

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

The Woodlanders

THOMAS HARDY



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

THE WOODLANDERS

Thomas Hardy

With Introduction and Notes by

PHILLIP MALLET

University of San Francisco

江苏工业学院图书馆

藏书章



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

In loving memory of
Michael Trayler
the founder of Wordsworth Editions

2

Readers who are interested in other titles from
Wordsworth Editions are invited to visit our website at
www.wordsworth-editions.com

For our latest list and a full mail-order service, contact
Bibliophile Books, 5 Thomas Road, London E14 7BN
TEL: +44 (0)20 7515 9222 FAX: +44 (0)20 7538 4115
E-MAIL: orders@bibliophilebooks.com

This edition published 1996 by Wordsworth Editions Limited
8B East Street, Ware, Hertfordshire SG12 9HJ
Introduction and Notes added 2004

ISBN 10: 1 85326 293 5
ISBN 13: 978 1 85326 293 7

Text © Wordsworth Editions Limited 1996
Introduction and Notes © Phillip Mallett 2004

Wordsworth® is a registered trademark of
Wordsworth Editions Limited

All rights reserved. This publication may not be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or
transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic,
mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise,
without the prior permission of the publishers.

Typeset in Great Britain by Antony Gray
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

THE WOODLANDERS

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

Editorial Adviser

KEITH CARABINE

Rutberford College

The University of Kent at Canterbury

INTRODUCTION

The writer of an introductory essay, conscious of the need to be brief, may well be tempted to offer an authoritative account of the text in question. In the case of *The Woodlanders*, this is a temptation best avoided. In summary, it might seem to be the quintessential Hardy novel. Its subject, described in the Preface as 'the question of matrimonial divergence', takes us into the familiar fraught territory of Hardy's fiction: love and sexuality, the clash of private feeling and public institutions, and the ever-present sense of class and social boundaries. The two main strands of the plot, one exploring the dilemma of Grace Melbury as she finds herself loved by two men, the other tracing the impact of two metropolitan outsiders, Edred Fitzpiers and Felice Charmond, on the small rural community of Little Hintock, have an obvious affinity with the plots of other Hardy novels, from *Under the Greenwood Tree* fifteen years earlier, to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* four years later. As in those novels, and as in *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) and

The Return of the Native (1878), the human action takes place amidst the intensely realised processes of the natural world, a world which is clearly something more than 'setting' or 'background'. None the less, readers of *The Woodlanders* have often struggled to find their bearings. To some Grace Melbury has seemed charming, every inch a heroine; others have found her insipid. Giles's final act of self-sacrifice has been seen as an heroic assertion of his love for Grace, and as an absurd surrender to the silliest of social conventions. The novel itself has been variously described as a tragedy, a pastoral, an elegy and a social comedy, or as a combination of some or all of these, together with a sprinkling of farce and melodrama.

Hardy, characteristically, provided few clues as to how we should see the novel, and those he did offer point in different directions. When he came to revise his work for the Wessex Edition of 1912, he wrote that he liked *The Woodlanders*, 'as a story, the best of all', partly because he was fond of the location, partly because it seemed 'quaint and fresh'.¹ But at the time of its publication, in 1887, he evidently thought of it as a radical and ambitious piece of work, comparing the situations in the novel to those explored in Ibsen's controversial 'problem plays' of the 1880s, and complaining that the conventions of the age had prevented him from emphasising that at the end of the novel Grace is 'doomed to an unhappy life with an inconstant husband' (Millgate, pp. 231-2). A quaint story of woodland life, or a drama about contemporary sexual mores? The burden of interpretation is thrown back on to the reader.

Perhaps in response to the range of interpretations it has received, *The Woodlanders* is often described as a transitional work. It was Hardy's eleventh novel, coming between *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), but the plot had first been conceived in the mid-1870s, and readers familiar with Hardy's fiction will easily find echoes of earlier novels and anticipations of later ones. Giles Winterborne, attuned to the rhythms of the natural world and the skills of his trade but clumsy and uncertain with the woman he loves, recalls Gabriel Oak in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, while Grace's decision to marry Fitzpiers rather than Giles – as a contemporary reviewer put it, the man of her fancy rather than the man of her heart – echoes Bathsheba's choice of Sergeant Troy over Oak. Like Fancy Day in *Under the Greenwood Tree*, Grace finds herself 'the social hope of the family' (p. 73); much as her father loves her, he also counts her among his 'investment transactions' and expects her to yield a good return by

