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From Dabbling in the Curds to Feeding the Machine: The Modernization of Agriculture in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

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From Dabbling in the Curds to Feeding the Machine:
The Modernization of Agriculture in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

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of the
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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

For years, I have been drawn to small, sustainable farming communities. I have sought out opportunities to gain practical experience with traditional farming and homesteading skills: harnessing and driving a team of draft horses, preparing a garden bed with a digging fork, milking cows and goats by hand, fermenting vegetables, canning jam. Through growing and providing food for my community, I feel connected to others and to the source of my sustenance. Through the use of simple hand tools rather than large tractor implements, I feel connected to the land where I work.

Pragmatically speaking, of course, I recognize that not all tasks can be accomplished by hand. I have therefore gained experience with farm machinery as well. One year, I volunteered on a farm where I milked seventy goats with a milking machine. On another farm where I worked for a summer, I rode on a transplanter on the back of a tractor for hours at a time. Rapidly and repetitively using one hand both to drop the seedlings in their rows and to fill in the holes, I raced to keep up with the machine. My muscles ached at the end of each day from my lopsided position, balancing on the seat of the transplanter and leaning out over the beds. I would have preferred to walk through the field to transplant the seedlings, but I understood that my employers, who wanted to continue selling their produce at affordable prices, depended upon the efficiency of the transplanter, which could dibble rows of evenly-spaced holes, apply water and fish emulsion, and hold numerous trays of seedlings as well as two farmhands.

After years of apprenticeship and employment on New England farms, I like to think that I have a realistic rather than romanticized approach to small-scale agriculture. Living and working with others can be fulfilling, but it can also be frustrating, even in a

small, idealistic community. Productive, physical work can be satisfying and grounding, but it can also be exhausting and painful. While I plan to continue working on farms in the future, I would admittedly not object if I never again had to stake another long row of hundreds of tomato plants, my stooped stance straining my back and the twine blistering my hands through my gloves.

Through my own experiences with farming, I became interested in Thomas Hardy's complicated portrayal of agriculture in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, his penultimate novel. Hardy certainly celebrates the positive aspects of traditional agriculture, but he also resists nostalgic idealization, recognizing as he does the complex realities of rural life and work. While he criticizes industrial agriculture for the alienation, detachment, and instability it can cause for laborers, he rejects a simple dichotomy between evil new ways and idyllic old ways. Food production and agricultural employment are more complex than a reductive dichotomy like this allows.

Tess of the D'Urbervilles, published in 1891, emerged from a grim agricultural context. Agricultural prosperity in England peaked in 1872, when wages for laborers, though still not generous, reached their highest point to date (Franklin 167). Between 1853 and 1875, favorable seasons allowed for prosperous harvests (Curtler 287). Though the failure of the potato crop in 1845 had led to the repeal of the Corn Laws, thus permitting the importation of produce, foreign competition was not initially a serious problem for British farmers (Franklin 165-166). The Crimean War followed by the American Civil War temporarily kept grain imports low and the demand for British produce high (Curtler 287). After 1875, however, foreign competition became a great burden for British growers (Franklin 167).

Between 1874 and 1882, only two seasons offered favorable growing conditions. The season of 1879 was particularly wet, with detrimental consequences (Curtler 293-294). Grain and hops became mildewed and moldy in the fields and blight spread to many crops (Prothero 376). Herds of cattle suffered from pneumonia and sheep from liver rot (Franklin 171). With only a brief reprieve in the late 1880s, the depression spanned from the mid 1870s through the end of the century (Prothero 375). As the cost of transporting goods from the United States and other countries decreased, England began to import grain and meat (Curtler 293). England's single annual grain harvest could no longer compete with the constant supply of grain from other climates (Prothero 376). Foreign competition, combined with a number of other factors including the poor quality of English products during the wet seasons, led to very low prices. The high cost of transporting homegrown produce by rail also challenged British farmers (Curtler 295). Unemployment and low wages distressed agricultural laborers and hastened the depopulation of the countryside (Snell 378-379).

