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Thomas Hardy's representation of Gender and Class in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*

Nombre completo del alumno Lucía Merino Carpintero

Tutor/Tutora: Sara Medina Calzada

Departamento de Filología Inglesa

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation is to examine the extent to which Thomas Hardy subverts the social conventions of Victorian England through his novel *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873). The Victorian Era is characterized by strict moral conduct as well as profound changes. These departures from the prevailing social order caused great anxiety amongst the population, reinforcing the traditional values. Focusing on gender and class issues, it can be argued that Hardy, aware of the inequalities and incongruities of said norms, employs different techniques to challenge those ideals in his novel. The author realistically depicts Victorian society, while subjecting his characters to distressing situations caused by the pressure of acting upon social demands. Likewise, his challenging of these conventions is conducted in a wisely and subtle manner.

Key Words: Gender, class, Thomas Hardy, social norms, Victorian society.

El próposito de este Trabajo de Fin de Grado es examinar hasta qué punto Thomas Hardy subvierte las convenciones sociales de la Inglaterra victoriana a través de su novela *Unos Ojos Azules* (1873). La época victoriana está caracterizada por una estricta moral de conducta, así como por severos cambios. Estas desviaciones del orden social prevaleciente causaron inmensas preocupaciones entre la población. Centrándonos en las cuestiones de género y clase, se observa que Hardy, consciente de las desigualdades e incongruencias de dichas normas, emplea diferentes técnicas para desafiar esos ideales en su novela. El autor describe de manera realista la sociedad victoriana mientras somete a sus personajes a situaciones angustiantes causadas por la presión de actuar de acuerdo con las expectativas sociales. Asimismo, desafió estas convenciones de una forma hábil y sutil.

Palabras clave: Género, clase, Thomas Hardy, normas sociales, Sociedad victoriana

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION…….…….....1
2. THE VICTORIAN ERA: A Time of Changes…….……...4
3. GENDER IN *A PAIR OF BLUE EYES*……..…7
    3.1 Domesticity and Submission…… 7
    3.2 Power Relations…….. 10
    3.3 Masculinity…… ...13
4. CLASS IN *A PAIR OF BLUE EYES*…….....17
    4.1 The Boundaries of Social Intercourse…….....17
    4.2 Challenging Class Norms…….....21
    4.3 Social Mobility…… 23
5. CONCLUSION…….……...27
6. BIBLIOGRAPHY……. 29

1. INTRODUCTION

This undergraduate dissertation focuses on Thomas Hardy's depiction of gender and class issues during the 19th century in his novel *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873). This period is marked by strong conventions, as well as sharp contrasts, irregular changes, and double standards. Society was remarkably strict regarding how men and women should behave, along with the harsh expectations corresponding to each social class. However, during this period, significant events arose, such as the Woman Question, which prioritized women's equality, or the Second Reform Act (1867), which improved the conditions of the proletariat by allowing working-class men to vote. Hence, it is not surprising to consider Hardy's advocacy for the liberation of women and his criticism of social class stereotypes during a period when the foundations of society experienced such meaningful tremors. Likewise, several authors support the claim that he was in favor of progress. Bhattacharya claims that "though Hardy was not drawn to feminist movement of his day, he was deeply sympathetic towards it" (4), and Flynn declares that despite not knowing his political leaning, his work resembles "the numerous socialist and radical movements that were emerging, merging and dissolving during the final decades of Victoria's reign" (58). Therefore, the characters in his novel would represent the struggles for equality and the dire consequences they face due to the strict ideals of their time. However, other authors disagree with these ideas, and as claimed by Boumelha:

> Many of the more recent critics have followed one of two paths: either they have accused Hardy of entrapment in conventional views of women's character and sphere of action, or else they have remarked on his particular interest in and sympathy with women. It is perhaps not surprising that women predominate among the first group, and men among the second (2).

That is to say, some argue that Hardy depicts reality as it was, reinforcing social stereotypes. However, it is essential to bear in mind the prevailing morals of the era. Regarding the strict norms, Yoshino claims that "he [Hardy] had no choice but to disguise his oppositional views while patiently negotiating the properties – avoiding unhealthy topics as best he may" (20). Therefore, Hardy employs subtle techniques to critique the system, in order to avoid censorship and engage the Victorian public. It is for this reason that it is important to study how Hardy decides to portray society. Hence, the aim of this

dissertation is to analyze the extent to which Hardy subverts the ideas and conventions regarding gender and class of 19th-century English society.

One of the main reasons behind my decision to work with this novel is because, despite its remarkable quality, it has not received as much academic attention as some of the author's other works. It is for that reason that I will provide a brief summary of the plot in order to offer context and facilitate the comprehension of the analysis. Likewise, it is worth noting that, according to Luebering, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* is inspired by Hardy's own life (91).

The novel is set in the outskirts of fictional Lower Wessex. The protagonist, Elfride Swancourt, is the daughter of the vicar of the town parish. Her fate changes the day her father requests an architect to renovate the church, and Stephen Smith is sent. Thereupon, Elfride and Smith fall in love. However, the problem arises when the young architect confesses that he comes from a working-class family, which led Elfride's father to oppose the marriage. Nevertheless, Elfride fights against society's conventions for her love but, eventually, gives up. Consequently, Smith decides to go to India to earn some wealth. During his absence, Mrs. Troyton, now married to Mr. Swancourt, hosts a distant relative of hers, Henry Knight. Knight, a man of letters, is also Smith's former instructor. Elfride and Knight fall in love as well. However, Elfride's heart is divided between the two men, whose personalities are utterly opposite. Further, Knight, upon learning that Elfride has had a lover before him, ends the courtship. Elfride is suffering the consequences of her actions, as society highly condemns the slightest deviation of conduct. In the end, both ex-lovers come back in a dispute for Elfride's love, only to learn that she sorrowfully married Lord Luxellian, the most influential man in the town, and shortly afterwards she dies.

Before analyzing the novel, it is essential to have a clear understanding of the historical context of Hardy and his work. It is for that reason that the discussion begins with an exposition of the main events of the Victorian era, regarding gender and class, as well as its consequences. The grasp of these circumstances sheds light on how and why the Victorians behaved like that and contributes to understanding their reasoning. Secondly, the discussion focuses on how Hardy confutes gender conventions, addressing three main topics, which were considered the most relevant to the analysis: Domesticity and Submission, Power Relations, and Masculinity. Subsequently, the analysis centers on the class question and the way Hardy criticizes the socioeconomic structure of the era, as

well as the stern demands that come with them. For this purpose, the chapter is divided into three subsections as well: The Boundaries of Social Intercourse, Challenging Class Norms and Social Mobility. It is noteworthy that gender and class, despite being two closely related issues, have been separated in the analysis to gain a clearer understanding of each matter. Finally, taking the previous aspects into consideration, a conclusion on how Hardy represents and refutes society norms will be presented.