¹ Millgate, p. 520; emphases in the original. For full details of this and other references, turn to the Bibliography at the end of this Introduction.

marrying into a higher position in society (p. 75). But if her predicament is one that Hardy had explored in earlier novels, there are also moments when she foreshadows the later and more complex character of Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure* (1895). Both can be said to combine 'modern nerves with primitive feelings' (p. 246), an inner division which leads them to vacillate between conventional views of propriety and an impulse, albeit timid and short-lived, to express their sexual feelings. Both have a 'subtly compounded nature' (p. 266), which makes them a mystery to themselves as well as to the men who love them – and at times to the narrator, who admits at the outset that Grace is 'a conjectural creature' whose 'true quality' can only be 'approximated' (p. 33). And both she and Sue suffer moments of existential panic which leave them quivering with terror.

The character of Grace is not the only element of *The Woodlanders* which can be seen as transitional. Fitzpiers can be seen both as a reworking of Hardy's earlier portraits of the glamorous seducer and as a preliminary sketch of Jocelyn Pierston in *The Well-Beloved* (1892, revised 1897), another 'subtlist in emotions' (p. 279), and similarly preoccupied with the subjectivity of love. The figure of George Melbury hints at a more significant development. At times he suggests Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, redrawn to a simpler pattern: self-willed, burdened by guilt and baffled by the daughter he loves, but without Henchard's terrifying capacity for excess. But in describing Melbury's state of mind at the prospect of marriage between Grace and Fitzpiers, Hardy begins to push at the limits of the Victorian novel:

Could the real have been beheld instead of the corporeal merely, the corner of the room in which he sat would have been filled with a form typical of anxious suspense, large-eyed, tight-lipped, awaiting the issue. [p. 136]

The ambition to get beyond the corporeal to the real, to the typical rather than the literal, was eventually to lead Hardy away from prose fiction towards his epic-drama, *The Dynasts*, written in the first decade of the twentieth century.

But if *The Woodlanders* returns to the themes which obsessed Hardy's imagination, it also stands apart from the other late novels. In the opening chapter the narrator claims that 'dramas of a grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean' may be enacted even in a place as small and isolated as Little Hintock. This claim is confidently borne out by *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, where Henchard, like Sophocles' Oedipus, is brought down in the moment of his success by the revelation of a crime committed long ago. The narrative material of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*,

the story of a country girl who kills her seducer, is remote from that of classical tragedy, but the novel ends with a reference to Aeschylus, and throughout reveals the instinct which for D. H. Lawrence most clearly linked Hardy with the great tragic writers: the bringing together of the social and the mythic, 'setting a smaller system of morality . . . within the vast, uncomprehended and incomprehensible morality of nature or of life itself' (p. 31). Yet it is difficult to see *The Woodlanders* as a tragedy. If it is, the tragic hero is presumably Giles, but for much of the time he is in effect off-stage. Structurally, Grace is at the centre of the novel, as the one figure who belongs to both the rural and the wider world; morally, the central figure is perhaps Marty South, with whom the novel begins and ends. The narrative perspective moves from one character to another: from Barber Percomb to Marty South, thence to Melbury, then in turn to Giles, Grace and Fitzpiers, then back to Giles, and so on. Our interest as readers is diffused more or less equally over a number of characters, to all of whom the narrator offers a degree of sympathy. No single figure demands the intensity of engagement both narrator and reader give to Henchard and Tess.

There are other reasons to question whether the novel can be regarded as a tragedy. Tragedy suggests life carried on with intensity, at the extremest point of human passion. Michael Irwin writes of Hardy's tragic heroes and heroines that they die 'of living out their personalities to the full'. Even as they 'burn themselves out, so they proclaim themselves' (p. 161). This is well said, but there is no character in *The Woodlanders* who lives and dies on these terms. It might be argued that Giles dies for love, but it is the more prosaic combination of the after-effects of typhoid and an exaggerated sense of propriety which kills him; as Robert Langbaum has argued, his death scene is marked by a 'perverse eroticism whereby sickness and love-death substitute for consummation' (p. 122). Giles is mourned by both Grace and Marty, but they mourn for the loss of what was never offered: 'As no anticipation of gratified affection had been in existence while he was with them, there was none to be disappointed now that he had gone' (p. 274). The absence of protest from his life is underscored by the irrelevance of protest after his death. Appropriately, in this novel of thwarted actions and depleted energies, Giles's surname, Winterborne, denotes a stream which flows in the winter but dries up in the summer.

