ON NIGHT’S STRANGE PERSONALITY: UNDERSTANDING THE MATERIAL AGENCIES OF THOMAS HARDY’S LITERARY ECOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates how human and nonhuman literary forms in the novels of Thomas Hardy become intermeshed and interpenetrated. In the first chapter, I argue that the narrative entanglement generated through Hardy’s writings resists current scholarly analyses that interpret his novels as deterministic and instead indicates the potential for seemingly-tragic characters to regenerate and claim alternate, possible futures. In order to break down this construction, I utilize the scholarship of Ursula Heise and Elizabeth Grosz, who revitalize Darwin’s *Origin of Species* – often interpreted to be the source of Hardy’s tragic worldview – and view Darwinian evolution as an open and constantly generative system of production, rather than a closed system with an anthropocentric telos. The second chapter of the thesis locates moments during which Hardy experiments with the interpenetration of human and nonhuman forms within the form of the novel. I demonstrate that this experiment highlights how anthropocentricism remains inherent to the conventions of the Victorian novel. The third, and final, chapter investigates the consequences of the apparent trans-corporeal moments that permeate Hardy’s texts, specifically that Hardy’s characters can no longer be understood to exist as unified subjects and are instead assemblages of human and nonhuman actants. Above all, this thesis works to improve upon previous ecocritical scholarship in order to better understand how prose can operate to dismantle anthropocentric perspectives within literature and literary criticism.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter One: Discovering the Possibilities of Thomas Hardy ............................................................... 7

Chapter Two: Investigating Thomas Hardy’s Literary Experiment ....................................................... 26

Chapter Three: Understanding Thomas Hardy’s Character as Assemblage....................................... 44

Conclusion ................................................................................................................................................ 64

Works Cited ............................................................................................................................................. 65
Introduction

The planet Earth has entered in a new age, a human age. Referred to by environmental theorists as the Anthropocene, our current epoch is defined by the destructive dominance of the human race. A few hundred years ago – an insignificant amount of time when compared to the age of the Earth – humanity mechanized industry and agriculture, leading to a population boom. Hundreds of thousands of chimney stacks – on ships, factories and homes – filled the atmosphere with particles of burnt carbon, blocking cities from the Sun. Now, billions of bodies and trillions of tons of synthetic trash populate the planet’s crust or float on top of its oceans. These are the unintended consequences of the human conquest of the natural elements. We have heating and air conditioning. We can predict the pathways of killer storms. We can trudge through mountains of snow and find fresh apples (shipped from New Zealand) in our grocery stores. One could make the mistake of thinking that the world was made for those humans – perhaps even thinking that humans have made the world for themselves.

Yet, this dominance rests on a shaky foundation. Hundreds of species have gone and will go extinct during the Anthropocene, and that list might include the one for which the epoch was named. Human pollution causes the temperature of the oceans to rise which causes the sea levels to rise, more catastrophic storms to germinate – putting populations living on continental coasts at risk (Nicholls and Cazenave 1518). These atmospheric changes will also disrupt centuries-old patterns of precipitation, redistributing atmospheric moisture in a way that will make dry areas of the planet even dryer and wet areas even wetter. Densely populated areas will experience unprecedented droughts that will disrupt agriculture, lead to famine and disastrous social upheaval (Parry et. al. 66).¹ It is during the Anthropocene – the apparent height of humanity’s

¹ The first data point in this potential trend may already exist. The humanitarian crisis and civil conflict currently ongoing in Syria was preceded, if not necessarily precipitated by, years of drought and inadequate crop yields. Calls
ecological domination – that human beings most need to understand the limitations of their own existence, most need to investigate the nonhuman and synthetic forces that threaten their existence.

In the face of extinction, human scholars have felt a growing sense of responsibility for their nonhuman environment. Dominic Head, in his essay “The (im)possibility of ecocriticism,” outlines some central tenets for ecologically-focused literature and literary criticism. Such literary and critical movements ought to exist, Head writes, “as a joint attempt to give voice to the nonhuman subject…[and to] represent radical challenge to existing practices, especially in the fields of novel production and reception” (34). Head’s mission has valuable and pressing material concerns, related to the often-wasteful production of physical books, but he also articulates the need to draw critical attention to nonhuman actants that exist within the texts themselves. Investigating the appearance of the nonhuman in literature allows humans to realize “that human history is implicated in natural history” (37). Human existence was preceded by millions of years of nonhuman existence. That nonhuman existence, despite the best efforts of humanity, thrive to this day. The implication of human existence within a larger natural or geologic existence demonstrates that, even within an epoch characterized by anthropomorphic domination, there are facets of the human experience that exist beyond the control of the human.

The early decades of Hardy scholarship failed to comprehend the nonhuman as it appears in Hardy’s novels, not realizing how Hardy’s literature can be seen to be implicated within a nonhuman history. Many of the scholars whose efforts resulted in Hardy becoming regarded as a canonical Victorian writer – including George Levine and Michael Milgate – glossed over the nonhuman elements of the novels. The natural world was understood to be an object – oftentimes
an object of interest – but only something that existed as a setting for the story, a backdrop in
front of which the actions of the characters would take place. These critics, to borrow from
Bruno Latour’s “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene,” insisted upon viewing the natural
and nonhuman world of Thomas Hardy’s literature as mere and deanimated stuff. However, such
nonhuman influences are abundant within the novels of Thomas Hardy, one of the many reasons
that make Hardy is a useful ecocritical study. His stories capture a moment of the nineteenth
century that resembles the Neolithic – a time during which the development and progression of
technological innovation began to proceed at an astronomical rate and began to quickly displace
outmoded tools and customs. In *Return of the Native*, Egdon Heath is beginning to be
overwhelmed by hedgerows that encourage the private development of property at the expense
of the villagers’ communal tradition. Agricultural machines begin to dominate labor. A machine
instigates conflict between Michael Henchard and Donald Farfrae in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*,
and another arrives to help farm workers till the chalky soil of the Dover cliffs in *Tess of the
D’Urbervilles*. Exactly at the moment of these anthropocentric incursions – perhaps even in the
face of them – Hardy seems to stress the importance of the nonhuman realm.

The work done by Gillian Beer, in *Darwin’s Plots*, provides a better understanding of the
role of nature within Victorian literature generally and the novels of Thomas Hardy specifically.
Her book examines the impact that Charles Darwin’s writing had on Victorian literature’s
presentation of social, political and moral conflict. Her chapter on Thomas Hardy importantly
relates the author’s literary production to his interest in and advocacy for Darwin’s scientific
theories, which inspires an understanding of the nonhuman elements that appear within his
novels as being more interactive. The nonhuman world is no longer relegated to the background
but instead can be seen to affect the experiences of Hardy’s human characters. However, even
Beer’s argument has its limitations, specifically that within it nonhuman entities come to occupy a position that is other than the human. From this othered position, the nonhuman is understood to be an obstacle characters face as the plot of the novels unfold. The presentation of nonhuman entities as a necessarily othered and oppositional force to human characters in Hardy’s novels informs a perspective of Thomas Hardy that dominates critical discussions of his work: that his writing is crucially informed by his own pessimism. Even some scholarship that does not directly address or involve a discussion of the nonhuman in Hardy appears to work from the assumption that Hardy’s novels involve pessimistic portrayals of the human condition.

This assumption appears to rest on a solid foundation because Hardy’s fiction stands out due to its constant insistence on the precarity of the human position. His novels are noted for their tragic, death-filled endings but are replete with constant reminders of how threatened human characters are by and how susceptible they are to the influence of nonhuman forms. Readers are reminded of the precarious positions his characters occupy on each page, not just with the introduction of a cataclysmic event at the story’s conclusion. The novels that this thesis will focus on are Return of the Native, The Woodlanders and Tess of the D’Urbervilles, each of which describes a natural environment that is replete with nonhuman actants. Return focuses on the life of Clym Yeobright. Clym leaves Paris to come back to his childhood home in Egdon Heath, which itself interferes with the lives and motivations of the story’s characters. His plans to open a schoolhouse for the villagers are knocked off track when Clym marries Eustacia Vye against his mother’s wishes. Woodlanders provides a similar story of return. Grace Melbury reenters the woodland community of Little Hintock after years of boarding school. Her father, a wealthy timber merchant, reneges on his promise to marry Grace to Giles Winterborne, a cider-maker and an exemplar of how nonhuman forces infiltrate human characters within Hardy’s
novels. *Tess* focuses on the journey of its titular character, a country-girl whose doomed fate appears to be predetermined. All three of the stories address issues of class, provincialism and education – themes that are further complicated by their setting in an environment that affects the moods and emotions of characters, providing fertile ground for an ecocritical investigation of Thomas Hardy.

These three of Hardy’s novels present a world that was not necessarily created for the enjoyment or pleasure of his characters, a characteristic of his literature that has often been ascribed to Hardy pessimistic understanding of evolution. Overall, my thesis proposes that a better investigation of the problem of “nature” or the nonhuman in Hardy can be facilitated by an emerging posthuman philosophy that details the existence and impact of material agency as well as the effects of nonhuman agents on the human world. I work with radical ecocritical theory of trans-corporeality described by Stacy Alaimo, Elizabeth Grosz’s retelling of Darwinian natural selection as an open and infinite system and Jane Bennett’s detailing of distributive agency decenters the anthropocentric perspective. The first chapter pushes back against these analyses of Hardy’s predetermined plots by highlighting moments of possibility that exist within *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. The second chapter investigates what might cause the destabilization of this conventional analysis: Hardy’s description of a nonhuman environment that interpenetrates the forms of human characters. With this depiction of human-nonhuman interpenetration, Hardy tests the limiting conditions of the form of the novel. His experiment critiques the humanist logic of the novel’s form but remains within that logic. The third chapter examines the effect of these nonhuman actants in the text, which highlight how Hardy’s characters exist as assemblages through which agency is distributed – rather than localized within the body or mind of an
individual subject. This analysis leads to a new way of understanding Hardy’s realist presentation of character in a world in which nonhuman elements exist so vibrantly and actively.
Chapter One
Discovering the Possibilities of Thomas Hardy

When reflecting on Thomas Hardy’s career, Virginia Woolf wrote that “if we place Hardy among his fellows, we must call him the greatest tragic writer among English novelists” (254). Woolf’s remark has, in some way, come to define Hardy, especially given that the quote itself appears on the back covers of numerous editions of his novels. Additionally, framing discussions of Hardy’s novels in terms of their tragic plots has become a commonsense critical approach. Critics treat the tragic nature of Hardy’s novels as a given and have defined that sense of tragedy in terms of its determinism: that the events of his stories are foreordained. Critics like Garrett Stewart and Gillian Beer narrow the scope of Hardy’s determinism to the level of character and focus their analysis on the outcomes endured by those individuals. Beer’s analysis especially is influenced by Hardy’s interest in evolution and Darwinism, which she argues led him to write of “the overthrow of the individual either by the inevitability of death or by the machinations…of ‘crass casualty’” (223).

But if Darwin’s work on the unfeeling machinations of natural law has proven central to the commonsense critical understanding of what could be called Hardy’s crass “tragic determinism,” other, more recent readings of Darwin by Ursula Heise and Elizabeth Grosz open up alternate possibilities. Grosz especially promotes a generative, even “comedic,” reading of Darwin’s theories of evolution by presenting biological life “as a confrontation [between] the accidental as well as the expected, a consequence of the random as well as the predictable” (7). I draw on work from both Beer and Stewart to document the overall deterministic structure of Hardy’s texts but utilize these recent re-readings of Darwin to locate moments of possibility that are contained within Thomas Hardy’s seemingly foreclosed universe. Within this framework,
Hardy’s novels describe an ecological system that, though tending toward failure, contains generative potential for its individual characters – giving life to a Hardy not of foreclosure but of possibility. This chapter examines the plots of one of Hardy’s major novels and concludes that – while the novel appears convincingly as predetermined tragedy – the story is rife with moments of possibility that resist the deterministic flow of the novel’s plot – swirling like eddies that fight the force of a rapidly-moving river. Hardy’s narrator hints at the existence of alternate plots through “if only” statements, which – along with moments of denarration and free indirect discourse that I examine alongside Audrey Jaffe’s investigation of Hardy’s “exclusionary realism” – resist the analyses of predetermined foreclosure so often associated with Hardy’s work.