2. THE VICTORIAN ERA: A Time of Changes

The accession of Queen Victoria to the throne marked the beginning of the Victorian era, which was to continue until the end of the century. This period was heavily defined by three intertwined circumstances: the Woman Question, Industrialization, and the expansion of the British Empire. It is worthy of mention that, in this essay, only the two first issues will be discussed owing to their relation to the novel *A Pair of Blue Eyes.* Said factors contributed to the social and economic development and transformation of society during this period. Likewise, Bland claims that despite "technological, industrial and social advances", the country experienced major problems such as "child labor, poverty, illness, and an enormous gap between rich and poor, men and women" (1).

Victorian society was an androcentric society. Men were usually in a position of power, while women were generally reduced to be appendages of them. Women were seen as inferior in the eyes of the law, institutions, and society. The distinction between men and women was clear and, in the words of Bland, "Victorian society created several social constructs, ideologies, roles and ways of behavior on the basis of and regarding gender" (2).

One of the most common social constructs regarding women was the ideology of 'The Angel in the House', the attentive and caring housewife, in opposition to 'The Fallen Woman' a woman who had lost her honor and was no longer regarded as pure. This is a heavy marked contrast to control and blame women, hampering their emancipation. Külh explains that "the domestic angels needed to be glorified in order for the transgressions of the fallen women to appear more shameful, so the differences between them would appear insurmountable" (177). As claimed by Nsaidzedze, one of the reasons for depicting women as pure and pious was resultant of the Victorian era being a period of contrasts; while the country was experiencing great progress, the Victorians faced corruption and wickedness outside their homes (prostitution, illness, poverty…) so women's roles at home were to represent the complete opposite (2).

Furthermore, women were deprived of certain rights. For instance, as explained by Blackstone, marriage under the common law functioned as a contract in which the woman granted her entire existence and will to her husband, in exchange for protection, merging into one person in law (279). Likewise, Stretton et al., state that "the lack of an independent legal identity, and of the ability to own separate property, meant that a wife

could not enter into contracts in her own name" (125). This caused women to absolutely depend on their husbands. In the same way, the law granted the husband the right to punish his wife if he considered it appropriate: "The law thought it reasonable to entrust him with the power of restraining her, by domestic chastisement" (Blackstone 15). Nevertheless, unmarried women did not elude societal scrutiny either, as they were often labeled as "redundant" women. Rahaman asserts that society perceived the prioritization of their economic wealth over the family as selfish, leading to their defamation and exclusion (300).

As a result of this situation, during this period the 'Woman Question' emerged. As claimed by Delap, the Woman Question represented "a space for political argument in which the nature, implications and origins of sexual difference might be debated, and was regarded as intensely significant for both its symbolic and its practical import" (319). Consequently, society experienced certain changes. These changes were reflected in the country's legislation. Some of the most significant Acts passed during this period were the Married Woman's Property Act (1882), which granted married women the right to own and control their property, and the amendment added to the Matrimonial Causes Act in 1878, which granted women protection in case of suffering a situation of abuse in marriage, and custody of children. This change in the law "was in effect a judicial separation and gave them custody of their children. Though not a divorce as such, it was not costly and so was available to working class women" (UK Parliament).

Regardless of these profound changes, which helped the development of women as citizens, this era was characterized by its contrasts, so women were disadvantaged in other aspects. For instance, the Contagious Diseases Act (1883) was passed, under which police officers were authorized for the genital examination of any woman who was suspected of prostitution. This law violated women's privacy and was a direct attack on lower-class women since men suspected of consuming prostitution services were not subjected to these examinations.

Furthermore, the Industrial Revolution transformed the British society. The country underwent economic growth which jolted its social structures. Eke and Abana explain that society shifted "from a way of life based on ownership of land to a modern urban economy based on trade and manufacturing" (70). Heblich et al., claim that cities suffered an enormous growth since it was there where jobs could be found (8). Hence, cities encountered terrible sanitary conditions among other issues, which caused the

migration of the upper classes to the rural areas. Thus, suburban nuclei were created in the cities, unattached from the impoverished areas, establishing the middle social class. Mokrá affirms that "the main consequence of the Industrial Revolution was the rise of middle classes" (15). The middle class now had the opportunity, owing to their work, to increase their purchasing power. However, that did not directly provide social class advancement. The prestige one had in society was particularly important. Likewise, Mokrá states that the upper class considered the rise of the middle class as something disruptive to the social system which had been established for many years (18). However, according to Betensky, this rejection was gradually dissuaded, as she claims: "Yet as the middle classes grew richer and more powerful through the nineteenth century, their wealth did win them entry into the most prestigious domains of British culture and politics" (320).

Spielvogel declares that the middle-class mentality was grounded in labor and effort (589). The middle class shared the belief that everyone could achieve success despite their origins since individuals were responsible for their own future. Effort and hard work were two of the most important values of the time and, on the whole, the middle-class mentality permeated other social groups in Victorian society.

The Victorian period is characterized by stark contrasts and contradictions. On the one hand, it was a time of prosperity and development. The Great Exhibition of 1851 is the embodiment of technological advances and buoyant growth. Likewise, the Great Reform Act (1832) extended the right to vote to a greater number of middle-class men, which meant a significant development regarding their working conditions. On the other hand, Victorian society was marked by destitution and poor conditions. The Poor Law (1834) was passed to "ensure that the poor were housed in workhouses, clothed and fed." (UK Parliament). The poor received these services in exchange for labor. This measure evidences the dire situation faced by the impoverished population. These events shed light on how unbalanced this era was, as it was abounding in injustices and inequities, some of which can be reflected Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, as the following analysis shows.

3. GENDER IN *A PAIR OF BLUE EYES*

As mentioned above, during the Victorian era, women suffered many injustices and were constantly disregarded. Nonetheless, the Victorian era was also a period of social change. As Pietrzak-Franger rightly claims, the novel offered a space where all these matters could be addressed and negotiated (131). The issue of gender was increasingly gaining importance in people's consciousness, and as a cause and/or effect novels reflected this phenomenon. Female characters were often represented as oppressed due to the subordination of the male gender, androcentric society, and the institutions themselves. Pietrzak-Franger also states that this depiction of society was interpreted from two approaches: as a tool to persuade society into reflecting on social injustice, and as a method to perpetuate those patriarchal ideals (131). Similarly, Hardy experiences this incongruence. He was very conscious of social issues but was nevertheless often considered misogynistic. It is crucial to revise the words of Bhattacharya as he reveals that Hardy was completely alert to the societal changes (11). This awareness can be perceived in the themes of his works, as they evolve as time progresses. Likewise, Bhattacharya explains that Hardy's characters are brimmed with contradictions and conflict due to all these transformations (9), such as the rise of the Woman Question. Although Hardy was not technically a feminist, he was in favor of social progress. This is why it is considered that her female characters made critics and society reconsider the flaws and fissures of the system in which they lived.