The state of agriculture in Hardy's home county of Dorset, the source for many of the fictional Wessex locations in his novels, was particularly bleak for farm laborers. Wages were always lower in Dorset than they were in neighboring counties (Sherman 112). In fact, by the middle of the nineteenth century, laborers in Dorset were receiving lower wages than laborers in any other county in England (Snell 375). While wages increased somewhat in the early 1870s, laborers in Dorset continued to receive lower pay, insufficient nourishment, and inadequate housing opportunities compared to those in other counties (376).¹ The depopulation of the countryside was severe; there were 18,000

¹ As I will later address, Hardy attributes this rise in wages in the early 1870s to the unionization efforts of Joseph Arch.

agricultural laborers in Dorset in 1871, 15,700 in 1881, and 12,500 in 1891 (379). The sense of instability that pervades *Tess* reflects the dismal state of agriculture in the late nineteenth century, in England as a whole and in Hardy's native Dorset in particular.

In his 1952 essay on Hardy's representation of farm workers, G.W. Sherman lets his readers know that Hardy, well acquainted with the laboring class of Dorset, "saw with unerring discernment the causes and effects of their insecurity on the land" (111).

Fourteen years later, in his introduction to a new edition of *Tess*, Arnold Kettle reaffirms that "the indispensable key to Hardy's work is that as an artist he looked at life from the point of view of the peasantry of the South of England" (15). For much of the twentieth century, critics generally found Hardy's writing to be a reflection of a world he knew well, which Kettle refers to as the "dying world" of rural England (16).

Michael Millgate's biography of Hardy opens with the relatively humble beginnings of the author, who was born in 1840 and grew up in a simple, country cottage with a thatched roof and cob walls (7, 28-29). His father, Thomas Hardy senior, grew vegetables for the family in his garden, collected apples for cider, raised pigs, and, like Tess's father, kept bees (31). Though not from a family of farm laborers, Hardy took part in agricultural traditions, like a harvest supper he attended on a nearby estate in 1850 (49). Living in Bockhampton and going to school in Dorchester, he witnessed the gradations of the modernizing countryside through his "daily walk between a 'world of shepherds and ploughmen', still in touch with the customs and beliefs of past centuries, and 'a county-town of assizes and aldermen, which had advanced to railways and telegraphs and daily London papers'" (52). In Bockhampton, Hardy experienced patterns of rural life that "had existed largely undisturbed from medieval times" and were about to

be altered by “population expansion, urbanization, railways, cheap printing, cheap food imports, enclosures, agricultural mechanization and depression, improved educational opportunities, and pressures for migration and emigration” (39). These transformations permeate Hardy’s fiction.

That Hardy lived in close proximity to farmers and laborers is indisputable, but critics do dispute the accuracy of his depiction of rural life. According to the historian K.D.M. Snell, Hardy overlooks the true arduousness of the life of the rural poor, as he never explicitly mentions the problems of low wages, widespread unemployment, hostility surrounding unionization, and class tension. He romanticizes his characters, argues Snell, to reassure his readers, who were primarily members of the employing class (392). After all, though Hardy grew up in a rural cottage, his family did not struggle as farm laborers did. Their home, though not luxurious, was surrounded by multiple outbuildings and several acres of land (Millgate 28). The Hardys typically lived “a cut above most of their neighbours” (30). Some of Hardy’s relatives were agricultural “work-folk,” but his father ran a masonry business that became larger and more profitable over time: “In the 1851 census Thomas Hardy senior was described as a ‘bricklayer’ employing only two men; by 1861 the number of his employees had risen to six; by 1871 there were eight men and a boy; and in a directory for 1880 he is described as a ‘builder’” (29-30). Independent and successful, the Hardys would not have felt the instability of the agricultural situation to the extent that laborers did.

Kettle points out that others have rejected Hardy’s depiction of the countryside on opposite grounds, insisting that his version of rural life is too bleak rather than too idyllic (17-18). As Millgate explains, the depression described above, while it did indeed impact

British farmers, is now typically “perceived as having been less severe, overall, than used to be believed” (219). Though Dorset laborers were always underpaid, Hardy’s home county, with its high rate of dairy farming, was actually less impacted by the depression than were counties that specialized in grain production (Snell 378). Kettle concedes these points, but argues that this focus on material conditions obscures Hardy’s own emphasis in *Tess*, which highlights “changes not in standard of living but in *relationships*,” as rooted peasants increasingly became landless, itinerant wage-laborers (17-18).

More recently, Zena Meadowson, a literary critic, has offered yet another approach to Hardy’s fictionalized rendering of nineteenth-century rural life. She defends what she deems his unrealistic representation of farming as an integral part of his rejection of earlier forms of realism. Meadowson lists a number of ways in which *Tess* departs from typical narrative realism, including “its stylistic unevenness, melodramatic characterization, and improbable plot-development” (227). She argues that such qualities distort reality in the novel in order to reflect the way modern agriculture and society distort rural life.