Thomas Hardy’s belief in a predetermined universe both in and beyond literature is evident in his own notes. In an entry titled “Our Actions,” Hardy wrote that “each act, as it has had immeasurable antecedents, will be fruitful of immeasurable consequents; for the web of the world is ever weaving” (Literary Notes 1: 638). Hardy invokes the image of this web explicitly in The Woodlanders while reflecting on the friendship between Giles Winterborne and Marty South: “looked at in a certain way, their lonely courses formed no detached design at all, but were part of the pattern in the great web of human doings” (22). In this world, the suffering of characters who appear to be doomed is inextricably linked to their past actions. After his mother’s death in Return of the Native, for example, Clym retrospectively articulates the inescapable interconnectedness of action to consequence:

‘I never went near her house, so she never came near mine…’ He constantly bewailed his tardy journey to his mother’s house, because it was an error which could never be rectified, and insisted that he must have been horribly perverted by
some fiend not to have thought before that it was his duty to go to her, since she did not come to him. (298)

The cause and effect relationship that dooms Clym – that his mother’s death was caused by his unwillingness to reconcile with her – is also implied to have been unavoidable. He realizes the error of his ways, but the error is only made apparent long after the point in time when it could be “rectified.”

Missed chances like this – and their seeming inevitability – certainly give Hardy’s novels the appearance of being deterministic. Jakob Lothe, in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, writes that “Hardy underlines the interplay of situation and character…Characters are trapped in history…” (116). In Hardy’s novels, so this line of argument asserts, history – a successive series of interdependent events – determines and forecloses possibility in the future. In his own notes, Hardy speaks of his desire to present a world that “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, *Life and Work* 182). Gillian Beer connects the apparent determinism of Hardy with Charles Darwin’s theories of natural selection and evolution. Beer suggests that Darwin’s findings interrupted the Victorian sense of natural order and informed Hardy’s own belief that natural laws were unfeeling and unfair towards the plight of human beings (*Darwin’s Plots* 6). Again, in his notes, Hardy complained about the “radical imperfection of the universe – its inability to accommodate the human emotions and ‘supply the materials for happiness to higher experience’” (Milgate, *Biography* 220). He concluded that “the emotions have no place in a world of defect, and it is a cruel injustice that they should have developed in it” (220). Existence in this unjust and unfeeling universe necessitates human suffering. A defective world dooms its inhabitants from the beginning of time.
Connections between Hardy to Darwin are made more explicit by the fact that Hardy proclaimed himself to be an early disciple of Charles Darwin. The above entries from Hardy’s notebook demonstrate his belief in the evolution of human characteristics over time, as outlined in Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin’s book ends with a famous description of a bustling riverbank. It’s an iconic image, capable both of inspiring awe at the complexity of organic life and fear at how chaotic a world determined by the unfeeling laws of natural selection can be:

> It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us… (758)

Darwin later comments on the “grandeur” of such a scene, giving the description a hope-filled conclusion (758). However, on its own, the image presented in these sentences is simply chaotic. The bank is filled with organisms and made to look very complex. Importantly, this complexity has all been “produced by laws.” The simplest, earliest organisms on planet earth were not merely beholden to the evolutionary laws of nature; they were driven by them. From these simpler organisms, more complex creatures – like human beings – were “produced.” They appear to lack agency. Even syntactically, they are passive. These biological laws were established from the start of time, Darwin posits, and – in turn – they established an environmental system that determined the future development of its many creatures. The laws continue to act “around us,” and the preposition is crucial. Darwin’s laws do not work for or with
humans, merely around them. This appears to bring Darwin’s theories in line with Hardy’s own belief in the inevitability of human suffering. In this unjust, unfeeling world it seems impossible to, as Hardy wrote in his journals, “supply the materials for happiness” (Millgate, Biography, 220).

With Darwin’s notion of the inescapable and unfeeling natural “laws” in mind, it is possible to see – as Beer does – the workings of a system that “involves the overthrow of the individual either by the inevitability of death or by the machinations (or disregard) of ‘crass casualty’” (223). To make this claim, Beer outlines three levels of plot in Hardy’s novels: the scheming of anxious characters; the wishful commentary from the narrator, which “often takes the form ‘Why did nobody’ or ‘had somebody…’”; and – where Hardy’s determinism lies – the blind and unfeeling interference from what Beer calls “Nature’s Laws” (224). For Beer, the first two levels of plot struggle, futilely, against the third, which operates “beyond the control of humankind” and “threaten[s], thwart[s] and undermine[s]” any inkling of individual passion or joy (Beer 223, 226). Beer suggests that this third level operates “beyond the control” of Hardy’s characters, just as Darwin’s laws appear to work “around” and beyond the control of humans. Her analysis concludes that “Nature’s laws” operate against the interests of specific characters to ensure that “human variety is oppressed by the needs which generate plot” (223). Those generative needs – joy and romantic desire – serve the purpose of continuing the human species at the expense of continuing the life of any specific individual. The predetermined endings of Hardy’s novels reach their conclusion, Beer explains, with the death of the protagonist, demonstrating how “a single generation [is made to] carry the freight of signification” (223). Beer argues that the terminations of Hardy’s characters, like the deaths of Tess and Jude,
represent a larger, oppressive system of predetermined foreclosure working to doom unlucky individuals.

Key to Beer’s understanding of Hardy’s determinism is her understanding of how Hardy depicts the natural world.² Ranging from animals to weather, nature – she assumes – ought to be understood as the non-human forces and organisms presented by Hardy’s texts. She writes that “the material world is not anthropocentric but language is,” perceiving a strict and irreconcilable boundary between humanity and the natural world (45). Beer bases her interpretation of Hardy’s determinism upon this belief in a nature that is boxed-in and separated from the bodies of human characters. Beer’s own syntax reveals an assumption that “human” and “Natural” forms are separately bounded. She exclusively discusses such entities as if they act in opposition to each other. The two entities appear to interact in Beer’s analysis, like organisms on Darwin’s bank, but only to demonstrate how the natural world exists as an obstacle to human happiness. For Beer, “Nature” becomes an othered entity that, though it lacks autonomy, interferes with the happiness of Hardy’s always-human characters.

To be sure, there is evidence for this understanding of nature as something against which human characters struggle. We see an example in Return of the Native with the death of Mrs. Yeobright. Exhausted, she is first enticed by the “perfumed mat” of a bed of thyme – on which

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² It is worth understanding what nature is in Hardy’s texts and surrounding analysis. Hardy himself may have agreed with the definition of nature given by Raymond Williams in the opening paragraph of his article “Ideas of Nature”:

> When we say nature, do we mean to include ourselves? I know some people would say that the other kind of nature – trees, hills, brooks animals – has a kindly effect. But I’ve noticed that they then often contrast it with the world of humans… (68)

For Hardy (and many of the scholars dedicated to his work), nature exists as all that is not obviously human in the world. This ranges from the hard, chalky ground Tess struggles to farm when working near the Dover cliffs to the rabbits and chirping birds who look on dispassionately while Tess is raped by Alec. Critic Jonathan Goode sees Hardy’s heath as not only an object but an obstacle, existing – as Williams writes – in “contrast” with humanity. Goode’s analysis zeroes in on Hardy’s description of the heath as a landscape, beheld by human viewer and “a mere backdrop to the [story’s] complex sequence of changing relationships” but also something that keeps characters “trapped…[by their] rustic community” (42, 52). Recent discussions of “nature,” including my own, are more inspired by the close of Williams “Ideas”: “We need and are perhaps beginning to find different ideas, different feelings, if we are to know nature as varied and variable nature, as the changing conditions of a human world” (85).
she rests – before being bitten by a poisonous snake (175). Here, an argument can be made that Hardy’s nature acts as a source of unhappy chaos. This chaos works, as Beer argues, to undermine the goals of Hardy’s characters. Hardy saw human and nonhuman worlds as enemies, just as he presented civilization and the Heath as diametric opposites: “The untameable [sic], Ishmaelitish thing that Egdon now was it always had been. Civilization was its enemy” (11). The plots of these novels indicate that the battles between civilized humanity and untamable nature were unfairly matched, predetermined to be won by the other-than-human at the expense of the happiness of human characters.

This unfair matchup plays out in the plot of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, a familiar example of Hardy’s apparent determinism. Tess’s fate seems to be determined by forces of the natural world that are out of her control. These forces, examples of the foreclosing elements of Beer’s third level of plot, appear in narrative clues that are sprinkled throughout her story. Early on, Tess admits the inevitability of her doom when she hears a question posed by her younger brother: “Which do we live on – a splendid [star] or a blighted one?” Tess echoes Hardy’s belief in the existence of unfair natural laws with her response that the family’s star is “A blighted one” (*Tess* 31). The world that exists around the characters of the story appears unreliable and seems only to undo human efforts: “None of the times could be relied on to coincide with the hours of requirement” (35). As the story continues, the narrator reveals that “Tess hoped for some accident that might favour her, but nothing favoured her” (298). It appears that these elements – like the unfeeling laws of Beer’s third level of plot – work against Tess and determine her death.

Garrett Stewart argues that the elements of determinism which constrain the development of Tess’s story exist within her as well as around her (*Novel Violence* 176). Throughout the

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3 Garrett Stewart outlines the theme of this novel succinctly, saying that “the only epic totality that remains for the descendent genre of the novel in Hardy’s unflinching experiment is the totally arbitrary waste of human possibility with the continuously blistering sense that it ought to have been otherwise” (174).
novel, the actions of characters fail to prevent the tragic endings that appear to have been predetermined. These efforts often serve only to exacerbate the negative consequences they are doomed to suffer. For example, instead of listening to Tess confess shameful elements of her past, Angel “silenced her by a kiss” (Tess 214). This move proves to be counter-productive because, when Angel does learn of Tess’s past, he interprets her previous recalcitrance to be an indication of her willful deception. In this novel of appetites, Angel’s mouth causes more harm later when he kisses Izzy and the other farm girls goodbye, only to cause more distress: “the kiss had obviously done harm by awakening feelings they were trying to subdue” (215). His actions, which can be seen to have been performed with good intentions, increase rather than alleviate the suffering of Tess and her friends, again providing evidence for the argument that characters’ lives are predetermined. It seems that nothing they do can change the outcomes of their blighted lives.

Until this point, I’ve documented evidence that supports the common understanding of Hardy’s novels. A so-called tragic determinism – related, as Beer makes clear, to a seemingly-Darwinian conception of a world that is governed by dispassionate and even cruel natural laws – dominates critical analyses of Thomas Hardy. This work assumes Hardy’s deterministic literary universe to be a given and takes such determinism for granted. However, the assumption implicit to these deterministic interpretations is contradicted by moments of possibility present throughout Tess and other works by Hardy. During these moments – in which an alternate possibility is presented by the narrator – it appears as though the characters are able to escape the entanglements that ensnare and determine their fates. In Tess, possibility exists from the very start of the titular character’s doomed adventure. While being transported by Alec to his residence, Tess is nearly kissed.
For a moment – only a moment – when they were in the turning of the drive, between the tall rhododendrons and conifers, before the lodge became visible, he inclined his face towards her as if – but, no! he thought better of it, and let her go. Thus the thing began. Had she perceived this meeting’s import she might have asked why she was doomed to be seen and marked and coveted that day by the wrong man… (43)

The paragraph is peculiar and – in comparison to much of Hardy’s writing – fairly unique. The attempted kiss is described in a long sentence and occurs within “a moment – only a moment.” Yet, though it is long, the sentence has a halting and uneven rhythm. The moment of action is interrupted with pauses and repetitions, almost the way a broken record skips and stutters before the phonograph needle finds the right groove. The “moment” is broken with a dash before being reinforced (“only a moment”). Even the physical setting is interrupted and placed in liminality. We see the couple “in the turning of the drive.” But then they are caught “between” tall plants, obscured from the view of others. The “between” is reinforced when we are told that they are in a place “before the lodge.” These words place Alec and Tess somewhere but also not anywhere specifically. Then the moment concludes with an instance of doubled assonance: “no!...let her go.” These constant interruptions from commas and parenthetical phrases disrupt the determined progression of the text. They pause and wonder instead of marching along forward in accordance with the foreclosing laws of nature.

In addition to describing Alec’s attempt to steal his charge’s affection, the narrator gives a lengthy description of what could have been – specifically what could have been avoided – had the kiss occurred: “Thus the thing began.” The narrator poses a conditional question, a casual what if. Though Tess is now doomed to become prey to Alec’s sexual desires, there is an implied
possibility that she could have escaped this fate if she had only realized Alec’s intentions beforehand. If he had kissed her, she may have been alerted to the fact that she was “marked and coveted” by the man she trusted. She may, then, have behaved differently, been less trusting of him later on.