3. 1 Domesticity and Submission

As it has been mentioned previously, one of the most recurring themes during the 19th century is the comparison between the idealized housewife and the demoralized woman, also known as 'The Angel in the House' vs the 'Fallen Woman'. This idea originates from Coventry Patmore's poem called "The Angel in the House." In the words of Kühl, "the poem puts the ideal wife on a pedestal, a not quite earthly being that knows no selfishness or anger, always good, always anxious to help the husband to be his best self … it seems to fetishize a type of woman that could not possibly exists in the real world" (Kühl 173). As Kühl explains, it is noticeable that it was during the period in which the New Woman demanded emancipation that her opposite figure re-emerged fiercely, distressing society

in an unprecedented manner, an effort to further chastise and reprimand women and prevent them from gaining control (2).

This duality is remarkably prevailing in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. The protagonist, Elfride, is a spineless woman who clashes between what she desires and what is expected from her. At first, Elfride is presented as a young woman of some attractiveness but little presence, whose role is to take care of her sick father, and as the narrator claims: "Elfride had as her own the thoughtfulness which appears in the face of the Madonna della Sedia, without its rapture" (Hardy 11). This description concurs with the ideal Victorian woman given that femineity was based on being delicate, passive, and looking after one's family and home. Notwithstanding, this almost archetypal notion of Elfride is distorted as dilemmas arise, and decisions are made. An illustration of this shift can be seen in the passage in which she decides to shatter all the decorum that society demands from her and escapes with Stephen Smith to enter marriage furtively: "More even than by her love, she was forced on by a sense of the necessity of keeping faith with herself" (Hardy 119). In this moment, Hardy introduces Elfride as oblivious to social norms, whose motives to behave do not obey anyone but herself. For the first time, Elfride is the master of her own destiny. Nonetheless, Hardy intends to let the reader know about Elfride's volatility. Throughout the novel, it can be observed that she is brimmed with incongruities and internal disputes. Thereby, she decides to return without marrying Smith. No matter how strong her desires are, her lack of will manages to overcome them. Wani and Sharma articulate that this is Hardy's way of illustrating the internal disputes women of the time had, in conflict with self-hood and womanhood (3). Her identity is restrained by the idealism that women are demanded. She discerns that society now understands her as impure and must be punished. She claims: "If anybody finds me out, I am, I suppose, disgraced" (Hardy 124). In this quotation, it can be recognized the anxiety and apprehension that being dishonored caused among Victorian women. Their behavior was conditioned by the excessive dismay associated with not being labeled a "Fallen Woman." In the novel, Stephen Smith states that "She [Elfride] is a girl all delicacy and honour. And no woman of that kind, who has committed herself so into a man's hand as she has into mine, could possibly marry another" (Hardy 142). In this citation, not only it can be contemplated, once again, the importance given to a woman's honor, but it can also be fathomed that this distinction between the graced and the disgraced is a device of control and subversion towards women. Leveraging this anxiety functions as a method of

discipline to prevent women from dissenting and opposing their oppressors. Thereupon, in a society in which religion plays such a significant role, it is almost inevitable to compare it to the panic the Church previously exercised, regarding eternal heaven and eternal damnation, to withhold society under control.

Correspondingly, as further evidence of Victorian intolerance towards women's sexuality, the novel shows Elfride's suffering from society's double standards and injustices. Bhattacharya conveys that society cannot tolerate her unchained sexuality or how she lives her life away from social conventions (42). Likewise, Bhattacharya proceeds to explain that not even her suitors could truly love her for who she was since she did not embody their vision of the perfect woman (43). They were totally immersed in the patriarchal values of the Victorian Era. A distinct example of this is Harry Knight's character. Knight does not love Elfride for her identity but for her pure, almost angelic state. Knight evidences this by declaring: "Though I own that the idea of your inexperienced state had a great charm for me … I should never have loved you" (Hardy 337). Likewise, the narrator supports this claim by observing: "But there had passed away a glory, and the dream was not as it had been of yore". (Hardy 339). In these fragments, it can be reasoned how Knight, owing to his narcissistic personality and beliefs, does not conceive the idea of Elfride being a woman with her own life and sexuality, which existed before becoming acquainted with him. When this picture of the perfect, virgin, pure woman he created in his mind does not correspond to reality, he becomes frustrated and punishes Elfride for it. Furthermore, Elfride, momentarily, becomes aware of all her virtues and, as if it were an epiphany, realizes that she is being unfairly judged. According to Cimmarrusti, "she wants to be something other than a male-created stereotype; she wants to be acknowledged as an individual, not merely an object of the patriarchal view of the world" (22). This assumption is supported by Elfride's complaint: "Am I such a – mere characterless toy- as to have no attraction in me, apart from freshness? … You said – I was clever and ingenious in my thoughts … Yet all these together are so much rubbish because I – accidentally saw a man before you!" (Hardy 337). Hardy, arguably, included this plea to demonstrate how incongruous the rules of Victorian society were. From Elfride's experience, suffering, and voice, that message gives the impression of being franker and more forthright. Moreover, it is accompanied by a tone of exhausting fatigue that adds to its portrayal of increased authenticity and genuineness. Furthermore, it could be interpreted that Elfride's imploration exhibits the consequences of Victorian

society's harsh moral codes on women. Elfride is aware of the consequences of her behavior and, conscious of said norms, is forced to marry. Her weariness and resignation can be seen through her words when she states: “Yes; I’ll do anything for the benefit of my family, so as to turn my useless life to some practical account” (Hardy 400). Eventually, she dies, without having known happiness, a result of her conflicting actions with the strict social morals.

Hardy depicts Elfride as a subordinate woman in an androcentric society. Elfride does not behave to breach the patriarchal norms, but rather she is forced to challenge those values owing to her own circumstances. However, she does not manage to accomplish it due to her internal disputes. Her dissenting behavior towards societal norms is her condemnation. Hardy, arguably, perceives the judgment of the misogynistic society and tries to liberate his protagonist from that yoke without success.

3. 2 Power Relations

Furthermore, one of the biggest problems that Victorian women faced was their lack of free will. Not only were they suppressed by the assumptions that would be made of them, but they depended upon a man's permission to attain their desires. Hardy, throughout the novel, displays a constant disparity between Elfride's desires and what the male figures impose on her.