Nor does the way love is represented in the novel support a reading of it as a tragedy. The plot is organised around a series of overlapping triangles: Marty-Giles-Grace; Giles-Grace-Fitzpiers; Grace-Fitzpiers-Mrs Charmond, together with those formed by Fitzpiers, Mrs Charmond and the unnamed lover from Carolina, and by Fitzpiers, Suke

Damson and Timothy Tangs – and, in the background, yet another, formed by Melbury, Grace's mother and Giles's father. Inevitably, these reflect on each other, the more so as there are a number of scenes in which two members of the triangle discuss the absent third: Fitzpiers discourses to Giles about the possibility of loving Grace, Felice Charmond reveals the depth of her passion for Fitzpiers to Grace while they are huddled together for warmth in the wood, Marty and Grace meet every week to put flowers on Giles's grave. The narrator draws the reader's attention to other parallels, most notably between Felice Charmond's solicitude for the injured Fitzpiers and Grace's for the dying Giles. These parallels reach their climax on the night of Fitzpiers's injury, when Grace admits Felice and Suke into his room with the words, 'Wives all, let's enter together!' (p. 215). Love, in this novel, is of many kinds, including the silent fidelity of Marty South as well as the sexual desire felt by Suke Damson, the conscientious loyalty of Giles as well as the helpless infatuation of Felice Charmond; but in each case it is not so much chosen as endured, and in each case the degree of nobility it brings to those who feel it is better measured by their pain than by their joy. In the tragedies of love the protagonists – Troilus and Criseyde, Antony and Cleopatra, even Tess Durbeyfield – are singled out from those around them by their capacity to love greatly, and to suffer greatly; in *The Woodlanders* this becomes the common experience. No fewer than eight characters fall in love, and have their hopes disappointed.

In this respect, the mood of the novel is nearer to comedy than tragedy. Tragedy celebrates what makes the individual unique, and however painful the events we witness, it flatters our vanity in doing so; better, at least in our imaginations, to live and die passionately, like Romeo and Juliet, than to live happily but predictably ever after. Comedy reminds us of what we have in common, that we are more likely to settle for the boy or girl next door than to risk all for love, and is in consequence less flattering, and often brings with it an undertone of melancholy. So it is in *The Woodlanders*, where the reader is less likely to be struck with awe at the fate of star-crossed lovers than to murmur, like Puck in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 'Lord, what fools these mortals be.'

Puck, however, is not mortal, and his perspective is insufficient. When Grace admits her rivals into her husband's bedroom, and watches as they stand gazing at his night-shirt lying on the pillow, she does not feel anger, or contempt, but 'tenderness . . . like a dew' (p. 215). Her response might be a model for ours as we read the novel. In *The Return of the Native*, Hardy writes of Eustacia, who is falling in love with a man to whom she has never spoken, that the 'fantastic nature of her passion, which lowered

her as an intellect, raised her as a soul'.² She falls in love because the alternative is not to be in love. This may not be rational, but it is deeply human, and she has Hardy's sympathy. There is a poignant moment in *The Woodlanders* when Felice lies awake at night, listening to 'the scrape of snails creeping up the window glass; it was so sad!' (p. 164). Her love for Fitzpiers redeems her from this loneliness. Similarly, it is 'a strange access of sadness' (p. 159) that drives him to love her. Neither wishes the affair, or attempts to justify it, but neither can face the alternative, the lassitude of a life without passionate love.

It is tempting here to draw a distinction, whether in psychological or in moral terms, between these world-weary outsiders, desperate for stimulus, and the honest folk of Little Hintock, but the novel does not allow us to do so. Fitzpiers goes to Felice against his will, as is suggested by the sleep-riding episode in Chapter 29, but this occurs just a few pages after Giles has reached out to the flower on Grace's bosom 'with the abstraction of a somnambulist' (p. 172). That both he and Grace recognise this as an echo of a gesture Fitzpiers had made to Mrs Charmond further associates the two men: the rural Giles and the metropolitan Fitzpiers are both in love with women denied them by the boundaries of marriage and social status. Fitzpiers explains that his isolated life as a doctor in a country village leaves him 'charged with emotive fluid', with no means to disperse it (p. 97). Mrs Charmond makes the same point when she says that Little Hintock 'has the curious effect of bottling up the emotions till one can no longer hold them' (p. 158). But Grace, too, on her first visit to Mrs Charmond, is 'a vessel of emotion, going to empty itself on she knew not what' (p. 49). For all three, love is, as Fitzpiers says to Giles, 'a subjective thing', an inner feeling projected on to another person. The real nature of the other – in Giles's ironic summary of Fitzpiers's philosophical musings, the identity of 'the tree your rainbow falls on' (p. 98) – is hardly relevant.

