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## Gender Matrix In The Melancholy Hussar Of The German Legion

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**Abstract:** A study of the woman, Phyllis Grove, and the limitations that class, nationality, and language place upon nineteenth century women in Britain.

**Index Terms – Seclusion, Societal Whims, Unexpected Love.**

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.

In "The Melancholy Hussar of the German Legion", Hardy's compassionate treatment of Phyllis Grove, the hapless heroine, reveals the author's keen interest in the limitations that class, nationality and language place upon a woman of the nineteenth century Britain. Phyllis Grove courted humility and modesty till she died "with the unfortunate result of inflicting an injustice upon her memory" (29).

The narrative opens with a meaningful emphasis on the "seclusion" embraced by Phyllis' father, and the narrator remarks, "If her social condition was twilight, he was darkness. Yet he enjoyed the darkness while her twilight oppressed her" (30). The young girl's isolation and lonely existence inevitably paves way for the tragedy that follows; Phyllis became so shy that "if she met a stranger anywhere in her short rambles she felt ashamed at his gaze, walked awkwardly and blushed to her shoulders" (30). Surprisingly, Phyllis was discovered by an admirer, Humphrey Gould, a bachelor neither young nor old, neither good looking nor positively plain. The interest, though of a mild type, culminated into an engagement between the two. The society could not condone such a match considering the fact that though penniless, Gould belonged to an old local family respected in the country. Unequal marriages in those days were not merely considered to be an infringement of convention but rather a "violation of the laws of nature." Phyllis being socially inferior to Gould stood in awe of the colourless Humphrey Gould. Hardy comments, "She did not love him in the true sense of the word" but "had a genuine regard for him" (34). Due to his pecuniary condition, Gould postponed the union between the two. Thus, weary of a boring and lonely life, the arrival of the York Hussars transforms her world dramatically. She falls in love with one of the German Hussars although already betrothed to Humphrey's Gould. Her first glimpse is from atop a fence:

She was sitting up here on day, listlessly surveying the pasture without, when her attention was arrested by a solitary figure walking along the path. It was one of the renowned German Hussar and he moved onward with his eyes on the ground and with the manner of one who wished to escape company... On nearer view she perceived that his face was marked with deep sadness. (32)

The foreigner's face haunted Phyllis, "its aspect so striking, so handsome and his eyes were so blue, and sad and abstracted" (33). After the brief first meeting others followed. That Matthaus Tina was a foreigner did not stop the two kindred souls from falling in love with each other. Their love blossomed and crossed all barriers of language, region, and culture. Hardy elaborates "whenever the subject became too delicate, subtle, or tender for such words of English as were at his command, the eyes no doubt helped out the tongue and – though this was later on – the lips helped out the eyes" (33). This acquaintance thought rash, developed and "like Desdemona she pitied him and learnt his history" (33). Matthaus Tina, however, suffered from what he called "home-woes", a yearning to return home to his mother and his "dear fatherland". His plan to desert the regiment and take Phyllis with him, "to my own country, and be my wife there, and live there with my mother and me." (36-37) places Phyllis' mind of the feasibility of the undertaking. But she was appalled at the same time by the wildness of the adventure. Banished to Dr. Grove's sister's house, on discovery of her relationship with a foreigner, Phyllis acutely felt the lack of female company in her life. There was absolutely no one she could turn to for advice. Presented with a

life-changing decision, she becomes poised on the threshold of a flight with only two possibilities – she could fly away towards freedom unfettered by the morals of an unsympathetic society or plunge helplessly down to be defeated by a system she can never fight against. But tethered as she was to the constraints of the society she lived in, Phyllis unlike Sally lacked the courage to change her destiny. She was overwhelmed by the constructs of gender and identity, love, and duty. Hardy remarks, “But the courage which at the critical instant failed Cleopatra of Egypt could scarcely be expected of Phyllis Grove” (40). Maybe, if Matthaus had been less honourable and Phyllis more daring, their future would have taken a better turn. But years of filial subjection to a father’s insensitive and selfish tyranny, leaves Phyllis with little resolve to change her destiny. Matthaus and his friend embark on a dangerous journey home, while Phyllis succumbs to a misplaced sense of duty to Humphrey Gould. He had returned and gifted her with a “very handsome looking glass.” Phyllis accepted the gift and decides to honour her betrothal. “She was in that wretched state of mind which leads a woman to move mechanically onward in what she perceives to be her allotted path” (41). Ironically, she discovered too late, that Gould wanted to set her free because he had fallen in love with another woman. Matthaus Tina was arrested and executed for infraction of military protocol and Phyllis is condemned to a lonely life of spinsterhood in the very “Twilight” that she had found so oppressive as a young girl. While spinsterhood in Sally Hall was an act of defiance, in Phyllis Grove it is a social condition that she had to adhere to due to lack of choice.

## REFERENCES

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