A noteworthy phrase in the above passage is “as if.” Jonathan Farina investigates the epistemological theories that underpin the use of this conditional language in Victorian literature. He writes that “as if” statements are often included to allow “characters to negotiate with abstract feelings, subjectivities, ideologies, and social systems as if they were concrete realities” (430). Hardy’s “as if” serves a similar purpose by intimating to readers a concrete demonstration of Alec’s action without giving specific details. Instead of relaying emotional or subjective information, Hardy’s narrator uses the “as if” to give information about a character’s potential course of action. The inclination of Alec’s face is never described nor are his intentions, but the “as if” statement can be completed through inference and readerly hindsight. The man meant to kiss her. The “as if,” then, presents the narrator’s concrete vision of an alternate future. That this moment of “as if” is interrupted and never completed underscores Farina’s point that “recurrent ‘as ifs’ present the narrative in which they occur as a conjectural history of some real story that purportedly precedes, exceeds, or otherwise eludes its narrator’s perspective” (432). However, in Hardy, what the “as if” statements refer to, a different future for Tess, continues to elude the narrator’s perspective.

Another moment of possibility occurs when Angel prepares to abandon his newlywed bride. The narrator gives hope for alternate endings:
If Tess had been artful, had she made a scene, fainted, wept hystERICally, in that lonely lane…he would probably not have withstood her. But her mood of long-suffering made his way easy for him, and she herself was his best advocate. (253)

It appears that, if the characters had only acted differently, their power to determine their lives would have returned to their hands. A passage like this does not necessarily resist the apparent determinism of the novel’s overall plot, however. The narrator begins with “if” – a portion of the conditional “as if” – but then fails to seriously entertain any possibility of Tess acting in a way that would generate the requisite sympathy in Angel Clare. As Stewart argues regarding Tess’s irreducible flaw, the nature of her character prevents her from acting in such a way. Still, this moment of possibility is presented, even if just to entice readers with a hope that remains impossible. For such possibility to appear repeatedly throughout Tess chips away at any interpretations of determinism.

As Beer’s and Stewart’s analyses of Hardy’s determinism begin to erode, so does the comparison that relates his novels to the predetermined elements of Darwin’s natural selection. This reading of Darwin can be updated as well, as Elizabeth Grosz does in The Nick of Time. Grosz inverts Darwin’s alleged determinism by stressing how Darwin’s laws promote active, constant change rather than stagnation or mere chaos. Life, moved forward by time, is “the generation of endless variation, endless openness to the accidental, the random, the unexpected” (7). In such a system, individual tragedy becomes impossible. The death of a single entity is overwhelmed by what is generated through constant environmental activity. Grosz highlights how Darwin “introduces indeterminacy into the Newtonian universe” which “is governed by a relatively small number of invariable, predictive laws” (9). Her characterization of a Newtonian universe sounds similar to literary analysis that presents a deterministic interpretation of Thomas
Hardy. Says Grosz: “If one could somehow take a snapshot of the Newtonian universe at any one moment, one could predict the future of any element within it” (9). Stewart mentions “the binding grip of cause and effect” and its role in determining Tess’s end, implying that Tess’s death can be predicted from page one of the novel – with no possible alternative able to intervene before the end of the story (177). However, there are moments of possibility scattered throughout Tess, indicating that her fate is not bound so tightly in cause-and-effect’s grip.

The focus on the arc of a single character – crucial to Beer’s and Stewart’s analyses – is itself mistaken. As Ursula Heise argues, “nature and culture [are]...intersecting histories of experiments that continually succeed and fail” (72). Endings are not the proper focus for Darwinian literary analysis because endings do not necessarily exist within a system of constant evolution and regeneration. Something else – a new species, for example – is always being created and can replace whatever is being lost. Heise allows us to theorize that an individual’s death, like the “extinction [of an individual species] is the signal of a failure that should be prevented whenever possible; yet the failure of one experiment also becomes the point of a departure for new ones” (74). Moments of loss, then, indicate possibilities for generation even though – as we will see in Hardy’s novels – they may overshadow the potential that is promised in the future.

If we return to Darwin’s entangled bank, we will see a scene that allows for, if not boundless generativity, a more nuanced and subtle interpretation than inevitable determinism:

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning
endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being,
evolved. (Darwin 759)

The striking characteristic of this passage is Darwin’s mention of “the fixed law of gravity.” It is
included, it seems, to provide a counterpoint to the planet’s “cycling,” which continues to go on.
The fixedness of gravity ultimately contrasts with the chaos of Darwin’s entangled bank. Darwin
finds beauty in this shifting generativity. In the writhing of the entangled bank, Darwin envisions
an eternal process, one that contains chance and potential. “Several powers,” ones that exist in
addition to the law of gravity, operate in such a way as to provide “endless” beauty and grandeur
from even “so simple a beginning.” Darwin’s final phrase, indicating that creatures and
organisms “are being evolved” – are continuing to evolve – is crucial, and it allows for a subtlety
where previous scholars have inferred only deterministic implications. This “are being”
indicates, as Grosz stresses, the constant and indeterminate change occurring in Darwin’s system
of evolution.

Hardy’s stories convincingly appear to be deterministic, but their deterministic elements
have been amplified by a sort of confirmation bias within the critical scholarship that selectively
focuses on those tragic and deterministic elements. Images from Hardy’s writing that might
complicate these deterministic interpretations have been subordinated to those that demonstrate
determinism in those novels. Typically, these relate to a misinterpretation of endings, in which
scholars focus on a tragic death and ignore how – to borrow from Heise – the ending acts as a
point of departure for a new generation. For example, Henchard’s pitied death can overshadow
the marriage of Elizabeth-Jane to Farfrae at the end of The Mayor of Casterbridge, just as
Clym’s moping garners more critical attention than the happy union of Thomasin with Diggory
Venn at the conclusion of Return of the Native. These are the types of arguments that I believe
overly thematize texts and ultimately encourage critics to impose upon the nature of a novel to
that novel rather than examining the evidence contained within it. Beer’s analysis of Hardy
especially falls into this trap. Beer’s discussion of Darwin in her book’s early chapters resembles
– if even only loosely – the arguments that Grosz makes so effectively in *Nick of Time*. Beer
writes that “evolutionary ideas shifted in very diverse ways the patterns through which we
apprehend experience and hence the patterns through which we condense experience in the
telling of it” and that Darwin’s writing “will not resolve to a single significance nor yield to a
single pattern” (6). Yet, Beer’s analysis of Hardy loses this sense of possibility – even though
that possibility exists in his writing. The moments in these stories that indicate potential – which
act as the continuation of Heise’s experiments in nature and culture – indicate that Hardy’s
narrative system is not as predictive as has been argued by Beer in *Darwin’s Plots* or Stewart in
*Novel Violence*. Hardy’s is a system defined, as Grosz writes about Darwin, by “an open and
generative force of self-organization and growing complexity…more readily understood in terms
of active vectors of change” (19). Those vectors of change – constantly active – appear
throughout Hardy’s work and resist the interpretation of being wholly deterministic.

Perhaps the most fraught moment of possibility in *Tess* occurs as Tess tells to Angel “her
story of her acquaintance with Alec D’Urberville” (225). In these pages – not more than a page,
really – every fear the reader may have about Tess’s future appears to be affirmed while every
hope readers have for her happiness is extinguished. If the novel had ended just a dozen or so
pages earlier, it would have told a story of redemption and true love – almost a fairy tale. Then
Angel tells Tess “of that time of his life…[when] he went to London and plunged into eight-and-
forty hours’ dissipation with a stranger” (225). For this transgression, Angel is immediately
forgiven, leading Angel to announce that “we will dismiss it at once and forever.” Readers,
suffering alongside Tess for over two hundred pages, certainly share the hope that causes her to “jum\[p] up joyfully” when Angel says that her story “can hardly be more serious” than his (225). In this mood of forgiveness and hope, knowing that the newlyweds’ “hands were still joined” while she speaks, Tess seizes control by telling her own story, and the chapter ends.

This moment plays differently for readers located at various points in time. Today, reading the story after it had been compressed into a single volume, the hope that Tess is able to thwart the blighted, predetermined plot of the novel lasts only as long as it takes to turn the page and start the next chapter. For readers of the three-volume version, first published in 1891, that possibility survives only until one gets hands on the book’s final volume, which begins with Angel’s reaction to Tess’s story. For those reading Tess as it appeared serially in Graphic or Harper’s Bazaar, hope can survive in the novel for at least a week, until the next edition of the journal comes out (Tess xlv). Existent in this moment of possibility for longer or shorter periods of time certainly affects the perception of the novel as predetermined. These moments operate similarly to Schrödinger’s thought experiment involving a potentially-deceased cat. Suspending Tess in a moment between success and failure, without knowing the actual outcome, makes both outcomes equally possible and equally likely to occur. While rushing through a single volume copy of the novel, these moments are extinguished so quickly that they go unnoticed. But when readers are forced to sit with them in suspense, cracks may begin to show in the story’s predetermined foundation.

Other moments of Tess that resist the deterministic logics of plot involve denarrated shifts in point of view. These moments of denarration, as Audrey Jaffe writes, “complicat[e] assumptions about realism’s specularity…by calling attention to…realism’s exclusionary

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4 Natalie Houston, in an introduction to Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Lady Audley’s Secret, describes how serialization changes the habits of readers. She writes that “readers of a serial become acquainted with the characters in a novel over time, and have the leisure to puzzle over key events or questions before their resolution in a later chapter” (11).
potential” (98). These moments of exclusion separate readers even further from the characters whom Beer would argue act to “carry the freight of signification” as the focal point of the novel’s plot. A prominent example of one of these shifts in point of view occurs when Tess strikes the killing blow against Alec:

She went into the back room, which was more especially her own apartment, and continued her sewing there. The lady lodger did not return, nor did the gentleman ring his bell. Mrs. Brooks pondered on the delay, and on what probable relation the visitor who had called so early bore to the couple upstairs. In reflecting she leant back in her chair. (382)

This is another unusual passage because the story’s familiar characters are all missing from it. Immediately before this point in the story, Angel Clare walked forty miles or so to see Tess, only to find that she has married the man who had drugged and raped her. Angel leaves, Tess goes upstairs with her husband. The two have a heated exchange, during which the point of view switches to follow the meanderings of an eavesdropping landlady. This shift in point of view forces readers to observe Tess and Alec while peering through a keyhole. These transitions in point of view are common in all of Hardy’s novels – from Return to Jude – and happen throughout Tess as well. For the five or so pages preceding this scene, for example, the narrator was focused solely on Angel Clare, while the book’s namesake was ignored completely. The shifts between the points of view of more familiar characters remind readers that each human character shares an unseen inner mind and indicates the lack of any one character’s primacy. But, rather than moving towards a secondary character, in this case the narrator moves to follow a stranger, both to the characters and to the reader. With such an unfocused point of view, Hardy’s presentation of character “undermines the sense of specialness…[of] the realist subject” as
Audrey Jaffe writes (57). The arbitrary focus of the novel’s point of view further “exposes fragility of the structures on which realist character tends to rely” (65).

Like Darwin’s entangled bank, Hardy’s stories present a flat ontology, in which human existence is not seen to be privileged above the existence of nonhuman organisms. Darwin describes how plants, birds, insects, worms – and so many other species that go unmentioned – weave together. All of these types of organisms are described equally. In spite of initial appearances that the scene of the bank may be “elaborately constructed,” Darwin gives no primary focus or order. There is only activity. In Tess, this lack of focus and order is underscored when the point of view of a passage settles on a character completely unknown to the audience. The landlady of the apartment Tess and Alec are renting does not even have a name until the third sentence of this passage, and she does not know the names of the primary characters of the story at all. This happens again when a caretaker comes to tidy up the mansion in which Tess and Angel are hiding. The novel’s point of view shifts to the man as he moves through the house to open windows until he eventually discovers two strangers sleeping upstairs. Of course, those strangers are none other than the characters long-familiar to readers, Tess and Angel.

These shifts in point of view often obscure key events in the novel from the full view of readers. The shift to the landlady’s point of view prevents any readers of Tess from directly witnessing Tess’s murder of Alec D’Urberville. This is not only one of the climactic moments of the story but also when Tess experiences a potentially cathartic and even redemptive release from her torment. The scene appears to be a rejoinder to the final pages of the first phase of the text, when Alec’s sexual assault of Tess is foreclosed from the view of the audience. In that instance, the narrator became distracted by the possibility of someone coming to save Tess from Alec: “Already at that hour some sons of the forest were stirring…good and sincere hearts
among them…But no dart or thread of intelligence inspired these men to harness and mount” (74). Both of these scenes serve to remind readers that a world beyond that of Tess’s narration exists. Whereas this world was theorized when Alec approached Tess through the woods, readers are given proof of its existence during Alec’s death. There are people out there, whom readers have not yet met, who could intervene in the story – either to have saved Tess from the very beginning or, as becomes the case at the story’s conclusion, to punish her for the murder she commits.