Marty's love for Giles, like his for Grace, is hardly better founded. Giles is a good man, and Marty's love for him is understandable, but they never speak of love (p. 274), and Giles is unaware of her feelings. Their tree-planting in Chapter 8 generates a moment of sexual symbolism: Winterborne's fingers work with 'a gentle conjuror's touch', in 'a sort of caress'; Marty 'erect[s] one of the young pines into its hole', to the sound of a 'soft musical breathing' (pp. 54–5). The passage reads strangely because it highlights not the presence but the absence of any suggestion of sexual intimacy and arousal between them, either now or later. Giles does have some hope that his love for Grace might be

returned, but time and again the novel reveals their lack of mutual understanding. Grace does not recognise the apple-trees Giles points out to her (p. 36); he has never heard of the authors she mentions to him after her visit to Mrs Charmond (p. 57). Their most intimate physical moments are the kiss Giles takes when he knows, as she does not, that she will be unable to divorce Fitzpiers, and the kisses she gives him on his deathbed; her most loving words are spoken as he lies delirious in his shelter, out of hearing. Only in the brief interval between Fitzpiers's departure and the news that the divorce application has failed, do we see them coming to recognise how each has changed, and beginning to build a love based on a knowledge of each other. Hardy gives some half-dozen pages to this in Chapter 38; two pages into Chapter 39 comes the letter that closes off the possibilities they have just begun to explore. For most of the novel Giles loves Grace simply because he has always done so.

The account given of love in *The Woodlanders* is atypical of Hardy's work only in that there is less emphasis here on its possible joyousness. Grace feels an 'indescribable thrill' at the time of her first meeting with Fitzpiers, when she thinks she sees him looking at her in the mirror, which leaves her 'as if spellbound' (p. 106). Something like this happens to most of Hardy's lovers, quickening the pulse and awaking the senses, so that they feel more fully alive. But it is often ambiguous, as it is for Grace. Fitzpiers acts on her 'like a dram' (p. 132), and makes her feel intoxicated (p. 136); but she also feels 'utterly mastered' (p. 123), 'indefinably depressed' (p. 138), and coerced into 'passive concurrence' with his wishes (p. 142). She dreams of being irradiated by love, 'flushed by the purple light and bloom of her own passion' (p. 144), but the nearest she comes to this is not on her wedding day, as she had expected, but after her visit to Mrs Charmond, when her face shines with 'a species of exaltation' (p. 56). The sense of love as a transformative experience, about which Hardy writes again and again, in the poems as well as the novels, is conspicuously absent from *The Woodlanders*. Melbury remarks to Giles how in the woodlands 'the whitey brown creeps out of the earth over us' (p. 28); it certainly creeps out over the experience of love.

The question naturally arises why the novel should seem so dispirited. One reply might be in biographical terms. The notebook entries from this period show that Hardy was suffering from depression:

Nov. 17th-19th [1885] In a fit of depression, as if enveloped in a leaden cloud. Have gone back to my original plot for 'The Woodlanders' after all. Am working from half-past ten a.m. to twelve p.m., to get my mind made up on the details.

Nov. 21st-22nd Sick headache. Tragedy. It may be put thus in brief: a tragedy exhibits a state of things in the life of an individual which unavoidably causes some natural aim or desire of his to end in a catastrophe when carried out. [Millgate, p. 182]

But an explanation on these lines will not take us any deeper into the novel itself. A cryptic note made a month later is more helpful: '*Dec. 21st* The Hypocrisy of things. Nature is an arch-dissembler.' This can be taken with a note made in January 1887, less than a month before *The Woodlanders* was completed:

... I feel that Nature is played out as a Beauty, but not as a Mystery. I don't want to see landscapes, i.e., scenic paintings of them ... I want to see the deeper reality underlying the scenic ... [Millgate, p. 192]

This is another version of Hardy's insistence that the artist should attend to the real rather than the corporeal. What is the 'deeper reality' of the natural world in *The Woodlanders*?