All the male characters maintain a paternalistic attitude towards Elfride, either by restricting her from her freedom or by treating her with haughtiness. Both behaviors are a mechanism to submerge women, restraining them from their independence. In the initial instance, her father forbids her from becoming espoused to Stephen Smith. Hardy unveils Elfride’s personality as not conforming with the social principles, not only via her behavior but also allowing the reader to comprehend her inner world through an omniscient narrator: “Indignation at parental inconsistency in first encouraging, then forbidding” (114). Elfride’s incapacity to contravene authority, or at least, consummate these attempted rebellions, suggests that Hardy is aware of the conflicts between women’s desires and societal expectations. Nonetheless, the fact that that defiance remains in simple feelings and abides by the rules, indicates that that is how the author depicts women’s passivity, resigned to do what they are expected to. Hardy, arguably, does not

intend to represent Elfride as a feminist icon insurrecting against her oppressor, neither he aims to portray her as the lady in distress from the collective imagery. Elfride is a young woman with unclear ideas who sometimes risks what her heart dictates and acts bravely, but who, however, concludes collapsing due to her lack of determination. Yoshino illustrates that it is her human nature, replete with contradictions, fears, and bravery, which makes the reader empathize with her, as she states: "She is brave and fearful, headstrong and vulnerable, and queenly and slavery, so she is utterly human, and we care for her" (21).

Moreover, it is worth noting that society was experiencing reasonably substantial adjustments as a consequence of the rise of the Woman Question. It did not benefit the oppressor group to encourage the intelligence and independence of the opposite gender. Therefore, another form of violence and control towards women is the infantilization and ridicule of these. Elfride is a victim of this patriarchal behavior. The male gender was considered superior and was attributed qualities such as intelligence and temperance. A woman could not be as intelligent as a man since they were considered excessively emotional, and their mental state interfered with their judgment. And that is how Knight perceives Elfride: "Elfride was rather willful, by reason of his inattention, which she privately set down to his thinking her not worth talking to" (Hardy 175). Knight's continuous contempt towards Elfride exposes his egotistical nature and how he considers himself superior to her. By addressing her as a little girl, ridiculing and questioning her, he effectively unsettles Elfride, who resigns herself to being inferior to him. It can be argued that Hardy employs the chess passages to exemplify their personalities. In said passages, Elfride faces a game of chess on different occasions with each of her suitors, culminating in very different results. After the game against Knight, Elfride cries: "But I want to, papa! Honestly, I am restless at having been so ignominiously overcome" (Hardy 182). From her reaction, it can be assumed that she considers the defeat an insult to her intellect, causing a breach of decorum. Knight does not hesitate to inform her: "Though I am afraid it is not the plan adopted by women of the world after a defeat" (Hardy 182). In such a manner, Knight exerts power inducing a sense of guilt within her regarding her behavior and attitude. If women experience shame when they diverge from societal norms, the frequency of such instances is likely to diminish.

Paradoxically, Elfride is attracted to the sense of inferiority with which Knight regards her, as the following passage illustrates:

> Elfride's docile devotion to Knight was now its own enemy. Clinging to him so dependently, she taught him in time to presume upon that devotion – a lesson men are not slow to learn. A slight rebelliousness occasionally would have done him no harm, and would have been a world of advantage to her. But she idolized him, and was proud to be his bond-servant (Hardy 323).

Hardy is cognizant of the power abuse of this relationship. It is noteworthy the use of the word "bond-servant" to refer to Elfride. The master and slave dialectic represents what was expected in marriages of the time. Women, in a situation of subordination, were required to serve their husbands' needs without any financial recompense. Furthermore, they were deprived of their freedom since they were dependent on them. Likewise, a contradiction within Elfride exists anew. It could be posited that Hardy emphasized Elfride's hesitant personality to display that she is not fully conscious of the level of subordination to which she is subjected. If this alienation did not exist and Elfride were more cognizant of gender issues, it may be feasible that she would reconsider certain attitudes. Hence, one may contend that Hardy attributes a level of responsibility to women for contributing to their incessant state of submission, considering the following quotation in which the narrator states: "Clinging to him so dependently, she taught him in time to presume upon that devotion" (323). Likewise, Prakrithi states that: "It's probable that Hardy hints at woman's flaw in allowing men to rule them, skillfully inquiring if man is solely responsible for women's subjugation" (85).

As it has been previously mentioned, marriage in the Victorian Era functioned as a contract in which women renounce to their persona in exchange of protection. Nonetheless, considerably prior to marriage, during the early stages of courtship, men already believed themselves in the right to own women. This is an instance of another form of paternalism. Neither of Elfride's suitors deviate from this pattern. Despite disparities in their personalities and backgrounds, their adherence to patriarchal norms remains largely consistent. At the end of the novel, when Knight and Smith encounter in the train, from their dialogues, it is possible to infer how they do not consider Elfride an individual with volition. This is reinforced by Smith's statement: "I know this, she was MY darling before she was yours; and after too. If anybody has a right to call her its own, it is I" (Hardy 395). Elfride is similar to a manipulated figurine, torn by both parties until her resilience wanes and fractures. At no juncture do they contemplate the possibility that Elfride may autonomously decide her choice of a spouse. This insolence is significantly

attached to the idea of Victorian women's passivity. Additionally, Hardy utilizes irony by revealing that Elfride passed away as a spouse of a third man. It became apparent that, even in her absence, the concern of her former suitors remained solely on their ownership. This notion strengthens when Knight states: "And if we find she died yours, I'll say no more" (Hardy 396), manifesting their lack of empathy. Notwithstanding, Hardy does not reveal a fairy tale ending for the protagonist. It is unveiled via Unity's narration that Elfride was devastated and the situation at her home was utterly distressing: "And she said to me she didn't care what became of her and she wished she could die. When she was better, I said she would live to be married yet" (Hardy 400). The author reminds the reader that the only viable outcome for a Victorian woman is marriage. Possibly, what Hardy is aiming for, with this ending, is portraying all the hurdles and adversities that women faced to fulfill their happiness and freedom. He illustrates that, regardless of multiple attempts to demolish the patriarchal system, eventually, women are sentenced to comply with those norms as their existence revolves around them.

3. 3 Masculinity

Likewise, the patriarchal system does not only affect women; men also had to meet certain social expectations as well, especially in the Victorian era. They were expected to satisfy the ideal of masculinity. Tosh illustrates that the primary meaning of 'masculinity' was "gender privilege, as in matters of inheritance" (qtd. in Hayes 12). It bears mentioning that the concept of masculinity is not and has not been an immutable concept, but rather varies depending on their historical and geographical context. Rutherford conveys that in Victorian society, "becoming an acceptably 'masculine' man meant 'adopting the values of male superiority', for one's sexual identity involves both shaping and defending these values" (qtd. in Hayes 9).

