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## Gender Matrix In Fellow Townsmen

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**Abstract:** A study of man-woman relationships and the extent to which social conditions influence gender roles.

**Index Terms – Social conditions, Gender roles, Inter-gender Relationships.**

Thomas Hardy's texts, it has been observed, like women and dislike them, they depict both pleasure and pain, both arousal and anxiety (Brad, "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.

"Fellow-Townsmen" is a tale that invites a close study of man-woman relationships to the extent to which social conditions influence gender roles. Hardy begins with individuals, proceeds to couples and conventional love triangles, then reverses the process. This structure echoes earlier works and anticipates *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Jude the Obscure*.

Barnet, the successful flax-merchant and the struggling young lawyer Downe, were "fellow burgesses of the town which lay beneath them, but though old and very good friends, they were differently circumstanced" (72). Barnet was the richer man but this fact was never perceptible in his manner towards this friend. Yet Barnet envied Downe's thriving marriage and home. He expresses sadly, "You are a fortunate fellow, Downe," Barnet continued as mother and children disappeared from the window to run to the door. "You must be happy if any man is. I would give a hundred such houses as my new one to have a home like yours" (73).

To preserve peace in the household, although unsuccessfully, he builds "Chateau Ringdale," so christened after a certain Lord Ringdale his wife once had a fancy for. The bitterness Barnet feels about his own lack of domestic bliss is compounded by a return home to a wife "who was nowhere to be seen." He sits down to a lonely meal, the picture of Downe's family imprinted on his mind. It was natural then, in such moments, for his mind to drift back to "a certain pleasing and gentle being whose face would loom out of the shades at such times as these." "I wonder if she lives there still" (75) he thinks. These words uttered by a miserable Barnet immediately prepares us for Lucy Saville.

The meeting between the two in Lucy Saville's apartment uncovers a sad tale of love and remorse. Our first impression of Lucy is, of one who possess a quiet demeanor and an aura of calmness, which is highly admirable in one so young. The untimely death of her father has forced Lucy to eke out a meager income from the sale of floral paintings which she sketches at night in poor light. Barnet is genuinely concerned about Lucy's hard work and deep regret is outlined in his countenance. But Lucy has accepted the necessity of work and dignity, the same dignity that is evident in her initial response to Barnet's unexpected presence in her room. Hardy beautifully describes the change from a preoccupied expression into that of "a reserved, half-proud and slightly indignant look" on her face. To Barnet's allusion to her past she coldly replies "When I think of the circumstances of our last meeting, I can hardly consider it kind of you to allude to such thing as our past-- or, indeed, to come here at all." Time has helped Lucy to stoically and calmly accept Barnet's marriage to "a woman of whose family even you might be proud" (77-78). Beautiful, young, intelligent, and dignified she stands as a painful reminder to Barnet of all that he could have had but lost due to his own foolishness. Lucy is a symbol of "Women (who) accept their destiny more readily than men" (*A Pair of Blue Eyes*).

Barnet, the refined, well-educated, liberal minded young man, cannot accept the present state of affairs as readily as Lucy. He is broken by the realization that he had lost domestic bliss because of "ambition... no it was not ambition, it was wrongheadedness." The helplessness of the situation wrings out of him a confession that he wanted to see her as "an old and good friend. not to mince matters, to visit a woman I loved." Lucy's stance remains firm. Though visibly shaken, by Barnet's confession, she reasserts her moral stance. When Barnet left her to marry another, Lucy did not fall apart but relied on logic and her innate power of reasoning to accept what she considered to be inevitable, "Everything was so indefinite, and feeling your position to be much wealthier than mine, I fancied I might have mistaken your

meaning. And when I heard of the other lady. I thought how foolish I have been and said nothing" (79). Barnet could only say, "Then I suppose it was destiny-- accident-- I don't know what that separated us, dear Lucy. Anyhow, you were the woman, I ought to have made my wife-- and I let you slip, like the foolish man that I was!" (79). Almost in tears Lucy answered with gentle solitude,

It is a very common folly of human nature you know; to think the course you did not adopt must have been best... My family was so much poorer than yours, even before I lost my dear father, that-- perhaps your companions would have made it unpleasant for us on account of my deficiencies (79).

What Lucy voices in the extract quoted above, is the malady of her times. The unequal marriage-- the fact that she was poorer in comparison with Barnet-- would never have worked. Maybe, in the face of the differences inherent in their social and financial backgrounds, love alone would not have been able to sustain the relationship. So, she gently urges Barnet to "make it up" with his wife and to leave her at once.

Barnet replies "I will" and walks out her door only to converge with Charlson, a surgeon about town, who owed him money. But Charlson had a little too much of "brazen indifferentism in his disposition to be altogether a desirable acquaintance" (81). If Barnet had been indecisive about obeying Lucy's injunction, what Charlson says next, compels him to obey it to the letter for her sake

"I've had a dream," repeated Charlson who required no encouragement. "I dreamed that a gentleman, who has been very kind to me, married a haughty lady in haste, before he had quite forgotten a nice little girl he knew before, and that one wet evening, like the present, as I was walking up the harbor-road, I saw him come out of that dear little girl's present abode" (81)

Gentlemanly and honourable to the core, Barnet observes Lucy now and then from afar but never seeks her out again. He years to help her but is constrained by his marital status. So he watches, he loves and longs for Lucy from a distance.