The readers of *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* had thought of Hardy as a pastoral novelist, describing a timeless rural existence where the wearied urban reader could rest from the fever and fret of modern life. *The Woodlanders* debunks this idea of pastoral. In Chapter 19, Fitzpiers watches the labourers stripping bark from the trees, and thinks of 'sacrificing all practical aims to live in calm contentment here' (p. 116). This is the affectation of a bored man, who would rather redefine his idleness as contentment than admit he lacks the energy to pursue his practical aims. But the scene he has been observing is less calm than he assumes. The barking is described as a 'flaying process', and likened to the shaving of 'the executioner's victim' in readiness for the guillotine; the barkers attack the main body of the tree 'like locusts', while Marty is 'encaged' by the branches as she works with her ripping tool. The trees look 'as if ashamed' of their nudity before the axeman finishes them off; the boughs Marty works on are 'quivering', as if in pain (p. 113). The imagery is of torture and imprisonment, not of pastoral harmony, while the fact that Marty is assigned her task because her labour costs less than that of the men reminds us that this is a working world, not a place of rest.

The pastoral is mocked again in Chapter 28, where Grace first watches her husband disappear into the landscape, on his way to Felice Charmond, and then sees Giles emerge from it, looking and smelling 'like Autumn's very brother', sunburnt to the colour of wheat, his clothes dyed with fruit-stains and his hands 'clammy with the sweet juice of apples' (p. 171). The natural imagery is extended into Grace's emotional

life, as her heart rises from its sadness 'like a released bough' (p. 172). But her conclusion, that 'Nature was bountiful' in bringing her Giles instead of Fitzpiers, is a merely temporary revulsion against the world into which she has married. Giles is as deeply bound as she is by notions of propriety, and her sudden longing to throw off 'the veneer of artificiality' (p. 172) conflicts with other images used of her education. The timber-dealers have walking-sticks twisted into corkscrew shapes, 'brought to that pattern by the slow torture of an encircling woodbine during their growth, as the Chinese have been said to mould human beings into grotesque toys by continued compression in infancy' (p. 45). Grace is such a toy: 'tilled' into a more fashionable view of the world (p. 92), moulded with new 'implanted tastes' (p. 69), so that 'cultivation' is 'advanced in the soil of [her] mind' (p. 37). The choice of images undermines the distinction between 'nature' and 'culture'. However she might wish it, Grace cannot separate the genuine and the artificial in her personality, to protect the one and eliminate the other.

Pastoral is an artificial form, which by playing with the idea of crossing the boundary between the sophisticated and the natural in fact asserts its permanence and inevitability. *The Woodlanders* is an anti-pastoral, which insists (to borrow the title of an essay by Thomas Huxley, the champion of Darwinian theory) on 'Man's Place in Nature'. Even a casual reader of the novel must be impressed by the number of times Hardy links the natural and the human world. The noises made by trees 'rubbing each other into wounds' are 'vocalised sorrows' (p. 14); the 'bleared white visage of a sunless winter day' emerges 'like a dead-born child' (p. 20); the 'dangling arms' of the ivy are 'groping in vain for some support' (p. 22); the colour of the earth 'creeps' out over those who live in the wood (p. 28); the mossed roots of trees resemble 'hands wearing green gloves' (p. 44); night hawks make an 'uncanny music' (p. 119); Fitzpiers's motives in deciding not to take up a practice in Budmouth are 'shapeless as the fiery scenery about the western sky' (p. 163); trees are wrinkled 'like an old crone's face' (p. 164); the woods break out into 'a cold sweat' (p. 187); the look on Mrs Charmond's face is like a 'lightning gleam' revealing that her heart is 'overflowing' (p. 197); the smooth surfaces of plants are like 'weak, lidless eyes' (p. 247); a tree bangs against a roof, 'in the manner of a gigantic hand smiting the mouth of an adversary, to be followed by a trickle of rain, as blood from the wound' (p. 255); the stumps of rotting trees rise from the moss 'like black teeth from green gums' (p. 258).