One of the values of masculinity was the man as gentleman. According to Hayes, "a gentleman lived according to a chivalric code which emphasized honor and respect, not only in his dealings with his fellow men, but in his treatment of women" (99). Nonetheless, Hardy, perhaps, in an attempt to condemn or seek reconsideration of these values, does not utterly construct his male characters according to these ideals. Stephen Smith is defined by his passivity, which is understood as a lack of masculinity. Hardy considers that "the emotional side of his constitution was built rather after a feminine than

a male model" (Hardy 374). In addition, Smith's physical description deviates from the ideals of masculinity: "His complexion was as fine as Elfride's own; the pink of his cheeks as delicate … Neither whisker nor moustache, unless a little-light brown fur on his upper lip deserved that title" (Hardy 19). It is significant to mention this since, in Victorian times, beards were considered a symbol of superiority over women and other men: "Beards signified 'the natural superiority of men over women, and more vigorous men over their effete counterparts" (Oldstone-Moore qtd. in Hayes 97). Possibly with such description, ironically emphasizing Stephen Smith's lack of facial hair, Hardy pretends to inform us that, due to different aspects, such as immaturity, social class or personality Stephen Smith does not hold a position of superiority over Elfride. It is for this very reason that Elfride ceases to be enamored of him. It is notable that Hardy, as opposed to Smith's description, characterizes Knight as "covered with furze as with a beard" (Hardy 166). Ergo, Hardy is implying that Knight is in a position of superiority above Stephen Smith. Furthermore, as opposed to the ideal of feminine passivity, men had to assume control of the circumstances. Hardy exemplifies this belief as the narrator, talking about Smith, states: "But decision, however suicidal, has more charm for a woman than the most unequivocal Fabian success" (136). It can be observed, owing to the narrator, that Smith does not fulfill society's expectations. Elfride, despite also being a victim of this ideology and not satisfying the ideal of the perfect woman, imposes a certain form of punishment on her suitor for that same reason. Moreover, Knight converges closer to the ideal of masculinity; however, he does not fulfill it either. He differs from these ideals, firstly, considering his sexually withdrawn personality, and his little interest in women, concealed in an obsession for women's purity, dissenting from what was expected from men. This is exemplified when he states: "I always meant to be the first comer in a woman's heart, fresh lips or none for me" (Hardy 322). Likewise, he is characterized by more intellectual tasks such as writing, which was considered a lack of masculinity because "intellectual labor became associated with the feminine and the domestic" (Anand 113).

It can be inferred from Elfride's sentiments how internalized society's values were at that time. Elfride is aware that she prefers a man with a more 'masculine' attitude; however, she lacks an understanding of the underlying reasons. If she did contemplate her reasoning, perhaps, she would conclude that, in an androcentric society, women are taught from a young age that they are inferior to men and that they rely on them to

progress, since they are considered passive and fragile creatures. Elfride is, arguably, the victim and accomplice of a society that attempts to infantilize and control women.

Likewise, as Gilmour aptly articulates: “It is the assumption, rather than the reality, of gentlemanly status that worked to satisfy middle class men and their desire to be accepted by the traditional hierarchy” (qtd. in Anand 6). Consequently, the chess scenes regain significance. In these passages, the social order of the three protagonists can be observed. The fact that Elfride lets Stephen win indicates that she is the one dominating the situation, something unusual that could even be considered inappropriate. Once again, Hardy displays that Stephen Smith is in a position of inferiority regarding Elfride: “The game had its value in helping on the development of their future” (55). As the narrator announces, that is the dynamic that rules their relationship throughout the novel, “exchanging” gender roles. Furthermore, taking the quote into account, this defeat or “non-victory” diminishes Elfride's perception of him. Conversely, when Knight beats her, that victory makes Elfride cherish him fonder: “That she looked up at and adored her new lover from below his pedestal, was even more perceptible than that she had smiled down upon Stephen from a height above him” (Hardy 258).

Similarly, regarding the concept of masculinity and the gentlemanly role that men had to perform, a belief about men being responsible for saving women existed. This belief was probably reinforced by the implications that marriage entailed. Hardy evinces this ideal during the passage in which Elfride is teasing around the parapet and Knight bears her, preventing her from harming herself. In this sequence, Elfride is presented as childish and carefree, meanwhile Knight is depicted as the hero who rescues the damsel in distress. Nonetheless, afterward, Hardy introduces the cliff scene in which the roles are completely exchanged. During this passage, Knight finds himself in a difficult situation, as he chases after his hat, he falls and is left clinging to the edge of a cliff. His life depends upon Elfride, who saves his life. Elfride is no longer controlled by her passivity, instead, she becomes the heroine of the now-defenseless man. The narrator states: “It was a novelty in the extreme to see Henry Knight, to whom Elfride was but a child … who mastered her and made her weep most bitterly at her own significance, thus thankful for a sight of her face” (Hardy 232). In this quote, the narrator articulates the irony that Knight, who throughout the novel has despised Elfride, is experiencing. However, at this moment, as a matter of fate, his life depends on her. Elfride’s personality is not as doubtful and hesitant as it had previously been. Instead of being overwhelmed by her feelings, she

is able to reach a decision and follow through with it for the first time. The perception of women being the ones who need saving is dismantled and Elfride becomes the heroine. Hardy, arguably, decided to include both the parapet and cliff scene, in the novel to establish a contrast to reflect on gender roles and their inequity and disparities.

Additionally, the relationship between the male protagonists is worthy of consideration. The tie between Knight and Smith is that of teacher and student, and several authors have emphasized the homosocial nature of their bond. For instance, Hayes notices that "Mallett focuses upon Henry Knight's repressive tendencies and Stephen Smith's naivety and alludes to a discourse of homosociality evinced in the master/pupil relationship between the two men." (83). As discussed earlier, Smith is described in a feminine manner, meaning that he lacks masculinity, which was usually associated with homosexuality. Similarly, Knight, sexually repressed and obsessed with Elfride's purity, seems as if he has no sexual interest in her in any way. Furthermore, Smith experiences an almost platonic admiration for Knight. Such is his admiration that Elfride is brimmed with jealousy. "I not only have never loved anybody but you … but I have not even formed a strong friendship, such as you have for Knight. I wish you didn't. It diminishes me" (Hardy 84). It is deserving of mention that, despite the discussion revolving around romantic relationships, Elfride responded by referring to their friendship. It appears that Elfride occasionally assumes a secondary role, which Sedgwick claims is attributable to the fact that when two men contend for the fondness of the same woman, their concealed homoerotic desires are channeled through the woman, portraying her as pitiful or contemptible, as she is reduced to a mere symbol of desire between men (qtd. in Anand 111).

To be specific, the dispute between Knight and Smith over Elfride's ownership is nothing more than a way to redirect their feelings. They are both even more engrossed in the contest of her manhood than in genuinely loving her. Immediately after Elfride's figure vanishes, signs of physical affection between the two men can be recognized for the first time in the novel: "Then Stephen put his hand upon Knight's arm, and closed them round from the yellow glow" (Hardy 398); "Stephen then paused, and lightly put his hand within Knight's arm" (Hardy 399). Elfride can be understood as the pretense that united them. Hence, it is not unusual to read a homosocial subtext in their relationship.