These shifts in point of view exacerbate the destabilizing effect of the text’s moments of possibility, whose presence resists deterministic readings of Hardy. Tess, like many of Hardy’s novels, includes narrative jumps through time and space and from character to character, examples of Hardy’s free indirect discourse. Often these narrative shifts happen multiple times within the same sentence. As Angel leaves Izz before leaving for Brazil, the narrator writes that Angel “drove on; but no sooner had Izz turned into the lane, and [Angel] Clare was out of sight, than she flung herself down on the bank…” (272). With that semi-colon, the narrator gives the locations of two characters moving in opposite directions simultaneously and transitions from the perspective of Angel to that of Izz in order to give insight into Izz’s anguished emotional state. By the next paragraph, the narrator moves back to the perspective of Angel: “Clare too…was wrought to aching thoughts” (272). Again, the importance of any one character is undermined. No individual in the novel is marked with the imprimatur of the novel’s determinism. The loss of any individual contained within the story, even the story’s titular figure, is not devastating. It is only the temporary failure of a longer, continually-active process of regeneration.

Tess ends with a similar indication of regenerative potential. Tess is killed off by the story’s end, yet the story continues: “The two speechless gazers bent themselves down to the
earth, as if in prayer, and remained thus a long time... As soon as they had strength they arose, joined hands again, and went on” (398). The coupling of Angel and Liza-Lu is made possible with Tess’s urging. She tells her husband Angel to “marry [Liza-Lu] if you lose me, as you will do shortly” (394). The story ends with this act of replacement, with Liza-Lu surpassing Tess. However tragic for the now-superseded characters, the novel ends with a sense of continuation, change, and regeneration.

This ending places the novel somewhere between the system of foreclosed determinism proposed by Stewart and Beer and the system of constant regeneration put forward by Heise’s and Grosz’s readings of Darwin. Neither the determinism nor the possibility contained in the novel are adequately incorporated in both systems of analysis. The heroine of Tess dies, and she dies with her own sense of predetermined doom, believing that she lived in the shadow of a blighted star. However, the novel indicates that the predetermined outcome could have been avoided. Additionally, even with the foreclosure of her death, it should be noted that Tess is guaranteed a regeneration of sorts. Liza-Lu will carry on her family’s genetic line with Angel. The moments of possibility documented throughout Tess, then, invert Beer’s and Stewart’s analyses of Hardy’s determinism. Beer’s third level of Hardy’s plot – which involves the unfeeling laws of nature – does not foreclose the outcomes of characters’ lives, as – even with her doomed fate – Tess herself has the potential to change and affect her future. Hardy’s literary system is one that tends towards entropy, which contains forces that – if they are not guarded against carefully – lead to a character’s suffering.
Chapter Two

Investigating Thomas Hardy’s Literary Experiment

Thomas Hardy’s stories are characterized by a presentation of human and nonhuman actants as being equally capable of exercising agency. Some appear as human characters; others appear as nonhuman entities that originate from the natural environment, but all interact in ways that suggests that the boundary between human and nonhuman can be dismantled. Portions of Hardy’s novels show the collapse of these two groups – how the rational human subject can become influenced by an irrational, impulsive force, for example – demonstrating his willingness to experiment with and against the anthropocentric conventions of the realist Victorian novel. However, in collapsing these categories, Hardy’s critique of the primacy of a uniquely-human agency instead demonstrates the necessity of the distinction between human and nonhuman entities that exist within the novel. For example, he personifies nonhuman entities – natural and material agencies that populate his literary settings alongside humanoid characters – in such a way that incorporates them into ontological categories of or related to the human. Though Hardy tests the possibility of a literary world in which the boundaries of the human being have been broken down and become intermeshed with the nonhuman environment, this chapter demonstrates how such an experiment butts up against limitations inherent to the form of the novel.

Hardy’s understanding of the human being is rooted in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. He takes a note from Schopenhauer’s Criticism of Kant in his journal, writing “Kant’s greatest service is to have separated the phenomenal from the thing-in-itself by proving that between us & things there always stands the intellect” (Literary Notes 2: 2063). Hardy understands that the phenomenal, the essence of the human being, is separated from all other things in the world by
the capacity for intellect and reason. This is supported by an extract from *Return of the Native* when Thomasin describes what motivates her to accept Diggory Venn’s marriage proposal: “I ought to have thought of my family. What dreadfully bad impulses there are in me!” (*Return* 378). Though she has an expectation of control, that she ought to have been able to subjugate her desire to a calculated logic, she finds that there are “dreadfully bad impulses” within her that she must, but cannot, restrain. In her speech, Thomasin separates “thought” from “impulse,” aligning thought with the human self, while casting impulse as distinctly other. Thought is something that a person can perform, while impulses influence human behavior from beyond human control.

The presence of a boundary between human and nonhuman entities seems to define the setting of *The Return of the Native* when Hardy writes that, for the Heath, “Civilization was its enemy” (11). This sentence establishes what Mary Rimmer calls Hardy’s “binary oppositions between cultivated and natural worlds” (261). As Rimmer writes, “‘Culture’ then, was disputed ground…when a young Thomas Hardy was learning” during his childhood (255). At that time, Rimmer elaborates, culture itself could be understood through one of two separate paradigms, both of which focus on a nonhuman form that is separated from, and subjected to, a degree of violence perpetrated by a human counterpart. The first that Rimmer describes deals with the physical labor of agriculture, in which culture “has inherent overtones of conflict…The culture of any crop involves more than natural growth. Agriculturalists must first prepare the soil by clearing ground, breaking up the earth…rooting up weeds” (255). The labor of farming transforms a wild plant’s growth into an efficient process intended to provide civilization with sustenance. The plants that best serve the needs of society are cultivated while those that are undesired are torn from the ground and killed. Rimmer writes about how a metaphorical understanding of cultivation came into being from these literal acts in which human culture is
violently imposed upon a nonhuman world: “When ‘culture’ refers metaphorically to education or character formation, the violence of the process is muted, but the metaphor still implies eradicating unwanted growths in order to foster desired ones” (256). Mr. Melbury voices this idea in *The Woodlanders* when he complains to his daughter Grace about the cost and purpose of her education: “You so well read and cultivated…Hasn’t it cost me near a hundred a year to…show an example to the neighbourhood of what a woman can be?” (85). The influence of culture – specifically the development of intellect through education, as in Grace’s case – was seen to subordinate nature and the nonhuman while elevating the human, thus separating the two. The nonhuman is seen as an object beholden to the mercy of a human intellect intent on bettering it and beautifying it for the needs of civilization. In this way, human civilization comes to be the enemy of nature within Hardy’s novels.

However, just as in the previous chapter’s discussion of Darwin, an alternate interpretation of Hardy exists. Hardy, at times, allows for these apparently diametrically opposed concepts to interpenetrate. As Rimmer elaborates, “Hardy recognized that culture…remains in conflict but also in dialogue with nature, and that the porous boundaries between the two are nowhere more evident than in the experience of hybrid characters” (261). Though characters can be cultivated and educated – in a sense, brought further away from nature – Hardy attempts to show that the human is connected with the nonhuman. The violent process of cultivation that Rimmer describes allows for Hardy to establish an ideological interchange between human and nonhuman, the rational and the impulsive. As in Thomasin’s description of her thoughts and her impulses, the effects of that interchange alter a human character’s mental state.

Selections from Hardy’s own notes indicate that he had doubts that there was a clear separation between human and nonhuman entities. As Phillip Mallett writes, these doubts were
inspired by Darwin, who “came to understand…structural and functional resemblances derived from consanguinity, not from Divine preference for a few recurring patterns,” a paradigm that allows for human and nonhuman forms to interpenetrate (Mallett 317). In his notes, Hardy works against the subordination of nonhuman entities to human beings, writing first that “From homologies I shd [sic] look at it as certain that all mammals had descended from some single progenitor” and reinforcing this flat ontology later on by writing that he considers “man…not [to be] ‘higher’ than the other animals” (Literary Notes 1: 1538; Literary Notes 2: 225). His notes hint at his own understanding of the interchange between human and nonhuman elements that exists within his novels when he writes “Not a single fixed element anywhere – a general flux of things…” (Literary Notes 1: 1191). Hardy’s understanding of humans and nonhumans existing within a flat ontology appears to have informed his writing of Old Man South in Woodlanders, whose life is connected with the life of a diseased tree. South cries “yes, the tree ‘tis that’s killing me” (91) before dying the night the tree falls in a storm.

Hardy’s belief in a “general flux of things” can be further unpacked when put in conversation with the philosophical call-to-action Elizabeth Grosz makes in Nick of Time: “we need to understand the body, not as an organism or entity in itself, but as a system, or series of open-ended systems, functioning within other huge systems it cannot control” (3). Just as Hardy’s connection between Old Man South and a dying tree does, Grosz’s structure of systems flattens the ontological differences between human and non-human forms. The boundary that could separate the human body from its natural environment is opened. The agency which is often ascribed to the human being begins to seep into that non-human world. Furthermore, in this structure of open-ended systems, human beings discover that nonhuman forms – previously believed simply to be objects – are empowered with an ability to act beyond, perhaps even
counter to, human control. These empowered objects are what Stacy Alaimo, in her book *Bodily Natures*, describes as “material agencies – the often unpredictable and always interconnected actions of environmental systems” (3). The interactions between material agencies will prove crucial to understanding Hardy’s attempts to erode the barrier between human and nonhuman forms within his novels.

Alaimo defines her trans-corporeal system, in part, by its “viscous porosity” and an “emphasis on mediating membranes” rather than strictly defined boundaries (15). Permeability is the dominant characteristic of this ecological system, and Alaimo’s primary concern is to trace “how various substances travel across and within the human body...[and] how they do things – often unwelcome or unexpected things” (146). The substances that Alaimo discusses are primarily toxins – sometimes naturally-occurring, but mostly synthetic chemicals. A trans-corporeal paradigm shows how Egdon Heath in *Return* – which Hardy describes as having an agency of its own – and the lush forests of Little Hintock in *Woodlanders* have the capacity to subject human characters to the influence of that agency. Characters become “immersed within incalculable, interconnected material agencies” (17). *Return of the Native* includes multiple appearances of such trans-corporeal moments, one of which appears during a long passage depicts in which Eustacia and Wildeve meet at a dance out on the Heath. Hardy describes how the nonhuman forces of the heath penetrate and influence their human bodies:

Through the length of five-and-twenty couples they threaded their giddy way, and a new vitality entered her form. The pale ray of evening lent a fascination to the experience. There is a certain degree and tone of light which tends to disturb the equilibrium of the senses, and to promote dangerously the tenderer moods: added to movement it drives the emotions to rankness, the reason becoming sleepy and
unperceiving in inverse proportion; and this light fell now upon these two from
the disc of the moon. All the dancing girls felt the symptoms; but Eustacia most of
all. The grass under their feet became trodden away, and the hard-beaten surface
of the sod, when viewed aslant towards the moonlight, shone like a polished
table…The pretty dresses of the maids lost their subtler day colours, and showed
more or less of a misty white. Eustacia floated round and round on Wildeve’s
arm, her face rapt and statuesque; her soul had passed away from and forgotten
her features, which were left empty and quiescent, as they always are when
feeling goes beyond their register. (252-253)

First note the syntactical positioning of nonhuman elements – specifically light – within these
sentences: “The pale ray of the evening lent,” and the “tone of light…tends to disturb…to
promote dangerously.” Light is positioned as the subject of these sentences and performs actions
of its own volition. Further, the light primarily effects the mental capacities of Eustacia and the
other dancers. As in the case of Thomasin, the nonhuman influence inhibits human rationality.
The light first appears to enhance the perceived vitality and enjoyment of the human characters,
to “driv[e] the emotions to rankness.” Eustacia’s reason is overwhelmed and she worries little
about dancing publicly with Wildeve, even though she is married to Clym Yeobright. Eustacia
loses all control, and enters some kind of catatonic state. She floats “on Wildeve’s arm…rapt and
statuesque.” Even her facial features are “forgotten…[and] left empty.” A sublime feeling affects
her, which “goes beyond” the human register.

This scene’s placement at a community dance heightens the effect of the nonhuman
influence. Control of individual consciousness is lost in two ways: first by the effect of the
evening light, and second by the collective action of the dancing group. The light’s effect is
stronger when “added to movement.” Beyond that, we see in Hardy’s description how individuals become lost within a collective group. The colors of the dancers’ dresses fade away and are replaced by a “misty white.” They become indistinct, as if one in the same. A collectivistic ritual opens the dancers up to be acted upon by nonhuman forces and makes it evident that they exist within a trans-corporeal system.