Two points emerge from this small but not unrepresentative sample. The first is the obvious one, that there is a constant traffic in our imaginations between the natural and the human worlds; we perceive each in terms of the other. Trees sigh; so does the breeze, so do the

characters. The second is more difficult. Taken together, the passages also suggest that for all our kinship with it, we are not entirely at home in the natural world. It is disquieting to find the winter sun associated with a stillborn child, or the glossy surface of leaves with lidless eyes; and yet the likenesses force themselves upon our attention. Consider a more elaborate example:

On older trees still than these huge lobes of fungi grew like lungs. Here, as everywhere, the Unfulfilled Intention, which makes life what it is, was as obvious as it could be among the depraved crowds of a city slum. The leaf was deformed, the curve was crippled, the taper was interrupted; the lichen ate the vigour of the stalk, and the ivy slowly strangled to death the promising sapling. [p. 44]

'Here, *as everywhere*': the authorial voice insists not just that fungi resemble lungs, but on the conclusion we are to draw. Everything we see is evidence of a universal falling short; of 'the contrast of what is with what might be' (p. 5). Marty South's life, for example, might have been other than it is; instead of handling a heavy tool, her fingers might have 'guided the pencil or swept the string' (p. 10), had not 'a cast of the die of destiny' determined against her (p. 9).

Despite the reference to 'destiny', the governing force in the novel is Darwinian. Darwin's vision of a world in which population constantly tends to outstrip resources, leading to an endless universal struggle to survive, is not necessarily a reason to despair. In other novels Hardy suggests that the abundance of nature has both a positive and a negative aspect. It is true that the variety of competing populations means that not everything will survive, but some will, as the niche left vacant by one species or individual will be filled by another. But in *The Woodlanders* the emphasis falls almost entirely on the pain of struggle. Hardy had moved into a new home, Max Gate, just before beginning work on the novel. As the trees he had planted grew higher, blocking out the light, he found himself unable to have them cut back, because he could not endure the thought of their being wounded. We might apply to Hardy his own comment on George Melbury, who keeps the imprint of his daughter's foot protected beneath a tile, so that he can gaze at it from time to time: 'Melbury perhaps was an unlucky man . . . Nature does not carry on her government with a view to such feelings' (p. 18).

It was Herbert Spencer who thrust the phrase 'survival of the fittest' into evolutionary debate. Hardy thought well of Spencer, but did not share his optimism. He recognised that the survival of the fittest did not mean that the best would come through, only that those who survived were those who fitted best into their environment. In *The Woodlanders*

each person aspires to someone a little higher in the social scale: Marty to Giles, Giles to Grace, Grace to Fitzpiers, Fitzpiers to Mrs Charmond. We can hardly avoid noticing that if we had to erect a moral scale, it would run in the opposite direction. It is true that Marty's letter helps bring about Mrs Charmond's death, but in most respects the stronger preys upon the weaker in this line. Mrs Charmond takes Marty's hair, her 'one bright gift of Time' (p. 10), as well as Giles's cottage and Grace's husband. Fitzpiers abandons his attempt to buy Grammer's brain, but he acquires that of John South and, as Grammer foretells, he carries home Grace's 'living carcase' instead of her own 'skellinton' (p. 121). Grace takes Giles's hut, saving her reputation at the cost of his life. Even Giles exploits Marty's labour, forgetting that she is standing chilled to the bone while he is kept warm by his work.

Hardy's poem 'In a Wood', published with a note referring the reader to *The Woodlanders*, is an account of Nature as 'arch-dissembler'. The speaker, 'spirit-lame, / City-opprest', enters the wood in search of 'a soft release / From men's unrest', only to find that the trees are 'akin' to humanity, 'Combatants all!' in a blind battle for survival:

Since, then, no grace I find
 Taught me of trees,
 Turn I back to my kind,
 Worthy as these.
 There at least smiles abound,
 There discourse trills around,
 There, now and then, are found
 Life-loyalties.

Nature in *The Woodlanders* is, precisely, grace-less, as much a site of struggle as the human world. In the novel, unlike the poem, it is hardly true that among men and women 'smiles abound', nor that loyalties are kept up for life. But Hardy writes more in sorrow than anger. There are no villains; those who harm others take no pleasure in doing so, and are themselves often sad or in pain. There is hardly more real enmity between the characters than there is between Giles and the rabbits who eat his winter-greens, so that each night he has to set snares for them (p. 58). None the less, the rabbits are trapped and die, and the men and women suffer.