4. CLASS IN *A PAIR OF BLUE EYES*

As discussed previously, the nineteenth century was a period of economic growth and technological development, which led to the rise of the middle class. This advancement was a consequence of the Industrial Revolution, which was a key factor in the development of England as a country, specifically during the 18th and 19th centuries. According to Steinbach, "most historians remain convinced that the changes industrialization wrought were dramatic, they also stress that the process occurred very gradually" (85). In addition, Victorians not only lived in an era marked by ongoing discoveries, advancements, and transformations, but they also had to deal with its aftermath. The adjustment to the continuing changes was not easy, as explained by Middekke and Pietrzak-Franger: "the human psyche was not able to bear up against this rapid change of society and experience" (3). Victorians found themselves with a major part of their beliefs challenged. Liaci explains that a method used to alleviate the anxieties provoked by these changes was to categorize things as either good or bad, with the aim of eliminating the wicked elements of society. Thus, a behavioral "standard" was established to identify deviations, in an attempt to maintain a sense of control amidst the rapid societal changes (4). An instance of such changes and the reactions they elicited was the transformations resulting from the rise of the middle class. This event diminished the influence of the landed gentry and the upper class, reshaping existing socioeconomic relationships. In response, "the aristocracy and landed gentry frequently embodied forms of tradition and continuity set against (for better or worse) the currents of social change" (Adams 54). In *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, it can be observed how Hardy portrays these changes and the responses they evoked.

4. 1 The Boundaries of Social Intercourse

As mentioned before, during the Victorian era, the Industrial Revolution played a significant role in shaping English society. The middle class gained ground, shaking the values of the time. In reaction to the anxieties induced by change, some Victorians attempted to uphold the established and prevailing order of things. Hence, a reluctance to

the blend of social classes and praise of social segregation can be observed in *A Pair of Blue Eyes.*

Adams claims that "as a marker of elite social status, the norm was traditionally associated principally with inherited rank, but also with a host of virtues derived ultimately from a martial ethos: independence, courage, fidelity, and above all, honor" (56). The idea that superiority is bestowed through inheritance is also embraced by Mr. Swancourt, Elfride's father. Mr. Swancourt's character epitomizes the influence of the values of the Victorian era on people's consciousness. His judgment of people is largely rooted in whether they conform to certain expectations and moral standards. Evidence of this is his treatment of Stephen at the beginning of the novel, which contrasts with how he regards him at a later point. It is important to bear in mind that according to Davidoff and Hall's criteria, the Swancourt family belongs to the upper middle class (qtd. in Powell 39). Mr. Swancourt is the vicar of the town parish; hence they rejoice in social connections and prestige. Thus, his close relationship with Lord Luxillian, who owns most of Endelstow and eventually becomes Elfride's husband. By contrast, the Smiths belong to the working class as their capital comes from manual labor.

Mr. Swancourt is not reticent in expressing his admiration for Smith, as he utters: "I never was so much taken with anybody in my life as I am with that young fellow – never! I cannot understand it – can't understand it anyhow" (Hardy 54). It is evident that, at this point, he holds Smith in high regard. This could be attributed to the fact that, previously, Mr. Swancourt had exhibited persistence in emphasizing the nobility of the young man's lineage. He even congratulates him on, allegedly, belonging to a prestigious family: "And, Mr. Smith, I congratulate you upon your blood; blue blood, sir; and, upon my life, a very desirable colour, as the world goes" (Hardy 23). This reaction is logical if we consider the argument of Betensky, who states that "the 'gentle-born' were never regarded in the same way as the sons or daughters of a mill-worker" (320). Therefore, Stephen Smith's social status increased, thus enhancing his respectability and reputation. It is interesting to remark that Mr. Swancourt, to substantiate his argument, mentions the 'Landed Gentry' book (Hardy 23), since according to Mokrá, "all of the wealthy members of gentry used their property and respect coming from their position to enjoy a great amount of independence" (16). Consequently, Mr. Swancourt's regard for Smith could be attributable to his social status. He might perceive a self-serving opportunity in befriending Smith, conceiving it as a means to satisfy his personal interests.

Likewise, this idea is reinforced when Stephen Smith reveals his true ancestry. Previous to disclosing the truth, Hardy depicts Stephen Smith's character with an almost crippling anxiety, since all his thoughts revolved around the consequences of his "dreadful" secret:

> Certain circumstances in connection with me make it undesirable. Not on my account, on yours (53).
>
> Suppose there is something connected with me which makes it almost impossible for you to agree to be my wife, or for your father to countenance such an idea? (66).
>
> You can hardly judge, dear, till you know what has to be judged. For that, we will stop till we get home. I believe in you, but I cannot feel bright (67).

This proves not only that Smith is aware of the limits of social classes and the consequences of trying to overcome them, but it also demonstrates that the integration of different classes was considered a dishonor and insult to the upper classes. In addition, when Smith reveals who his family is, the narrator states:

> It required no further effort to perceive what, indeed, reasoning might have foretold as the natural colour of a mind whose pleasures were taken amid genealogies, good dinners, and patrician reminiscences, that Mr. Swancourt's prejudices were too strong for his generosity, and that Stephen's moments as his friend and equal were numbered or had even now ceased (Hardy 89).

This quote reinforces the previous idea that Mr. Swancourt is governed by the conventions of the time, refusing to entertain the idea of class mingling, and despising deceit as it undermines one's integrity. Likewise, it also emphasizes the words of Adams, who claims that "class … entails a complex mediation between social orders, which depends on recognition across a wide social spectrum" (49). Therefore, it can be inferred that in the 19th century, although individuals had the opportunity to attain their own fortune, this alone did not warrant the respect and privileges bestowed upon the upper class.

In contrast, a method to maintain or increment the socioeconomic status was convenient marriage. This was a common practice as Conca and Abe state:

> Countless European bourgeois tried to climb the social ladder and acquire noble titles, entering the social and economic elite, and many of them finally crowned their ambitions with an ennobling marriage to Countess or Baroness, or by obtaining a title in recognition of their achievements, thus attaining a 'social capital' we might say, made up of prestige and status, wealth and local and international networks (214).

This interest in increasing prestige and creating new relationships is seen in Mr. Swancourt's marriage to Mrs. Troyton, a distinguished wealthy woman, "owner of all that part of Endelstow that is not Lord Luxellian's" (Hardy 110). "I married her for your sake" (Hardy 131) says Mr. Swancourt to Elfride. He is utterly aware of the benefits of this union; however, he disregards Elfride's opinion. His actions stem from inconsiderate motives, disguised as sympathy, as he disregards Elfride's happiness. He longs for a lifestyle more akin to Victorian upper-class ideals, even at the expense of his daughter's delight. An instance of this is when he articulates: "She will introduce you to the world a little … There's nothing to stand between you and a husband with a title" (Hardy 131). This supports the significance of Victorian values, where social interests prevailed over anything else. It also shows how social rank was still considered more important than wealth, as they sought social recognition through that union. This is also upheld by the fact that Mr. Swancourt does not allow Elfride to marry Smith, despite him having money, as his family belongs to the lower classes.