Clearly, Hardy’s nature does not exist as a mere object. Instead, the natural, nonhuman world interacts with human corporality, which becomes “intermeshed with the more-than-human world [and] underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment,’” as Stacy Alaimo writes in *Bodily Natures* (2). If we return to Thomasin’s rationale for marrying Diggory Venn, we can see how human and nonhuman forces collapse together within Hardy’s writing. Though Thomasin’s thought and her impulse are portrayed as being separate, they are contained within the same body. This demonstrates the level to which the nonhuman can penetrate human characters, even without their realizing it. Thomasin’s decision-making is impaired by impulsive, nonhuman urges that are nonetheless inherent to her being.

This is where Hardy, in attempting to demonstrate the flux that can occur between the human and the nonhuman, encounters a deconstructionist dilemma outlined by Jacques Derrida in his lecture “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” Derrida suggests that any critique of an ideological system – whether it be Nietzsche’s criticism of metaphysical representations of truth or Levi-Strauss’s discussion of the nature/culture binary – is limited in its critique due to its inability to extricate itself from the language and concepts of the system under critique. As Derrida writes, “we have no language – no syntax, no lexicon – which is alien to this history; we cannot utter a single destructive proposition which has not
already slipped into the form, the logic…of precisely what it seeks to contest” (117). Though Hardy, at times, presents what appears to be a trans-corporeal vision of a literary world, his experiment demonstrates how the concepts of bounded corporeality and a distinct, unique and ontologically-superior notion of human agency both remain foundational to the form of the novel.

For example, Hardy presents nonhuman forces as personified and humanized while endowing them with a human-like agency. Egdon Heath typifies that, within the form of the novel, nonhuman agency can only be understood as or in relation to the human. In early descriptions of the Return’s setting, Hardy writes an analogy that provides the heath with a human approximation. Hardy writes that “the untameable, Ishmaelitish [sic] thing that Egdon now was it always had been.” (11). “Ishmaelitish” implies the existence of a closely connected relationship between heath and civilization, human and nonhuman. The heath now has a body – Ishmael – as does civilization – the brother, Isaac. The “untameable” heath becomes condensed into a human form. The two concepts are penetrated by the same genetic substance, sharing DNA from their father. Though Hardy equates these human and nonhuman constructs – rather than attempting to subordinate one to the other – he cannot avoid the hierarchy invoked by including this allusion in the novel. The human and nonhuman are written to have a shared importance, and their influences are interconnected, as are their origins. It is implied that human rules and intelligible facts start to slip away and become meshed with the awkward and untamable force of the nonhuman. However, Hardy invokes a charged biblical allegory in order to make this point. Readers can infer from this reference that the heath is wild, wandering but also that it is the inferior and unwanted sibling when compared to its opposite.
This understanding is emphasized further because, in *Return of the Native*, Hardy describes the landscape to have a capacity for conscious processes that resemble those of a human being. An earlier description of the setting in *Return* includes an exaggerated personification of Egdon Heath that positions it within a peculiar relationship to human characters in the novel, which is complicated because the heath exerts agency. Hardy writes that it “embrowned itself,” occupying the subject role of the sentence and being able to give its appearance a specific color. The heath acts as the subject of a sentence again when it is described as being capable of “exhaling darkness” (9). However, the heath is also described as an “unenclosed wild,” boundless but also defined – as “wild” – in its relation to humanity. Additionally, the heath appears as a human being at times within the novel. The Heath is “aroused to reciprocity. The storm was its lover, and the wind was its friend. Then it became home of strange phantoms” (11). The heath is capable of feeling aroused. It can love and have friends. Not only does this description personify the heath by giving it a capacity for feeling human emotion – like arousal, love and friendship – it also places it within a social network that resembles humanity’s by analogy.

This type of nonhuman personification extends not just to nonhuman environments like the heath but to nonhuman concepts in Hardy’s world. These personifications often appear within specific phonetic descriptions that Hardy uses to articulate the relationship between human and nonhuman forces in the novels. These phonetic occurrences are often contained within uniquely notable syntactic constructions and are important to understanding how Hardy seeks to immerse the human characters of his novels in the viscous porosity of the trans-corporeal. One instance of this personification appears very early in *The Woodlanders*, when the barber Percomb visits Marty South to buy from her clippings of her hair. Marty steps out of a
shed and into the dark outdoors. The narrator quips, “Night, that strange personality, which within walls brings ominous introspectiveness and self-distrust, but under the open sky banishes such subjective anxieties as too trivial for thought, gave Marty South a less perturbed and brisker manner now” (16-17). In this one sentence, Hardy invokes the entirety of the universe, the infinite blackness of the dark “open sky” and places Marty and her anxieties within it. It is an unfamiliar, even uncomfortable, perspective, yet “Night” is given “a strange personality.” In this vast, infinite framework the human begins to appear “too trivial for thought.” Anxieties become “subjective” and are easily banished by the sky. This blackness acts on its own, as well, and it does so in a way that alters Marty’s consciousness. It becomes almost a part of Marty, penetrating her attitude and giving her a changed “manner.” With this personality, “Night” acts as a person: conversing with, reassuring and calming Marty South.

The syntax of the sentence emphasizes how “Night” exists as a personified being. Subject and verb are split by a massive parenthetical that is almost twice as long as the sentence itself. Initially in that parenthetical, “Night” is given “personality,” making it – if not exactly human – an entity capable of human agency and action. The parenthetical descriptor recurs in order to expand upon the characteristics of Night’s personality. Night is described as if it has a physical form, some kind of body. Just like the night, it can exist outside, certainly, but Night can also come inside and exist “within walls.” Because of this, the parenthetical extract of this sentence also demonstrates how Hardy is limited in his presentation of the nonhuman world in his novels. The parenthetical separates “Night” from the rest of the sentence and forces readers to consider it as the stand-alone subject of the sentence. Night does not exist simply as a darkened sky filled with twinkling stars but as a “personality,” an entity with its own subjecthood and agency and that acts alongside Marty South. Imagine if the sentence were simply “Night gave Marty South a
less perturbed and brisker manner now.” It would be a run-of-the-mill, a familiar description of how a person is affected when stepping out of a stuffy room and into the cool, darkened outdoors. Instead, Hardy forces readers, with that lengthy parenthetical description, to contend with Night, an entity endowed with personality and capable of standing alone.

At times, the nonhuman protects characters and works to promote their interests while, at other times, it treats them harshly. Towards the end of Return, as Clym and Diggory Venn rush to find Eustacia and Wildeve, Thomasin follows with her baby. The stormy weather is personified and written about as if it is in control of its own behavior. “The noise of the wind over the heath was shrill, and as if it whistled for joy at finding a night as congenial as this” (349). Again, Hardy demonstrates that nonhuman agency can only be described by utilizing a humanist lexicon. The wind whistles, and suddenly it appears embodied, with pursed lips and a curled tongue. The stormy night joyously, ominously and almost maniacally. It shrieks out from the darkness of the night. Yet, for Thomasin at least, the menacing qualities of her surroundings turn out to protect her. “Sometimes the path led her to hollows between thickets of tall and dripping bracken, dead, though not yet prostrate, which enclosed her like a pool” (349). The path leads Thomasin, who passively follows along. The dark thickets – the very reeds through which the wind is howling – protect her from the brunt of the storm, and keep her dry. Thomasin and her baby arrive at a scene of doom that could very well have been their own. While the path led Thomasin to safety, while the bracken keeps her dry and protected from the stormy wind, it brings Eustacia to the bottom of a weir, where she drowns and dies.

If one were to ask in whose interest these nonhuman forces operated, it would be difficult to answer with anything other than the human writing the story, Thomas Hardy. He is constrained to write a novel that follows the conventions of the period and the desires of his
publishers. Earlier, at the dance attended by Eustacia and Wildeve, the pale ray of the evening light arrived to provide drama and conflict, primarily between Eustacia and the spouse – Clym – whom abandoned to dance with her other lover. Here, the wind and the mysterious forest path act together to bring the story to a suitable end. Again, Hardy’s experiment with the nonhuman highlights the necessity of an anthropocentric ontology to the conventions of the novel – specifically that the novel must resolve with a definite conclusion. Within the form of a novel, interactions between human and nonhuman forms cannot exist in a “general flux” indefinitely.

One of Hardy’s uniquely trans-corporeal characters in Giles Winterborne. The lovable underdog of The Woodlanders is described as having a deeply sympathetic connection with the nonhuman world around him. In an early scene of the story, Giles and Marty South are alone in a clearing, tasked with planting pine saplings. Hardy introduces the pine trees by giving readers a sense that the saplings have a human form. Giles can hear their “sighs” as well as their “soft musical breathing” as if the branches hide lungs and a larynx (64). The pine trees sing and breathe, and they also react immediately to human touch. “Winterborne’s fingers…endowed with a gentle conjuror’s touch in spreading the roots of each little tree, resulting in a sort of caress under which the delicate fibres all laid themselves in their proper directions for growth” (63). Hardy describes the connection between Giles and the saplings as almost magical or supernatural. He has a “conjuror’s touch.” Giles has “a marvelous power of making trees grow…there was a sort of sympathy between himself and the fir, oak, or beech that he was operating on; so that the roots took hold of the soil in a few days” (63). As a paid woodsman, this sort of talent provides Giles with his livelihood. He mentions that the foreman selected him specifically to do the planting. Additionally, Giles shows care for the nonhuman forms he helps to grow. He caresses the delicate roots, much in contrast to the way he “seem[s] to shovel in the
earth quite carelessly” (63). This connection, again, leads to pragmatic results. The roots respond effectively and immediately to Giles’ touch and take hold in the soil quickly. He also has a knowledge of Little Hintock’s weather patterns that could easily be mistaken for being mystical: “He put most of the roots towards the south-west; for, he said, in forty years’ time, when some great gale is blowing from that quarter, the trees will require the strongest holdfast on that side to stand against it and not fall” (63). His ability to predict the wind directions years into the future, as well as his ability to spur the growth of the saplings in such a way that ensures they survive that wind, is indicative of how immersed Giles has become in the trans-corporeal environment of Little Hintock. He has access to this knowledge, which extends far beyond the bounds of his present-day, physical body, almost instantaneously.

But Giles’ connection with the nonhuman world has its downside, and he still exists within the novel’s human society. The nonhuman penetrates his being and marks him, at inconvenient times, as being unworthy of a relationship with the highly-educated Grace Melbury. The two were meant to marry upon Grace’s return to Little Hintock, but both Grace’s and her father’s pride in her newly-cultivated state interfere, which leads to Grace’s engagement to the scientific-minded Dr. Fitzpiers. Midway through the novel, Grace – who is beginning to doubt her match with the doctor – spies on Giles while he works with a cider press. His viscous porosity is shown to be a defining characteristic of his because, though Giles “wore his shirt sleeves rolled up beyond his elbows, to keep them unstained” with apple juice, he nevertheless becomes shot-through with the muck and muddle of his nonhuman surroundings (175). “Fragments of the apple-rind had alighted upon the brim of his hat…while brown pips of the same fruit were sticking among the down upon his fine round arms, and in his beard” (175). In this description, Giles wears the refuse of cider-making – bits of mashed-up apple – almost like a
second skin. The work – and the messiness inherent to it – becomes a part of Giles and forces Grace to realize the social consequences of how easily Giles can be permeated by the nonhuman. Though she calls out to him, fondly at first, she becomes almost aghast at her prior attraction. “No,” she remarks. “I could never have married him!” (176). Even he – as pervaded by nonhuman elements as he is confined by the human structures of class status. Giles, though at times appearing to be so influenced by nonhuman elements that he is described as “Autumn’s very brother,” remains within the novel’s human constructions (205).

With the publication of his chapter “Ecological Hardy” in 2001, Richard Kerridge brought the Victorian author into the ecocritical canon by highlighting how Hardy’s narrative tone emphasizes the interdependence between human characters and the natural world. Kerridge argues that the natural world Hardy depicts exists an independent nonhuman force, capable of acting on its own and without considering the morality or happiness of human beings. Hardy’s depiction of nonhuman forces is crucial to Return of the Native. Kerridge revels in a description of Clym at work cutting furze in a field, writing that Yeobright “discovers, in work rather than contemplation, a release from self-consciousness and alienation. He has literally come closer to nature” (Kerridge 140). Clym becomes “this man from Paris…disguised by his leather accoutrements, and by the goggles he was obliged to wear over his eyes…He was a brown spot in the midst of an expanse of olive-green gorse, and nothing more” (Return 244). Kerridge exults in this description of Clym, suggesting that he has successfully obtained “unalienated pleasure in nature…in the course of daily work” (Kerridge 136). Clym’s work as a furze-cutter opens him to the influence of the nonhuman environment in which he exists.

