



Gender Matrix In Thomas Hardy's Shorter Fiction Wessex Tales: Interlopers At The Knap

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Abstract: A study of the heroine, Sally Hall, and her reinforcement of Hardy's claim that "woman is not undeveloped man", her embodiment of the spirit of the New Woman, and her being a product of a time far ahead of her own.

Index Terms – Woman, Independence, Courage, Determination.

Thomas Hardy's texts, it has been observed, like women and dislike them, they depict both pleasure and pain, both arousal and anxiety (Brady, "Matters of Gender", 104). No one has created more attractive women of a certain class, women whom a man would be more likely to love or to regret loving.

The *Wessex Tales* was Hardy's first collection of short stories and the stories reflect the experience of a novelist at the height of his powers. Each of these stories has its origin in the village anecdotes but on closer examination, each deals with a situation involving love which is vitiated by life's ironies and perils and circumstance. The narratives reveal a keen psychological analysis of female behaviour within the frame work of social conditioning.

Sally Hall, the heroine of "Interlopers at the Knap" reinforces Hardy's claim in *Desperate Remedies*-- "woman is not undeveloped man." Sally embodies the spirit of the New Woman and belongs more to the new age than to nineteenth century Britain. She possesses ineffable charm, high spirits, intelligence, perceptiveness, and the independence of a woman who dares to say "No" to the accepted social condition called matrimony.

Charles Darton's initial response to Sally Hall displays the crippling rhetoric and arrogance of a man towards a woman he considers to be his social inferior. Marrying Sally, according to Darton is desirable because "Sally is comely, independent, simple character with no make-up about her who'll think me as much superior to her." The wiser Japheth John's reply to this sets the note to the play of the irony in the story. "I shouldn't call Sally all simple. Primarily because no Sally is; secondary because if some could be this one wouldn't" (117).

It is Hardy's description of Sally, however, which prepares us for the woman we grow to admire and like as the story progresses. "Roseatte good nature lit up her gaze, her features showed curves of decision and judgment and she might have been regarded without a mistake as warmhearted, quick-spirited handsome girl" (119). Sally displays none of the giddiness and recklessness of a young girl in love but exhibits, throughout the narrative, an understanding about men in general that is uncanny, "young men make such kind promise when they are near you, and forget 'em when they go away" (120). This maturity in judgment and behaviour is her strength in crises. Another endearing trait she possesses is a fierce loyalty to her loved ones. This excerpt from a conversation with her mother and her brother, Phil's, ill-timed return home reinforces this:

"Could no other misfortune happen to helpless women than this, which will quite upset my poor girl's chance of a happy life". "Nonsense, mother!" said Sally, vehemently, while her face flushed. Charles isn't the man to desert me! But if he should be and won't marry me because Phil's come, let him go and marry elsewhere. I won't be ashamed of my own flesh and blood for any man in England - Not I" (123)

Charles Darton fails Sally and proves to be a "deserter." He slighted Sally for "an uncured sentimental world" called Helena, who is also Phil's widow. It is to Sally's credit that she rises above her circumstances. Intuitively aware of the undercurrent between Darton and Helena, she pulls herself together and faces the inevitable with dignity. In crises, Sally stands tall, taller than Darton with all his self-professed claims of manliness and infallible superiority. Sally's independence "made her one of the least jealous women" (127) and totally in line with Hardy's great heroines, she decisively frees Darton to pursue his renewed interest in Helena: "Yes, you can," said a voice, suddenly a third figure stood beside them. It was Sally. "You can, since you wish to", she repeated, "She no longer belongs to another... my poor brother is dead!" (130).

And Hardy comments: "Her face was red, her eyes sparkled and all the women came to the front" (130). All the woman in Sally Hall, is a tribute to Hardy's conviction that "Woman is not undeveloped man." It is Sally who initiates the subsequent turn of events (she does what Darton wishes to but lacked in strength and courage) culminating in Darton's foolishness: "Why not Sally? I can't believe it! Young Mrs. Hall! Well... Well where's your wisdom... she (Sally) was a woman worth having if ever woman was and now to let her go!" (133).

Too soon, Darton realized the magnitude of his error. Helena had been a woman to lend pathos and refinement to a home; "Sally was a woman to brighten it" (134). When Japheth points out after Helena's death, "Ah Charles you threw a prize away when you let her slip five years ago!" Darton's reply was "I did-- I did!" (138). Throughout his fiction, Hardy seems to be fascinated by one power, respectable, middle class woman had in the nineteenth century Britain, the power to say "No" to a prospective suitor. Sally may be a slight creation against the backdrop of the great Hardyian heroines of the longer fiction, but she asserts her power in an otherwise powerless world by rejecting Darton's persistent second courtship and offer of marriage. Free from sentimental clap-trap Sally has no regret, "I am quite happy enough as I am, and that's the end of it." Her independence is so easily entrenched into her character that she sees no necessity to explain, "What in truth, I cannot explain-- my reason, I will simply say that I must decline to be married to you" (139). Her stance is not one of evasiveness or coyness. The decision is born out of her own sense of worth-- the worth of a woman who does not need marriage to complete her happiness.

"Ah-- then you despise me, Sally!"
 "No" she slowly answered, "I don't think you quite such a hero as I once did-- that's all. The truth is I AM HAPPY ENOUGH AS I AM AND DON'T MEAN TO MARRY AT ALL. Now may I ask you a favour, sir?" She spoke with an ineffable charm, which, whenever he thought of it, made him curse his loss of her as long as he lived.
 "To any extent"
 "Please do not put this question to me anymore. Friends as long as you like, but lovers and married, never!" (141).

The story ends with Hardy's comment, "notwithstanding the solicitation her attraction drew upon her, Sally had refused several offers of marriage and steadily adhered to the purpose of leading a single life." (141).

"Interlopers at the Knap" then, is a gentle exploration of the feminine psyche and the ability of a woman to cast her refusal of matrimony in a positive form. The remarkable courage and determination of Sally Hall to assert her independence by choosing to lead a single life, reveals the sensitivity and deep understanding that Hardy had about the power of a woman.

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