This account has emphasised the melancholy aspects of *The Woodlanders*. In a longer essay one might redress the balance by making two points in particular. There is first its humour, manifest locally in a quirkiness of speech, as when Grammer Oliver wishes to cancel the sale of her brain to

Fitzpiers and wheedles Grace into acting as her emissary, to help 'save a poor old woman's skellington from a heathen's chopper' (p. 101), or on a broader scale in scenes of near farce, such as the party Giles lays on in an attempt to impress Grace. In the event everything that can go wrong does so: the chief guests have to help prepare the supper, while Grace is splashed in the eye as Creedle tips out the food, has her dress stained with the oil used to shine the chairs and finds a slug on her plate – though, as Creedle optimistically notes, it is at least 'well boiled' (p. 67). Towards the end of the novel, Hardy highlights the absurdity of the melodrama about the mantrap with Grace's exclamation to Fitzpiers: 'Oh, Edred, there has been an Eye watching over us tonight, and we should be thankful indeed!' (p. 296) – to which the reader might respond that the eye in question belongs to the jealous Timothy Tangs, and not, as Grace's capital letter suggests, to the Deity. There is a similar incongruity between occasion and response a few pages later, when after an anxious search for his daughter Melbury finds her alive and well in the hotel, and greets her with the words, 'I thought you went out to get parsley!' (p. 300). That this is comically inappropriate does not, however, wholly obscure the gulf that has opened up between the ageing Melbury and the daughter he dotes on, nor the pain this brings him. In a notebook entry made a year after the novel was completed, Hardy wrote: 'If you look beneath the surface of any farce you see a tragedy; and, on the contrary, if you blind yourself to the deeper issues of a tragedy you see a farce' (Millgate, p. 224). *The Woodlanders* keeps the reader aware of the close proximity of the two.

The other point one might make to counter the view that the novel is one-sidedly melancholy is suggested by a remark made in an interview by Philip Larkin, an admirer of Hardy, that 'the most negative poem in the world is a very positive thing to have done' (p. 8). We can extend the thought to the writing of *The Woodlanders*. Hardy was fascinated not just by memory, but by memorials; his work returns constantly to the processes which erode, abrade, deform human beings, their artefacts and the natural world around them, but also to the acts by which we hold on to or attempt to restore the past. *The Woodlanders* can be seen as such an act. It begins and ends in darkness, as a type or image of the brevity of our lives. What is seen through the darkness is often sad, or difficult; but it is life, and it has no less reality than the surrounding gloom. The novel as a whole can be seen as the gradual amplification of the last sentences of the first chapter:

The . . . door, which opened immediately into the living-room, stood ajar, so that a riband of light fell through the opening into the dark

atmosphere without. Every now and then a moth, decrepit from the late season, would flit for a moment across the outcoming rays and disappear again into the night. [p. 8]

The first sentence of the novel imagines a 'rambler, who for old association's sake,' sets out to 'trace' a now forsaken but formerly much-travelled coach-road in the south of England. Like Barber Percomb, the solitary figure in the scene, the reader is asked to step off the road into the plantation beside it, as Hardy traces – recalls, or creates – the story hidden in the woods. Like Percomb, we gradually draw close to the action, beginning as he does by gazing into a room at a girl 'seated on a willow chair, and busily working by the light of the fire' (p. 9). As the details accumulate and the plot gets under way – as the young woman gazes at her blistered palm, and the barber outside toys with his scissors – we become absorbed in what we take as the 'reality' of the story, and in our different ways are moved by what we seem to see.

Then, in the closing chapters, we begin to withdraw. Melbury leaves Grace with Fitzpiers, shut away from him as from us in the Earl of Wessex hotel, and he and his men return to Little Hintock. As they do so, they exchange stories, suggested to them by their resemblance to the one we and they have just heard brought to a conclusion, however provisional. 'I know'd a man and wife . . . ' begins Farmer Cawtree; 'I knowed a woman . . . ' comes in the bark-ripper, trumping Cawtree's tale. As they make their way home, we catch a last glimpse of the young woman seen at work by the fire. We now know her name, and her history; we know why 'the contours of womanhood' will never be developed in her, why she stands in the moonlight with a 'little basket of flowers in her clasped hands', and whose grave she is preparing to visit (p. 304). In later years, we might imagine, some other woodlander will begin, 'I knowed a woman . . . ' and tell the story of Marty South, memorialising her in 'the outcoming rays' of his narrative, until his tale is completed and she too 'disappear[s] again into the night'.

PHILLIP MALLETT
University of St Andrews