However, Kerridge’s ability to portray the nonhuman remains within the novel’s anthropocentric, humanist lexicon as Hardy’s is. Kerridge writes that – through his work – Clym
has “come closer to nature,” a statement that maintains the boundary between human and nonhuman within his analysis (140). Though the speck that Kerridge admires so much occupies a position within a flat ontology, parts of Kerridge’s argument rely upon the opposite interpretation. Kerridge writes that, for Clym, “unalienated pleasure in nature occurs…neither in distress nor leisure” (136). This state of pleasure, which Clym achieves by becoming the brown spot, comes after Clym experiences “a release from self-consciousness” (140). Kerridge’s analysis of the scene forces Clym and the heath back into their human and nonhuman categories. Clym experiences pleasure from the heath – superior to and deriving a pleasant feeling from a natural object. He uses this analysis to critique human materialism and wealth. He interprets the scene to depict the enlightenment of a bourgeois Parisian has “come closer to nature” through his hard work as a furze cutter, which leads to “unalienated pleasure in nature” (140, 136).

Here, however, the heath appears to have a mysterious effect on Clym, one that Hardy does not appear to be aware of or – at least – does not explicitly describe. Both in the scene and Kerridge’s interpretation, Clym’s conscious faculties come under the influence of nonhuman forces – just as Eustacia’s did under the influence of the pale evening light that shone down upon the dance and just as Marty’s did when stepping out into the influence of Night’s “strange personality.” Hardy describes Clym as “a brown spot…and nothing more” (244). Clym is, from this perspective, a speck – and only distinguishable from a vast expanse of plant life because of a differentiation in color. The bird’s-eye point-of-view literally flattens the ontology of the scene and forces readers to view Clym and the heath as if they exist in only two dimensions. This flattened structure removes the depth that would have distinguished that brown spot from the green expanse. Besides the fact that one is green and the other is brown, the two forms are very much the same. Readers cannot, despite Kerridge’s inference, even see that Clym is working or
taking pleasure in his work. His mental processes – an understanding of which gives grounds to infer a sense of agency – as well as his physical processes – witness of which gives grounds to infer a sense of autonomy – are obscured from view. Clym becomes a spot and nothing more. This occurs even despite Hardy’s earlier personification of the heath, invoked by its comparison to the biblical Ishmael, and Clym becomes subsumed by the nonhuman landscape. The human and nonhuman forces become enmeshed with each other to a degree that both Kerridge’s analysis and Hardy’s narration do not fully realize.

It might still have been possible for Hardy to portray the breaking down of the boundary between human and nonhuman within a novel, but it would have required a more intense experimentation with the form of that novel itself. The ending of Return of the Native demonstrated a conventional finality that is almost avoided during the closing paragraphs of The Woodlanders, when Marty South stands before Giles Winterborne’s grave:

As this solitary and silent girl stood there in the moonlight, a straight slim figure, clothed in a plaitless gown, the contours of womanhood so undeveloped as to be scarcely perceptible, the marks of poverty and toil effaced by the misty hour, she touched sublimity at points, and looked almost like a being who had rejected with indifference the attribute of sex for the loftier quality of abstract humanism. (366)

This is the end of the story, Marty standing there and professing her undying love for Giles. The ending dissolves, just as Marty does into the mist. The romance between Grace and Fitzpiers is wrapped up with a marriage, but the plot as a whole does not resolve. Marty is left to stand resolutely in the graveyard and find a conclusion to her love story beyond the scope of the text.

Within the passage, Marty disappears into a nonhuman expanse, just as Clym did. The corporeal elements of her body, “marks of poverty and toil,” disappear into the fog of the night.
She loses her sexual characteristics – “her contours of womanhood” – in this nonhuman mist. This obfuscation of human character, cultivated elements of personality, appears even in the structure of the passage. The alliterative sibilant “s” pervades this entire passage, shrouding it in a phonetic mist similar to the fog that floats around Marty. She is “solitary and silent,” and “a straight slim figure.” The hissing “s” haunts and threatens to erase the boundaries between human and natural. The mist wipes away “marks of poverty and toil,” and brings Marty – like Clym – far enough away from her cultured station in Little Hintock to “touch[ing] sublimity.” However, giving the ending of the novel some concreteness, through the mention of her now “abstract humanism,” the ending of the novel still preserves Marty’s human form.

Hardy comments on how difficult it is to portray the relation between human and nonhuman entities in his penultimate novel, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*: “We may wonder whether at the acme and summit of the human progress these anachronisms will become corrected by a finer intuition, a closer interaction of the social machinery…but such completeness is not to be prophesied, or even conceived as possible” (43). He suggests that intuition may, somehow, close the lexical gaps that separate human from nonhuman, civilization from nature. Yet that such an interaction is not to be “even conceived as possible” indicates that the findings of Hardy’s novelistic experiment – that the ghost of humanist logic remains within, and in fact even defines, a critique of humanist conventions – do not appear just because the experiment takes place within a novel. It is, perhaps, a perspective originating from and defined by the human mind that limits the possibility of such a conception. Indeed, even the theories of human-nonhuman interaction discussed throughout this chapter encounter a similar conceptual limit. Even their basic terminology for material agency (“nonhuman” or “more-than-human” or “other-than-human”) necessarily relates back to the human being. The humanist conventions that are
revealed through Hardy’s nonhumanist experiment uncover the existence of anthropocentric concepts that are therefore inherent and fundamental to philosophical understandings of the human being rather than symptoms of a misguided anthropocentric outlook.
Chapter Three

Understanding Thomas Hardy’s Character as Assemblage

The existence of and influence exerted by nonhuman forces in Thomas Hardy’s texts prompts a new investigation of the characters contained within his novels. The anthropomorphic individuals who act as characters are immersed within a system of interconnected yet autonomous actants, which appear both as human and nonhuman forms. Actants of contradictory volition can even appear within the same individual, as in the case of Thomasin discussed in the previous chapter. The name “Thomasin,” which refers to a specific anthropomorphic character, includes rational thought of Thomasin – which causes her to doubt her two engagements – as well as the erratic impulses of Thomasin – which push her towards matrimony. In this discussion, the name “Thomasin,” though it refers to a specific character, does not refer to a specific actant. Instead the name refers to a corporeal conduit through which diverging actants operate.

Johnathan Frow’s recent book, Character & Person, provides a definition of character that helps to make sense of the contradictory actants that appear within Hardy’s presentation. Frow writes that character is “the literary or dramatic or filmic instance of an operation within a social assemblage, by means of which the reader is inscribed into the terms of a particular formation of personhood” (ix). Key to Frow’s definition is that a character operates within and through the assemblage of a text – both within its fictional environment and between the text and its readers. This places a limit on what characters can be. They must be recognizable in relation to “a particular formation of personhood” – both to readers and to other characters within the story. A character is treated as such by others operating within the text and is understood to be such by the text’s audience, which projects its own assumption about what constitutes
personhood and sees those presumptions reflected back to them. Additionally, Frow writes that character “is a moment of an apparatus or the mobilization of subjectivity within the terms of an ethical or legal or religious or civic mode of action” (ix). The description of character as involving an apparatus allows for the divergent actants signified by the name “Thomasin” to be reconciled within a single entity – referred to in and out of the text as “Thomasin” – that acts within the text’s socio-political framework. This singularized embodiment of a subject is, for Frow, “central to the definition of persons and characters…its key coordinates are the boundaries between inside and outside; between self and other…” (ix). Here is where Hardy’s character departs from Frow’s construction. As described in the previous chapter, characters written by Hardy are often penetrated by and subject to the influence of actants that are located outside their bodies. These characters are and exist within an open system of unbounded agency, which appears similar to the theorized systems put forth by Elizabeth Grosz and Stacy Alaimo that were described in the previous chapter. The effect of the open and trans-corporeal systems of intermeshed actants will be clarified within the terms of this discussion with the introduction of Jane Bennett’s concept of distributive agency, which she discusses in her book *Vibrant Matter* (2010).

Both Frow’s and Hardy’s presentation of character-as-assemblage relates to a question of realism. In his book, Frow is primarily concerned with understanding persons as characters and characters as persons. He investigates how a human being’s social construction of the self resembles the literary construction of fictional human beings and how those constructions inform each other. Though this is not an explicit qualification of Frow’s definition of character, that definition nonetheless relates to an understanding of what people are like in the flesh. Thomas Hardy, as he wrote in notes included in Michael Millgate’s *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy,*
was similarly concerned with faithfully representing real human beings through his novel’s characters: “The writer’s problem is how to strike a balance between the uncommon and the ordinary so as on the one hand to give interest, on the other to give reality…the uncommonness must be in the events, not in the characters; and the writer’s art lies in shaping the uncommonness while disguising its unlikelihood” (154). Implicit to both Frow’s and Hardy’s sets of conditions is believability – making characters appear and act in ways that we are likely to encounter in the world around us. This chapter argues that the depiction of characters who are penetrated by nonhuman actants changes what has been understood as Hardy’s realist presentation, which does not necessarily correspond to the phenomenological, subjective experience of a unified psyche. Instead, Hardy’s own presentation of a realist character is best comprehended as consisting of an apparatus that must be understood in relation to its existence within an environment replete with nonhuman actants.

Hardy wrote during the height of the Victorian realist novel, but, even at that time, the term was complicated and fraught with multiple meanings. Francis O’Gorman summarizes realism as an “imaginative prose that…in one way or another…represent[s] the textures and experiences of lived life…[and] makes its material from the observed world” (113-4). However, as O’Gorman notes, Hardy had doubts about the usefulness of the term, writing that it was “an unfortunate, an ambiguous word…taken up by literary society like a view-halloo” (O’Gorman 113). Hardy invokes the elusiveness of the term by describing it as a view-halloo, the cry a hunter gives after spotting a fox. The use of the hunting phrase as a descriptor also indicates that the term could be improperly, just as a nervous hunter can cry out the view-halloo after catching a glimpse of a squirrel.
Hardy’s sense of realism is particularly tricky, especially because his novels include some incredible examples of human behavior. O’Gorman, attempting to pin down the vain “view-halloo” that is the declaration of a novel’s realism, criticizes those who use the “sense of whether a novel is ‘true to life’” as a determination of its realism, writing that such a sense is “no useful tool in thinking sophisticatedly about ‘fiction’” (116). O’Gorman believes that, instead of remaining faithful to the world as it exists, Hardy’s writing “exemplifies a form of realism that examines and exposes the responses of ‘ordinary’ individuals to extraordinary circumstances” (116). O’Gorman would say that Hardy involves common characters in uncommon situations, but what seems more likely is that he immerses common characters in uncommon environments. This would explain O’Gorman’s comment that, for Hardy, “the real did not seem, sometimes, to inhere…in the observed, tangible world at all” (117). Hardy describes environments that contain an uncommon number of nonhuman actants, perhaps so many that most readers would not recognize the environments as realistic facsimiles of their own.

However, such environments may, in fact, be real. A vital framework that will help to explain the literary existence of Hardy’s characters comes from Jane Bennett’s theory of distributive agency, which she outlines in her book Vibrant Matter. Bennett writes that bodies enhance their power in or as a heterogeneous assemblage. What this suggests for the concept of agency is that the efficacy or effectivity to which that term has traditionally referred becomes distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts. (23)

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5 The most incredible and often-cited example of Hardy’s unbelievable characters, which will not be discussed here in detail, is Michael Henchard of The Mayor of Casterbridge. Henchard, quite unbelievably, starts the novel by getting drunk at a county fair and selling his wife and daughter for a handful of pounds.
Bennett conceives of agency as existing within a “federation of actants,” rather than existing as a unit of willpower that is contained within the self of an individual’s self (28). She includes nonhuman actants within this confederation of distributive agency: “Humanity and nonhumanity have always performed an intricate dance with each other. There was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity…” (31). Bennett also describes how social structures “work with and against human purposes” (29).

Structures contain human agency, even though they lack agency themselves: “there is no agency proper in assemblages, only the effervescence of the agency of individuals acting alone or in concert with each other” (29). Throughout this chapter, this concept – distributed agency which involves multiple and competing actants of both human and nonhuman origin – will help to explain what appears to be a confoundingly ruptured identities – which are actually comprised of divergently-motivated actants – of various characters within Hardy’s novels.

