paralyzed reverie" (299) and begins to dance "slavishly and abjectly" to his melody (301). Indeed, from this moment onward, Car'line undergoes a dramatic and public deterioration of her mind, body, and spirit. Having lost her "power of independent will" to the fiddle's tune, Car'line dances endlessly—until her nerves grow overstrained and she collapses onto the ground in violent sobs (299). Hardy leaves the reader's knowledge of Car'line in a state of complete discomposure: "the fits were still upon her; and her will seemed shattered" (303). Car'line's inability to control her attraction to Wat's "seductive strains" thus leads to her physical, mental, and emotional demise (300). Because Car'line's class status denies her tools to navigate her sexuality, I maintain that Hardy uses

Car'line to expose the disadvantages that lower-class women's relationship with art produces. Moreover, the ultimate deterioration of Car'line's health highlights the danger of her vulnerable position.

Although Car'line does not die at the end of the story, she experiences a profound disconnection with both herself and with her child a result of the music's destructive effects. After marrying Ned, Car'line proudly believes that she is "mistress of herself" and capable of self-control (298). However, as soon as Wat begins to play, Car'line loses independent will: though she "did not want to dance," she soon "whirled about with the rest" (299). Thus, Wat's music acts directly against Car'line's intentions and sharply contrasts her new sense of self. In addition, Car'line's overwhelmed state allows Wat to steal away her child. While Ella's empowered engagement with poetry causes her to imprint her imaginings on her fetus, Car'line's lack of power results in the complete dispossession of her child. Moreover, Car'line's indifference to Carry's disappearance reveals the "moral consequences" of erotic overexposure and highlights Car'line's profound deterioration of self (Kennaway 141). Wat's ultimate subjugation of Car'line and her daughter through music greatly contrasts with Ella's powerful demonstration of female sexuality. Hardy makes clear that the differing class positions of Ella and Car'line produce these disparate endings: while Ella's middle-class identity allows her to use art as a tool to serve her own intent, Car'line's unfamiliarity with the practice renders her vulnerable to the artist's will and leads to a complete disconnection both with herself and with her child.

Conclusion

Although I maintain that Hardy reveals the obstacles that limit, challenge, or deny the possibility for female sexual expression in both middle- and lower-class Victorian societies,

Hardy's examinations of art and female sexuality in "The Fiddler of the Reels" and "An Imaginative Woman" emphasize lower-class women's distinct disadvantage. Because Victorian society expected middle-class women to produce art, these women could engage artistic outlets as active agents. Consequently, middle-class women such as Ella Marchmill could use poetry to release frustrated sexual feelings or to experience sensual pleasure. Further, Ella's immersion in Trewe's poetry reveals the power of female sexuality; mediated by her connection to art, Ella successfully expresses her desire, obtains satisfaction, and even adopts the position of "artist" when she projects Trewe's image onto her child's genetic makeup (Ginsburg 284). Alternatively, Car'line's lower-class status denies her the means to practice art as an empowered subject; her resulting inability to manage her desires and resist Wat's music leaves Car'line vulnerable to Wat's will. In fact, Car'line experiences a tortuous subjection to art which catalyzes her complete disconnection with herself and the loss of her only child. In contrast to Ella's use of art, Wat uses music as a tool *against* Car'line—a fact that Hardy highlights by ascribing Wat a "gimlet-gaze" (301).

Hardy thus intentionally uses charged language and symbolic plot points to explore the relationship between art, female sexuality, and class status. Given Hardy's interests in poetry, music, and class issues—in conjunction with his noted compassion for women and their unique obstacles—I argue that my analysis of these topics in his short stories is particularly relevant. By creating contrasting images of female sexuality and artistic expression in "The Fiddler of the Reels" and "An Imaginative Woman," Hardy seeks to underline lower-class women's distinct disadvantage in matters of art and sexual expression during the Victorian period.

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