Ironically, the boating trip which was intended to bring Mrs. Downe and Mrs. Barnet close enough for the former to "find out what ruffles" the latter, ended in a tragic accident. Mrs. Downe is drowned and floated out to the sea while Mrs. Barnet lies apparently lifeless in her own house under medical hands, but there is not certain result. Charlson, the attending physician, with something of a mockery (for the man was aware of Barnet's domestic relations) says, "I have just come down... we have done everything but without result. I sympathize with you in your bereavement" (88). A lesser man than Barnet, would have dutifully expressed sorrow, while inwardly become sufficiently elated by the freedom that has come so unexpectedly. But he went back to the bedroom and stood there regarding his wife's silent form:

She was a woman some years older than himself, but not by any means over-passed the maturity of good looks and vigour. Her passionate features, well-defined, firm and statuesque in life were doubly so now: her mouth and brow, beneath her purplish black hair, showed only the turbulence of character which had made a bear-garden of his house... (88).

Puzzled by the lack of completeness in "the expression which he had been accustomed to associate" with the dead, Barnet places his hand on her chest and feels the faint beat of her heart. Barnet was faced with a dilemma:

Barnet had a wife whose presence distracted his home; she now lay as in death; by merely doing nothing-- by letting the intelligence which had gone forth to the world be undisturbed-- he would effect such a deliverance for himself as he had never hoped for, and open up an opportunity of which till now he had never dreamed. Whether the conjuncture had arisen through any unscrupulous, ill-considered impulse of Charlson to help out of a strait a friend who was so kind as never to press him for what he was due could not be told; there was nothing to prove it, it was a question which could never be asked. The triangular situation-- himself-- his wife-- Lucia Saville-- was the one clear thing (90).

Barnet's honesty and strength of character in his crisis raises him to heroic proportions. Although he did not love the woman who was his wife, he applied himself vigorously to restore her to life. Later he bitterly mused, "my wife was dead, and now she is alive again." But this same woman, whom he had gratuitously restored to life and made union for him with another impossible, on regaining her full health leaves him for London. Her departure did not arise from jealousy or any personal behaviour of his at all for her "concern was not with or his feelings, as she frequently told him; but that she had in a moment of weakness thrown herself away upon a common-burgher when she might have been if he had claimed Lucy when there was "no bar in their lives."

Meanwhile, Lucy is now employed as a governess in Downe's homes (a position Barnet had secured for her in secret). Time passes and fate lurks in the darkness, ready to strike another blow to Barnet's life. His wife dies in London but just as he falls on his knees in thanksgiving, a letter arrives for him from Downe. Barnet is free "at last" but Lucy has just exchanged marriage vows with Downe. "Impulse in all its forms characterized Barnet" and he rises to his feet and slowly walks to the church. "A feeling of sudden proud self-confidence, an indocile wish to walk unmoved in spite of grim environments plainly possessed him... it was creditable triumph over himself" (103). This observation made by the narrator clearly highlights the essence of Barnet and looks forward to Michael Henchard. Thwarted once again, in his desire to marry the woman he loved, he holds his head high and heroically blesses a union that was so painful to him. He disposes of all his property and sells his house to Downe. After a lapse of twenty-one years and six months, Barnet returns-- "a staidish gentleman with grey hair." Lucy is now a lonely widow and Barnet pays her a visit. This final meeting between Barnet and Lucy contains the experience and powerful psychological insight that characterizes Hardy's great tragedies. That human relationships more often than not, are destined to end in tragedy, is evident from the outcome of this meeting. Barnet proposes marriage to Lucy, who, even though enlightened about the depth and intensity of his feelings for her in the course of their conversation, hesitates to consider a second marriage.

"Lucy" he said, "Better late than never. Will you marry me now?" She started back and the surprise which was so obvious in her wrought ever greater surprise in him and that it should be so... "Why", she added, "I couldn't marry you to the world". "Not after all this! Why not?" "It is-- I would-- I really think I may say it-- I would upon the-- rather marry you, Mr. Barnet, than any other man I have ever met, if I ever dreamed of marriage again. But I don't dream of it... I have not the least intention marrying again." (112)

The subdued and tender humour that characterizes Barnet, on such occasions in early life, did not desert him now. He leaves Lucy with a pleasant "goodnight". After his footsteps have died upon the road, the widow pondered his speeches. She finally sees in Barnet what circumstances had blinded her to for so long-- his urbanity, his philosophical acceptance of her rejection, his gentlemanly attitude. He was, she decided heroic and grand and began to feel the stirrings in her heart of "an interest in Barnet precisely resembling that of her early youth". That he had continued loving her for so long prompted her to seek him out at the Black Bull Hotel, only to discover that he had left with no forwarding address. Lucy resolves sorrowfully, to wait for his return. The tale ends with "She did wait-- years and years-- but Barnet never reappeared." (114)

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