Indeed, Hardy was writing not only at a particular moment in the history of agriculture, but also at a particular moment in the history of both visual and literary art. Hardy’s interest in the English landscape painter J.M.W. Turner helps explain his imprecise representation of rural life in his novels. In his *Life and Work*, Hardy notes that as of 1887, shortly before the publication of *Tess*, he finds the “simply natural” in visual art to be “interesting no longer,” and adds that “The much-decried, mad, late-Turner rendering is now necessary to create my interest.” Hardy is drawn to Turner because he does not aim to depict the “exact truth as to material fact” in his landscapes (192). J.B.

Bullen, interpreting Hardy's remarks on Turner, writes that Hardy finds landscape in art to be "of importance only as a vehicle for human imagination and human emotion" (193). Bullen suggests that Hardy's literary distortion of real objects and landscapes is similar to the visual transformation he admires in Turner's paintings. In the lush valley surrounding Talbothays Dairy and the monotonous, bleak fields at Flintcomb-Ash Farm, Hardy draws connections "between the physical properties of a landscape and the human drama enacted within it" (196). His representation of the Wessex countryside, though grounded in part in his familiarity with Dorset agriculture, is not "simply natural." Bullen's argument further illuminates Hardy's rejection of mimetic realism, but his work is not focused on Hardy's portrayal of agriculture. As I will demonstrate, agricultural landscapes and objects in *Tess* are imbued with human emotion, with laborers' relationships to their communities, the land, and their work.

Hardy was as much a poet as he was a novelist, and he draws agricultural topics into some of his poems as well. In "Domicilium," his earliest known poem, he voices the significant transformations impacting the English countryside before and during his lifetime. His paternal grandmother speaks in the poem, describing the land surrounding the Hardys' home in Higher Bockhampton when the family first settled there. She reflects that "change has marked / The face of all things." Previously, the land was much more wild, less impacted by human presence: "Yonder garden-plots / And orchards were uncultivated slopes / O'ergrown with bramble bushes, furze and thorn" (Hardy, *Complete Poems* 3). The family was very isolated, as their cottage "stood quite alone" (4). Communication with others must have been difficult and infrequent, as the road to their home was merely "a narrow path shut in by ferns" (3). Other species had a stronger

presence on the landscape than the human residents did, for “Snakes and efts / Swarmed in the summer days, and nightly bats / Would fly about our bedrooms.” Claiming that “Heathcroppers,” or wild ponies, “were [their] only friends” half a century ago, Hardy’s grandmother implies that their distance from human neighbors was supplemented by their closeness to the animals whose habitat they shared (4).

Hardy also describes the family homestead as it was at the time of his writing of “Domicilium.” The family cares for apple trees and gardens of flowers, herbs, and vegetables. Agricultural fields, a clear sign of human impact, now surround the house. Able to see other cottages nearby, the Hardys are no longer as isolated as they were in the past. The family is now surrounded not by wild plants, but by those they have cultivated themselves; the beech trees, which, “bending, hang a veil of boughs, / And sweep against the roof,” shelter the house from almost every side. Many of the other well-kept plants around the house, including the “Red roses, lilacs, [and] variegated box,” display the careful work of human hands (3).

Despite these changes, wild nature still maintains some strength in Bockhampton, as “Wild honeysucks / Climb on the walls” and “wish...To overtop the apple-trees.” The growth of the vines implies an urge on the part of wild nature to reclaim, both physically and symbolically, dominance over the domesticated landscape. Beyond the cultivated fields, the land has changed little in half a century. Intentional crops have not been planted, and the terrain has not been leveled: “Heath and furze / Are everything that seems to grow and thrive / Upon the uneven ground.” The relationship between humans and nature is dynamic, not settled. Hardy’s description of the oak tree, “springing from a seed / Dropped by some bird a hundred years ago,” suggests that the human hold on the

land is recent and still tenuous. The natural inhabitants have lived there for a longer period of time and continue to flourish beyond the homestead's boundaries and the human residents' lifespan. The persistence of the oak contrasts with the death of Hardy's grandmother, who is "Blest with the blest" by the time he writes the poem. The days of her conversations with the young poet are now "Long gone," but the oak, planted accidentally by a bird, continues to live (3).