Hardy’s characters have been miscast, mostly due to an insistence that they exist as analogues to real-life human beings. John Goode, in an analysis of Return of the Native, understands Eustacia Vye to exist as that unified, but limited, subject. He asks “is Eustacia, for example, a romantic rebel or a silly provincial little girl whose idea of life is a shopping trip to Budmouth?” (38). Certainly, Goode presents a valid way of understanding Eustacia, in that he adequately reflects the desires that motivate her throughout the novel, specifically that she is desperate to escape Egdon Heath. Eustacia resents being identified with the heath or the labor of those working upon it. That Clym picks up the hard labor of furze-cutting and refuses to return to Paris drives a wedge between him and Eustacia. “It is so dreadful,” she says “a furze-cutter; and you a man who have lived about the world, and speak French, and know the classics, and who are fit for what is so much better than this” (248). To be reminded that her husband is “a poor
fellow in brown leather” Eustacia interprets to be a shameful “taunt” (248). Eustacia’s primary goal throughout the text is to move away from the heath, and what attracts her to Clym in the first place is her fantasy that he will take her to live “in that rookery of pomp and vanity, Paris” (Return 108). As Goode might put it, Clym certainly impresses Eustacia the one might imagine some hunky high school quarterback would affect an overly-romantic teenager who dreams of being whisked into a fairy tale. Clym appears “a young and clever man…coming into that lonely heath from, of all contrasting places in the world, Paris. It was like a man coming from heaven” (108). However, to cast Eustacia as either “a romantic rebel or a silly provincial little girl” is to oversimplify the multiplicity of her existence within the text and to ignore her status as character-as-assemblage. Though she resembles the literary – and maybe true-to-life – trope of an overly-romantic woman, Eustacia is – like Thomasin and many of Hardy’s other characters – subjected to a variety of human and nonhuman actants that affect her behavior.

Eustacia is described as being remarkably out of her environment while living in Egdon Heath. The narrator wonders “why did a woman of this sort live on Egdon Heath? Budmouth was her native place, a fashionable sea-side resort…she hated the change; she felt like one banished” (68). She even holds the community’s joyous tradition of holiday mumming in “the greatest contempt” (120). However, though Eustacia does not identify with the heath, it acts in ways that significantly affect her existence within the novel. The unpleasant feeling that Eustacia has for the heath appears to be mutual, as her environment is described to be an inhospitable place for her to live. For Eustacia “love was but a doleful joy. Yet she desired it, as one in as desert would be thankful for brackish water” (69). For Eustacia, the lush, vegetation-filled heath transforms into an arid, barren desert which provides her with no sustenance or fulfillment. Even her ardent opposition to the heath do not make Eustacia immune to it. She still exists within its
assemblage of influences. In the previous chapter, we saw the effects that the nonhuman has on Eustacia when she goes to a village dance, where “a new vitality entered her form” under the “pale ray of the evening” (252). She is swept away by the emotion instigated by her situation, and Eustacia is “driv[en]…back into old paths” and begins conspiring to elope with Wildeve once more (254). This is the part of Eustacia’s existence that Goode fails to include in his oversimplified casting of Eustacia as either “romantic rebel” or “silly provincial little girl.” He, like the scholars influenced by Gillian Beer discussed in the first chapter, fails to see nonhuman environment – the heath of Egdon – as an active, agented entity. Instead, Goode writes that, as the story of Return progresses, “the heath becomes more and more a mere backdrop to the complex sequence of changing relationships” contained within the novel and that Hardy’s descriptions stress “the heath as an object of appreciation” (42, 44). Goode, in his analysis of Hardy’s presentation of character, ignores the heath’s status as an actant within the text and enforces an impenetrable boundary between human and nonhuman entities.

The many interactions with and related to marriage depicted within Return, Woodlanders and Tess demonstrate how agency in Hardy’s novels is depicted within the workings of an assemblage of actants. Hardy, in part due to his personal experiences, was a matrimonial cynic. Ann Heilmann describes the author as having an attitude that “systematically espoused marriage as a ‘sordid’ apparatus of social and legal control” (351). The structure of marriage can be understood as an actant within Hardy’s texts, as it works to inhibit, influence and even control characters throughout his novels, even if such structures lack their own agency. Later – when discussing The Woodlanders – Heilmann writes that “Grace becomes despoiled the moment she enters wifehood,” an interpretation which implies that marriage has the ability to transform individual characters (355). Through marriage, which places her directly under the influence of
her husband, Grace loses her autonomy. Before proposing, Grace’s suitor, Dr. Fitzpiers, “kept himself continually near her, dominating any rebellious impulse, and shaping her will into passive concurrence with all his desires” in order to secure his marriage to Grace (171). On her wedding day, she is shoved into a passive construction: “Five hours later she was the wife of Fitzpiers,” as if she were dragged to the altar (Woodlanders 173). After a few months of marriage, Grace’s father frets about her condition due to her suddenly acting “as if she had nothing to do, or think of, or care for” (219). Similar to the way in which Thomasin’s thought is overwhelmed by her nonhuman impulse or the way that Eustacia’s behavior is influenced by the heath of Egdon, Grace loses her volition to the effects of marriage.

Marriage also forces Grace to exist within the text as a discontinuous and schismatic character with a ruptured identity – an example of how Hardy’s characters exist within an almost-paradoxical assemblage of social structures. From the moment of her marriage onward, Grace is referred to by three separate names. Her textual being becomes signified by “Grace” – her common name – “Miss Melbury” – her maiden name – and “Mrs. Fitzpiers” – her married name. Each of these names carries a different connotation and can be invoked by other characters for various purposes. Each has a different meaning, which is generated depending upon where Grace exists in relation to the social assemblage of Little Hintock. “Grace” is what she is called by friends and family. “Miss Melbury” is used by those showing deference to Grace before her marriage, and it invokes her high status within the community of Little Hintock due her connection with the wealth and power of her father. “Mrs. Fitzpiers” is another honorific, tying Grace through marriage to the respectful social position of a doctor’s wife. However, the narrator of The Woodlanders uses these various terms interchangeably when referring to Grace.

Sometimes there appears to be a purpose for this multiplicity. For example, when she appears
alongside the socially-superior Mrs. Charmond, Grace becomes the charming, educated, lady-like – but youthfully inferior – “Miss Melbury.” Grace exists within a vast community of actants whose own actions and determinations affect her existence. The interchangeability of her various names makes the contextual contingency of her class – and the level of privilege and respect she it demands obvious.

There are instances when these various terms – and their various implications – refer to the same individual almost simultaneously. A comical instance of this occurs at the start of chapter thirteen when Grace Melbury interacts with Suke Damson, a scene that complicates Grace’s marriage to Fitzpiers because, during it, Grace notices Suke’s “sound and strong” jaws, indicative that Fitzpiers had lied about removing one of Suke’s teeth earlier in the story to cover up his infidelity:

Crack, crack, went Suke’s jaws…Grace’s mind reverted to the toothdrawing scene described by her husband; and for the first time she wondered if that narrative were really true, Susan’s jaws being so obviously sound… Grace…conquered her reluctance to speak to the girl.

‘Good evening Susan…’

‘Good evening, Miss Melbury…’ (208)

Later in that conversation, Suke calls Grace “Mrs. Fitzpiers,” and Grace’s reply is written as “‘So much the better for your stomach,’ said Mrs. Fitzpiers.” (208). Within the course of one page, Grace Melbury is referred to “Grace,” “Miss Melbury,” and “Mrs. Fitzpiers” by the narrator. Suke Damson is swept up in the confusion as well, calling Grace both Miss Melbury and Mrs. Fitzpiers. The change from one name to the next serves to complicate a reader’s understanding Grace – as an anthropomorphic individual within the text – because it presents an overwhelming
number of potential iterations as which that character can exist, each with unique relations to other actants within the story and their own connotation of social status and authority. Grace as “Miss Melbury,” Grace as “Mrs. Fitzpiers,” and Grace as “Grace” exist at the same time. She can occupy each of those roles all at once, in part because she is immersed within a network of actants, each of which – even though existing simultaneously – give different impressions of who Grace is. By the end of the novel – by reaffirming her commitment to her husband – Grace, the character, becomes subsumed by the structure of marriage. In her last scene, Grace and her husband are shown walking hand in hand, denoted as “Mr. and Mrs. Fitzpiers” (363).

All characters that appear within these novels are affected by the environment around them, although to varying degrees. Some of Hardy’s characters are presented as being almost entirely permeable to outside influences. These characters most closely resemble the theory of the trans-corporeal outlined by Stacy Alaimo and are immersed within and assembled from the nonhuman forces that exist in their surrounding environment. Giles Winterbourne, whose hopes can be buoyed or dashed based on interactions with the nonhuman, is one of these highly permeable characters, as are Clym Yeobright and Tess Durbeyfield. Other characters appear as unified subjects that are less susceptible to the influences of their nonhuman environment. However, even they are penetrated by some influencing force and usually to their catastrophe. Mrs. Yeobright – whose domineering enforces class and marital norms throughout Return of the Native – can be seen as an impermeable character, as can Eustacia Vye, Dr. Fitzpiers and Felicity Charmond. Finally, there are characters that exist between these two ends of the axis. These characters can be influenced by nonhuman forces – sometimes significantly – yet are not as interwoven with them as the permeable characters. Angel Clare, Diggory Venn, Thomasin and Grace all find a balance here
In *Return of the Native*, the less permeable characters – Eustacia and Mrs. Yeobright – are typified by their oppositional attitude towards Egdon Heath. Like Eustacia, Mrs. Yeobright closely aligns herself with social structures and institutions and is closed off from the influences of the heath. Eustacia idolizes wealth and social recognition while Mrs. Yeobright acts as the gatekeeper to marriage and marital decency throughout the text. First Mrs. Yeobright chastises Thomasin for her “disgraceful performance” after the young girl bolts from the altar in the book’s early chapters (42). Then she facilitates Thomasin’s disastrous union with the adulterous Wildeve by standing in the way of Diggory Venn when he comes to propose to Thomasin. To bar the redleman from even seeing her niece, Mrs. Yeobright voices what she anticipates to be the “objections” the heath community’s social conscience might have to their union: both Venn’s work as a migrant vendor of red dye and the fact that failing to marry Wildeve would prevent Thomasin from appearing “before the world without a slur upon her name” (94-5). Immediately after discouraging Venn from making a proposal, Mrs. Yeobright meets with Wildeve and pressures him into renewing his interest in her niece – a gambit that proves to be successful.

Mrs. Yeobright’s involvement with matrimony continues when she attempts to prevent Clym’s marriage to Eustacia. She is unsuccessful, which causes a rift to grow between the mother and her son. This failure to enforce social propriety has a great effect on her emotional state and marks a moment when Mrs. Yeobright is shown to be interdependent with the actants around her. When Clym leaves to marry Eustacia, Mrs. Yeobright’s “face changed its rigid aspect for one of blank despair. After a while she wept…” (207). However, she maintains her interest in enforcing the strictures of marriage. Later, she explains to Diggory Venn that “Both [Eustacia and Clym] disobeyed me in marrying; therefore I have no interests in their households” (263). She is moved to take an interest in Clym not because of maternal sympathy but because
she is told that the marriages of Clym to Eustacia and Thomasin to Wildeve are under threat:

“Then there was an understanding between him and Clym’s wife when he made a fool of Thomasin!” (263). She is ultimately motivated to reconcile with Clym and his wife because of concerns that relate to the social stature of her family (being “made a fool of” as she says). Similar to how Eustacia is indirectly toppled by a moment of trans-corporeal penetration, Mrs. Yeobright is doomed before being able to bring her plan into fruition. Her skin is pierced by the fangs of an adder; her blood becomes mixed with poison, and she dies on the heath.

In *The Woodlanders*, Fitzpiers and Felicity Charmond are similarly shown to oppose the influence of nonhuman agencies that exist within the text and, instead, align themselves with the social structures of their communities. Fitzpiers is out of place in the forest village, just as Eustacia was. He clings to the social prestige associated with his medical profession and scientific interests, even though, after a few months, “the loneliness of Hintock life was beginning to tell upon his impressionable nature” (125). Though we see the effect that existing within Hintock’s assemblage has on the doctor, he maintains his strong interest in science and Grace Melbury. He continues to condescend to others living within the village. This description also links Fitzpiers with Eustacia, who is also out of place in a rich natural environment. Charmond is also out of sync with Little Hintock, described at one point as “the wrong sort of woman for Hintock – hardly knowing a beech from a woak” (248). The two work together to influence others in order to enforce social structures, just as Mrs. Yeobright upholds the sanctity of the marital tradition in *Return*. Charmond is also described by Grace as being “superior in station and in every way” to all the natives of Hintock (241). These impermeable characters often work to undermine the autonomy of others rather than be subjected themselves to some kind of external influence.
Clym Yeobright stands in contrast to these characters as an individual who is permeated by nonhuman forces throughout the text. Clym has an inextricable connection to his nonhuman environment to such a degree that it defines him. He is first described as being “so inwoven with the heath in his boyhood that hardly anybody could look upon it without thinking of him” (166). Clym exists almost metonymically with the heath, insofar as those who view the heath think of Clym. However, the influences of the heath also exist within Clym. To separate him from the attitudes of Eustacia, Clym is described with this instruction from the narrator: “Take all the varying hates felt by Eustacia Vye towards the heath and translate them into loves, and you have the heart of Clym” (171). His care for this particular environment provides the foundation for his own heart. He is “inwoven” with the landscape and essential traits of his character are described in relation to Clym’s inwoven-ness with the heath.