Likewise, this quote is worthy of mention: "We are going to exchange her house in Baker Street for one at Kensington, for your sake. Everybody is going there now, she says" (Hardy 131). This is reminiscent of the flow of internal migration that England suffered in the 19th century, since Mokrá explains that the upper middle class created clannish neighborhoods apart from the center city centers (16). This may be considered another attempt by Mr. Swancourt to integrate into a network of more prestigious relationships.

Concisely, his attitude and behavior suggest that he may struggle with feelings of inferiority, motivating him to seek closer affiliation with the higher classes while holding contempt for the lower ones. This reaction to the blending of different social classes might be a consequence of the strict Victorian moral codes.

4. 2 Challenging Class Norms

In the words of Powell: “Victorians recognized social status during social interaction through the individual’s bodily practices and behavior” (30). In *A Pair of Blue Eyes,* it can be observed how Hardy uses social norms and manners to reflect society’s hypocrisy and incongruences.

Hardy introduces Smith as an architect’s assistant with an allegedly prestigious family. This is significant since in the nineteenth century, it was imperative to behave according to the codes of conduct assigned to the pertinent social class. Nevertheless, Hardy contrasts Smith’s manners and his social class to reframe these conventions.

Pigou states that “the harder the labour, the more the effect of the work of man’s body in dwarfing the growth of the man” (qtd. in Ingham 108). This implies that individuals from the working class had limited opportunities for personal development and education; therefore, the upper classes perceived them as vulgar and less civilized. As mentioned above, people’s perception of one was essential to one’s prestige.

Employing Smith and Elfride’s game chess as a reference again, it can be observed how Mr. Swancourt exhibits a judgmental attitude towards Smith’s Latin pronunciation, as he states: “You have a way of pronouncing Latin which to me seems most peculiar. Not that the pronunciation of a dead language is of much importance; yet your accent and quantities have a grotesque sound to my ears” (Hardy 57). This passage can be interpreted as Hardy exposing the rigid codes of society and the obstacles the working-class faced when pursuing education, rather than acknowledging their achievements. Likewise, Mr. Swancourt displays a major interest in Smith’s education as he wonders: “Your instructor in the classics could possibly have been an Oxford or Cambridge man?” (Hardy 57). This inquiry might be since an upper-class young man was expected to be educated. Therefore, Hardy is probably criticizing the lack of possibilities for the lower classes and how the prejudices of the time do not constitute the absolute truth. An individual’s potential is not determined by their social class, instead, it is dictated by the opportunities they are conferred in life. Likewise, the concept of ‘vulgar' is not innate, but rather a societal construct. Furthermore, in this same passage, Smith interrupts Mr. Swancourt: “That the pupil of such man –” “The best and cleverest man in England!” cried Stephen enthusiastically” (Hardy 57). According to *The Gentlemen’s Book of Etiquette and Manual of Politeness* by Hartley, this act is regarded as extremely impolite as it is

considered an offense (20). Nevertheless, in the novel, there is no indication that Mr. Swancourt perceived it as a disrespectful act. Hardy, arguably, included this interaction to emphasize the lack of Smith's involvement with higher spheres, and to contrast his theoretical (self-)education to his education in manners in order to criticize the absurdity of pigeonholing people based on their social class.

In addition, another instance of Hardy depicting Smith as not qualified enough to belong to the upper class is when he reveals that he does not know how to ride a horse. Elfride expresses surprise as she claims: "Fancy a man not able to ride!" (Hardy 61).

This is significant as Elfride realizes that Smith does not suit societal expectations, and added to his passive personality, she becomes increasingly disinterested in him. Contrarily, Knight's social status is more prestigious and Elfride is inclined towards it. Despite Elfride not being completely aware of the underlying reasons for her sentiments, the narrator discloses her consciousness by stating:

> The abiding perception of the positions of Stephen's parents had, of course, little to do with Elfride's renunciation. To such girl, poverty may not be, as to the more worldly masses of humanity, a sin in itself, but it is a sin, because graceful and dainty manners seldom exist in such an atmosphere (Hardy 268-9).

The narrator is declaring that Elfride does not follow social conventions to the same extent as the general population; however, she finally succumbs to them, as they heavily influence her judgment. This evidences how strongly Victorian values were impregnated in people's consciousness, as they interfered with the perception of a person regardless of their personal qualities and achievements.

Likewise, Elfride also shatters the decorum that her social class and gender demand. She enjoys taking advantage of the limited freedom available to her; thus, she revels in riding her horse without an attendant. Regarding this behavior, the narrator claims with an almost ironic tone: "But Elfride must not be confounded with ordinary young feminine equestrians" (Hardy 111). It can be inferred from this quote that Hardy is displaying that the sole distinction between perceiving someone's conduct as vulgar or not lies in their social class. It seems that upper classes' behavior is often justified. The narrator continues: "The circumstances of her lonely and narrow life made it imperative that in trotting about the neighborhood she must trot alone or else not at all" (Hardy 111). With this vague justification, Hardy probably aims to emphasize the inanity and double

standards of societal norms. Likewise, the narrator allows the reader to perceive her father's opinion on the matter: "Her father, who had had other experiences, did not much like the idea of a Swancourt, whose pedigree could be as distinctly traced as a thread of silk, scampering over the hills like a farmer's daughter, even though he could habitually neglect her" (Hardy 111). Once more, his inconsiderate personality can be perceived as his concerns do not regard his daughter's safety, but rather the prestige of the family, since reputation and status were crucial aspects in achieving economic, social, and moral superiority. To conclude the quote, the narrator claims: "And so there arose a chronic notion in the villagers' minds that all ladies rode without an attendant, Like Miss Swancourt" (Hardy 111). In this fragment, Hardy cleverly argues that social norms are unreasonable, hypocritical notions imposed to single out those who act differently. This act as a reminder that Victorians strictly followed those rules as a counteroffensive to the anxieties the changes in their period caused them. In this fragment, it is noticeable that social norms lack a rational foundation; they rely solely on prejudices. When the majority begins to accept the exceptions as the norm, as in Elfride's case, nobody disputes it, and suddenly, what was once unthinkable becomes socially acceptable. Hardy, probably, aimed to emphasize the impartiality of social norms and how bigoted and discriminatory they were. Likewise, the quote also reveals that the upper classes determine social norms and expectations as they have great power over society.

4. 3 Social Mobility

As indicated earlier, the nineteenth century was a period of change in which, owing to the Industrial Revolution, individuals could rise in social class on account of their own labor. However, some upper-class members considered this advance as something disruptive to the order of society. In *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, it can be observed the response of part of society to this phenomenon.

Some of the consequences of the development of nineteenth-century society can be recognized in Stephen Smith's character. It could be argued that Smith is the epitome of Victorian social mobility. He comes from humble origins as his father is a cottager and journeyman mason and his mother used to work in a milking shed, which pigeonholes

him into the working class. In the novel, Hardy depicts his struggles to progress in life and how society deprecates him by reason of his social class.