Throughout the text, the narrator describes Clym in the passive voice, as if he is afflicted by the influences of various human and nonhuman actants that exist around him. When Clym leaves his mother to marry Eustacia, he leaves his childhood home “in great misery, which was several hours in lessening itself to a controllable level” (207). In this instance, a powerful emotion exists within Clym and grows to become more powerful than he is able to control. After leaving, he is powerless to his misery and must wait “several hours” before he is able to even handle his emotional distress. Another example of Clym’s passivity when subjected to the influences of other actants appears when he falls ill and begins to lose his sight. He reads voraciously, “in spite of a cold previously caught, which had weakened his eyes,” until a doctor comes to visit and orders Clym to rest (241). The rest proves to be counterproductive, as Clym starts “fretting with impatience at this interruption to a task he was so anxious to hasten...” (241). Clym’s desire to be successful – by achieving his goal of opening a schoolhouse on the
heath – overwhelms him and, again, subjects him to an emotional state that puts his actions beyond his conscious control. The impatience and anxiety that Clym feels goes so far as to rob him of his agency, as – due to the progression of his illness – “Clym was transformed into an invalid” (241). Even within the syntax of the sentence, Clym’s subjugation is made clear. He is described, in passive voice, to be made by some other force into “an invalid.”

Clym’s permeability also ruptures his identity, forcing him to transition from living as a wealthy, cultured Parisian to working hard as a furze-cutter to wandering the heath as an open-air preacher. His work as a furze-cutter brings him closer to the heath, a source of nonhuman influence within Return of the Native, transforms him, this time, into “a brown spot in the midst of an expanse of olive-green gorse, and nothing more” (244). Clym becomes subsumed within the heath, from the narrator’s perspective he is physically and actually “inwoven” with the grass and furze and vegetation. By the novel’s end, Clym has faded into the background, almost become part of the scenery. During the wedding reception of Thomasin and Diggory Venn, Clym finds himself in the front room of his house with Charley. The two watch the party through a window. Clym – whose eyesight has failed considerably – asks Charley to describe the scene. After Charley tells of the singing and dancing going on at the party, Clym asks “Do any of them seem to care about my not being there?” to which Charley replies “No – not a bit in the world.” (387). Soon after the wedding, Clym becomes a traveling, open-air preacher. In his work, Clym is shown to be further subsumed and permeated by the heath. He is described to be “a motionless figure standing on the top of the tumulus,” almost as if he were a plant or a rock on hillside (388). The people coming to hear his sermons see him as only “the erect form in the centre, piercing the sky” (388). When he finally appears in the scene as a distinctly human figure, Clym
is still, to some degree, lacking a corporeal boundary. He is described as the “man in their midst,” almost as if he is floating through his congregant crowd.

Tess is tremendously similar to Clym. At the start of the novel, she is described as “a mere vessel of emotion untinctured by experience,” an empty conduit vulnerable to the influences of those around her (15). Even at the end of the story, she remains a “vessel of emotions rather than reasons” as if her body is nearly empty of agency and she is merely a conduit for the influences of those around her (330). She is as subjected to act according to the impulse of her emotions as Clym or Thomasin, at one point so overwhelmed that she “felt almost ready to faint, so vivid was her sense of the crisis” (68). She has a tremendous sensitivity to outside influence and describes herself as being free from the physical bounds of her body: “I do know that our souls can be made to go outside our bodies when we are alive” (120).

There are several graphic and specific depictions during which Tess is harshly subjected to the influence of other actants within the text. Her primary antagonist is Alec, who masquerades as her wealthy cousin. When she first meets Alec, there is an uncomfortable moment when she is forced to eat a strawberry. Despite “putting her fingers between his hand and her lips,” Alec insists, and “in a slight distress [Tess] parted her lips and took it in” (44). This precedes a scene during which Alec sexually assaults Tess while she sleeps. Alec’s influence over Tess continues to the end of the story. In her own description of the event, Tess is compelled to act by Alec even when she murders him: “he bitterly taunted me…then I did it. My heart could not bear it” (372). By the end of the story, Tess is subsumed by these various, nonhuman influences like Clym: “Thus Tess walks on; a figure which is part of the landscape…” (280). This results in the narrator remarking on Tess’s ruptured identity, similar to – but more
pronounced than – Grace’s: “an immeasurable chasm was to divide our heroine’s personality thereafter from that previous self of hers” (74).

Between these two sets are the characters of Thomasin and Diggory Venn, who appear in *Return of the Native*, as well as Angel Clare. As described in the previous chapter, at the start of the story, Thomasin struggles to maintain her autonomy against nonhuman impulses that – though contained within her – are portrayed as being alien to her being. She also feels the synthetic force of social pressure, mostly generated by her aunt, to avoid bringing shame to her name. By the end of the story, Thomasin asserts her own autonomy and marries Diggory Venn, an act that she herself worries is too “rebellious” (378). She discusses the social pressure she feels – that Mrs. Yeobright “objected” to her marriage with Venn “because he was a reddleman” (379). Ultimately, Thomasin decides to marry, saying “it is going to be, after all. He thinks I may as well make up my mind, and I have got to think so too” (380).

Diggory Venn suffers similarly from the effects of nonhuman influence before asserting his own autonomy. Venn has left his father’s dairy farm to make his living as a travelling merchant of reddle, a potent red dye that, at the time of the story, is beginning to be used less and less by the British textile industry. The reddle’s pervasive effect, and the handler’s permeability, is so potent that Venn is constantly forced to assure people that red skin is not an innate trait to his being. Young Johnny Nunsuch asks if Venn was “born a reddleman,” to which Venn gives a long reply: “I should be as white as you if I were to give up the trade – that is, I should be white in time, perhaps six months: not at first, because ‘tis grow’d into my skin and won’t wash out” (75). He tells Mrs. Yeobright “I am not red by birth” when she begins to object to his courtship of Thomasin on the basis of how his profession has marked him as a common laborer (94). The reddle threatens not only his autonomy and marks him as being of an inferior social class.
But Venn is finally successful in winning the hand of Thomasin when he gives up the redle trade. He approaches Thomasin, much to Clym’s surprise, “no longer a redleman, but exhibiting the strangely altered hues of an ordinary Christian countenance” (368). Diggory Venn’s appearance is carefully expunged of the substance that infiltrated his skin to the point that “red, and all approach to red, was carefully expunged from every article of clothes upon him” (368). Once transformed, with the nonhuman redle removed from his being, Diggory is worthy of marrying Thomasin. Like Clym, Diggory Venn shows himself to be a permeable being. The redle, quite literally, penetrates the boundaries of his physical body. However, unlike the permeable characters, Diggory is not subsumed by this nonhuman force. He is able to extricate himself from the influence of the nonhuman redle.

Grace goes through a similar journey, during which she struggles against the influences of other actants that threaten her agency. Though there is “so much [that] she developed and progressed in manner and stature” as a result of her boarding school education, her father worries about the influence that Little Hintock will have on her daughter (45). He bemoans: “I know Grace will gradually sink down to our level again, and catch our manners and way of speaking” (80). Grace stands out in Little Hintock to Fitzpiers, who sees her as distinctly separated from the assemblage of the woodland community: “She cannot be a permanent resident in Hintock” he remarks. “She does not look like one” (114). Against the community’s assemblage, Grace “was proud, as a cultivated woman, to be the wife of a cultivated man” (173). Then she remarks that she “feel[s] as if I belonged to a different species from the people who are working in that yard” when looking on Giles and the other workers (179). Ultimately, she marries Fitzpiers and, under his influence, moves away from Little Hintock.
Angel Clare is also caught between the forces that exist around him. He becomes, like Grace, a mixture of the natural and the cultured. He first appears as a cultivated intellectual: “Mr. Angel Clare – he that is learning milking, and that plays the harp…he is a pa’son’s son, and is too much taken up wi’ his own thoughts to notice girls” (113). These characteristics set Angel apart from the environs of the Talbothays dairy farm: “Nevertheless, something nebulous, preoccupied, vague in his bearing and regard, marked him as one who probably had no very definite aim or concern about his material future” (113). He resists the social structures of wealth and status, “the material distinctions of rank and wealth he increasingly despised,” which allows him to begin to appreciate his life on the dairy farm (116). After spending some time on the dairy farm, Angel “unexpectedly…began to like the outdoor life for its own sake” (118). These influences leave their mark, as – after a while - Angel “was getting to behave like a farmer; he flung his legs about…the manner of the scholar had nearly disappeared” (158). Against these influences, Angel maintains his own agency: “Within the remote depths of his constitution, so gentle and affectionate as he was in general, there lay hidden a hard logical deposit, like a vein of metal in soft loam” (241). Angel, like the other admixture characters, is influenced by – but kept distant from – nonhuman actants.

It can be seen that, to varying degrees, the characters of Thomas Hardy’s novels exist as assemblages and, because of this, are subject to nonhuman influences. It is worth returning to the quandary of Hardy’s realism and the question of whether these characters exist as analogues to an individual human subject. Both questions lead to similar issues raised by Garrett Stewart and Audrey Jaffe, who provide interpretations of how Hardy’s placement of characters within an interacting assemblage of actants dismantles the subjecthood of those characters. According to Audrey Jaffe, Hardy’s writing “undermines the sense of specialness…[of] the realist subject”
(57). His writing is abound “with episodes – and a general feeling – of belatedness, lateness, secondariness” (65). Hardy’s inclusion and empowerment of nonhuman forces within his novels – as documented in the previous chapter – threatens the supremacy of the realist, human subject. The secondariness that Jaffe describes – the lack of specialness often associated with the status of a human individual – is best demonstrated by Old Man South, whose death very closely follows that of a tree. Garrett Stewart’s understanding of character development in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* is similarly affected by the influences of nonhuman forces. He writes that, in *Tess*, the “narrative’s own view of character development…[sees] character not as multifaceted but as schismatic, ruptural, discontinuous, self-alienating…track[ing] psychological transformation as a series of defaults and fractures” (190). Stewart expects maturation to be a continuous process, during which – over the course of the novel – a character learns information about their self and the world around them. Instead, he finds that character development occurs in *Tess* “not as unfolding maturation but as…wrenchingly undergone gaps” (190).

The gaps and fractures that Stewart detects in the development of Hardy’s characters and Jaffe’s conclusion about their “secondariness” both come about due to the effect of nonhuman actants. Thomasin, for example, might appear to careen wildly from one decision to its opposite in merely a few pages. At the start of the novel, she flees from the altar to avoid marrying Wildeve. By the end of the next chapter, she is convinced by her aunt to marry the man. At the end of the novel, she quickly overcomes the doubts she has about marrying Diggory Venn after a few paragraphs of conversation with her cousin. These apparent discontinuities are reconciled once Thomasin is understood to be discontinuous as herself. She contains and is under the influence of disparate human and nonhuman forces within the text. Her decision to marry Diggory Venn is not the result of a built-up process of maturation, but comes about due to the
sudden acquiescence of her doubting thoughts to her impulses. The realism that Hardy portrays involves a vision of a world in which human and nonhuman forces interact constantly. Not only does it involve constant change, but it is threatened constantly by the prospect of that change. His presentation of character is inherently – rather than incidentally – schismatic and ruptured due to the permeable, interpenetrated boundary that exists between human and nonhuman actants in the texts.
Conclusion

Hardy’s realism, then, bears a resemblance to the real-world environments described by Bruno Latour in his 2014 Holberg Prize lecture, later condensed into an article titled “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene.” At one point in his lecture, Latour posits that “one of the main puzzles of Western history is not that ‘there are people who still believe in animism’, but the rather naive belief that many still have in a de-animated world of mere stuff…” (7). Hardy writes into existence a world that is much more than de-animated “mere stuff.” His environments, best exemplified by Egdon Heath, include a plethora of nonhuman actants. His stories, though told from the long-reaching shadow of a sense of doom, are not predetermined and are, instead, constantly subjected to this threatening change. His characters are so influenced and changed by the assemblage of actants in which they exist that many do not appear to have continuous, self-contained identities. We see this idea within one of Hardy’s own literary notes, an extract taken from D.G. Ritchie’s *Philosophical Studies*: “It may perhaps be answered that our philosophical faith is not in an actually existing rational system of things…but in and end, a ‘final goal of ill’ towards which evolution moves; that the conception of evolution involves the conception of the Absolute as Becoming, not as Being” (*Literary Notes* 2: 2431). It is constant change, the activity of Darwin’s entangled bank, the persistent Becoming of evolution, that defines Hardy’s literary vision.
Works Cited