During the compelling conversation with Elfride in which he is confessing his past life, he queries her: "Where do you think I went to school – I mean what kind of school?" (Hardy 80), to which she answers: "Dr's Somebody's academy" (Hardy 80). This response reveals the expectations Elfride held regarding Smith, however, he fails to fulfill them as he unveils: "To a dame school originally, then to a national school" (Hardy 80). According to Hadingham, the poor could attend those schools, but the instructed level was very simple, and the conditions were appalling (54). Further, Smith reveals that his parents paid for his little education, as he states: "A full premium was paid by the efforts of my mother and father" (Hardy 83). This reveals the efforts of the working class to improve their living conditions as Steinbach claims that parents eagerly wished to save their children from its damaging consequences (130). Hardy, arguably, intended to inform the reader about Smith's education, in order to contrast his proletarian origins with the prosperous future he achieved through his perseverance and endeavor. By doing so, he refutes the belief that "because the working class are weak, irrational and animal, the middle classes are not" (Ingham 21). These types of arguments rely on stereotypes and this one, in particular, employs a hasty generalization fallacy. Hardy, effectively defies this reasoning by demonstrating that working-class individuals are as capable and deserving of reaching high standards of living as those from the upper classes, thus establishing parity between the qualities, virtues, and flaws of the two groups.

In addition, Smith is granted the opportunity to travel to India. During this journey, he expects to increase his financial standing and consequently improve his social status, as he states: "I was thinking I could go over and make a little money, and then come back and ask for her [Elfride's hand]" (Hardy 141). Through these circumstances, Hardy symbolizes the changes society was undergoing. In the words of Spielvogel, "the creation of a wealthy industrial middle class and a huge industrial working class (or proletariat) substantially transformed traditional social relationships" (583). Namely, owing to the Industrial Revolution, the power of the bourgeoisie, which was traditionally rooted in land ownership was declining and the middle and working class had the opportunity to gain respectability and wealth through their labor. However, through the comforting words that Elfriede addresses to Smith: "It has become a normal thing that millionaires commence by going up to London with their tools at their back, and half-a-crown in their

pockets. That sort of origin is getting so respected" (Hardy 82). It can be assumed that despite the growing notion that individuals who exhibited discipline, perseverance, and hard work, were deemed deserving of success, its acceptance was progressing cautiously. The existing social hierarchy was imposed in response to the emerging changes.

Furthermore, Stephen Smith represents the self-made man, "an apotheosis of the bourgeois ethos, the very quintessence of the power of self-determination" (Adams 57). Nevertheless, Knight portrays the opposite: a cultured and educated man of letters whose societal status is inherently respected. Hardy, probably, sets in opposition these two characters to emphasize the difference in struggles and concerns that burden them. For instance, when Smith's father suffers an accident, Hardy directly criticizes society's inequalities, as the narrator audaciously claims: "The hand had been pronounced as injured but slightly, though it might possibly have been considered a far more serious case if Mr. Smith had been a more important man" (96). This quote exemplifies the privileges of the upper class as well as the injurious working conditions of the lower classes.

In addition, upon Smith's return with his increased wealth and achievements, the general townspeople change their attitude towards him; he is now admired. The narrator epitomizes this emerging reality by articulating:

> He was now a richer man than heretofore, standing on his own bottom; and the definite position in which he had rooted himself nullified old local distinctions. He had become illustrious, even sanguine clarus, judging from the tone of the worthy Mayor of St. Launce's (Hardy 384).

By doing so, Hardy reaffirms the belief that one can achieve success through diligence and hard work, reaffirming Smith as the epitome of a strong work ethic and the possibility of social class advancement. However, this also emphasizes the unequal treatment that individuals received based on their social status.

Nonetheless, the constant rejections of Smith by Knight and Mr. Swancourt serve as a reminder that having achieved economic success did not grant being respected and acknowledged by the whole of society. The moment in which Knight and Smith reunite, the narrator reports: "To the essayist, Smith was still the country lad whom he had patronized and tended; one to whom the formal presentation of a lady betrothed to himself would have seemed incongruous and absurd" (Hardy 276-7). This illustrates that "class

in Victorian Britain depended not only on economic status, but also at least as much on how one came about one's wealth or earned one's living and *whether* one had to earn one's living" (Betensky 320). Smith is still considered inferior due to his origins and way of earning a living. He will never achieve the same level of respectability in the eyes of his master. Another instance in which this is confirmed is when Mr. Swancourt is advising Elfride against marrying him, as he pronounces: "We must look at what he is, not what an improbable degree of success in his profession may make him" (Hardy 93-4). Perhaps, by contrasting these two different attitudes towards Smith's social mobility, Hardy is portraying having been born in the lower class as a condemnation, from which it is almost impossible to fully escape.

5. CONCLUSION

A Pair of Blue Eyes is a novel written in the context of Victorian society. Hardy's descriptions reveal the societal values prevailing during that era and the response to the socioeconomic changes that society underwent. Furthermore, the novel does not simply describe Hardy's contemporary society, as simultaneously, there exists a discreet yet persistent criticism of Victorian conventions. Hence, considering the previous analysis, it can be concluded that Hardy succeeds in subverting Victorian ideals regarding gender and class in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*.

Hardy, aware of the hurdles women face in an androcentric society and inequality regarding social classes, employs different mechanisms to criticize the systematic oppression exerted on both groups. However, it is essential to bear in mind that due to the strong conventions of the era, his critique is not overt, but instead, it is delicate and sagacious.

Hardy's female protagonists are a key element in achieving social criticism, and that is Elfride's case. Hardy depicts Elfride as a woman trapped between her heart and social expectations. He depicts the societal judgment that women struggle with daily. However, by allowing the reader to be aware of her inner world, he is encouraging them to engage in a reflective process, prompting them to contemplate their role in public scrutiny and its fairness. Likewise, through Elfride, Hardy reveals that none of the paths she could possibly choose from would offer true happiness, as it is compromised by societal norms, ultimately, leading to her death. By representing Elfride's destiny as a dead end, he is letting the readers be aware of the suffocating nature of Victorian values.

Similarly, Hardy criticizes the prevalent class system of the era and the social codes that derive from it. To achieve this, he continuously juxtaposes two different backgrounds, the working class and the middle-upper class. By representing the adversities Smith endures, Hardy hints at the discriminatory pretenses of the social classes. However, by allowing Smith to overcome some of those challenges, he refutes the argument that upper class people are superior in all senses. He also emphasizes how biased and bigoted societal norms are, as he, wittily, comments on how differently people from different classes are judged. Namely, he portrays being born into the lower classes as a social injustice from which it is nearly impossible to attain complete freedom.

Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes* serves as an excellent portrayal of Victorian society and the challenges its individuals faced due to the rigid moral standards imposed within. Thus, Hardy succeeds in representing Victorian society faithfully while also criticizing and subverting societal norms in a canny and prudent manner.

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