In this poem, rather than condemning the transformation of the landscape as unnatural, Hardy expresses pride for his family's strength in the face of wild nature; they are able to turn the wilderness into a productive family home. He also suggests, however, that he is drawn to wild nature. After describing the carefully pruned roses around his home, he writes that his family also keeps "such hardy flowers / As flourish best untrained" (3). Through playfully using his last name in its common adjectival meaning, he both stresses the Hardys' robustness and implies their resemblance to the unrulier flowers in the garden, rather than those that have been meticulously trained up a trellis. The Hardys retain some of their closeness to nature, despite the changes they have brought about upon the landscape. As his family was involved in food production on a very small scale, Hardy does not address the industrialization of agriculture here, but he does illustrate the increased management of the land and the decreased isolation of rural communities. Hardy began to observe these changes at a young age, and continued to pay attention to them.

Along with these transformations, Hardy often emphasizes the contrast between the façade that rural life presents to outsiders and the real experience of farm labor. "Few pilgrims but would choose / The peace of such a life in such a vale," he instructs his

audience, romanticizing the setting of a later poem, "The Milkmaid," published in a 1901 collection. The image of the "rich red ruminating cow," described with such heavy-handed alliteration, adds to the idealized quality of the scene. The work itself is idyllic as well: "the milk purrs in the pail," falling softly and easily with no exertion from the milkmaid. She is deeply connected to nature, "Of whose life, sentiment, / And essence, very part itself is she" (157).

Despite the picturesque and peaceful setting, however, the milkmaid is not content: "She bends a glance of pain, / And, at a moment, lets escape a tear." At first, Hardy idealizes her sorrow as well, rather than using it to particularize her. The speaker wonders if she weeps because of the train, a recent intruder "Whose alien whirr offends her country ear." According to this explanation of her sadness, the milkmaid symbolizes traditional rural life. Her preoccupation turns out to be much less philosophical, relating to "inner themes and inner poetries," personal rather than far-reaching matters. She frets about gowns and romantic jealousy rather than sweeping transformations of the countryside. She is preoccupied by petty concerns, and does not seem to notice or care that her way of life is disintegrating. It does not matter to her whether the "meads...dry to dun," as her new dress interests her far more than the systematic drainage of wetlands does. If the young man she likes would forget "that Other One," she would not care if the sounds of machinery completely replaced the sounds of nature, if "Trains shriek[ed] till ears were torn" (157). Though the portrayal of the anonymous milkmaid is demeaning toward the intelligence and interests of female farm laborers, it reveals the author's own preoccupation with the changes affecting the countryside. She does not notice them, but

Hardy certainly does. The milkmaid herself is not a particularly interesting character; the heroine of *Tess* engages much more deeply with the transformation of rural life.

Some of Hardy's poems imagine the harshness of rural life and labor, especially for female agricultural workers. In "The Ruined Maid," written in 1866, Hardy presents a character that reminds the reader of Tess Durbeyfield toward the end of the novel, when she is living with Alec in Sandbourne. The poem's main character, 'Melia, has come from a background of poverty and arduous labor; her interlocutor reminds her, "You left us in tatters, without shoes or socks, / Tired of digging potatoes, and spudding up docks." She now wears "fair garments" and appears to live in relative luxury, but connects this change in circumstances to what society deems her "ruined" state (158). As her old acquaintance repeatedly questions her about her jewelry and refined speech, 'Melia associates each of these acquisitions with her ruin.

Rather than assuring the reader that the character has found contentment in her escape from poverty, the old acquaintance's envy of 'Melia communicates laborers' powerlessness. Despite the cheerful, almost singsong rhythm of the poem, its message is grim. Female agricultural workers have few options for improving their quality of life. 'Melia, unlike her acquaintance, has left behind the type of work that Tess must do at Flintcomb-Ash; as she tells her interlocutor, "We never do work when we're ruined." But her insistence that she has been ruined, repeated at the end of each stanza, suggests that mobility out of rural poverty into a life of luxury can only be attained at great cost. The interlocutor actually covets the main character's way of life, rather than criticizing or pitying her situation: "I wish I had feathers, a fine sweeping gown, / And a delicate face, and could strut about Town." 'Melia reinforces the sense of entrapment in the poem when

she responds, “a raw country girl, such as you be, / Cannot quite expect that. You ain’t ruined” (159). Hardy critiques this system in which rural life is so abusive that laborers are drawn toward any alternative at all that might allow them to escape it. Perhaps he also criticizes the social rubric that condemns people for the supposedly immoral decisions they make in order to live in comfort. Through the women’s conversation, Hardy implies that a life of ease is not a realistic goal for most laborers.

While “The Milkmaid” and “The Ruined Maid” relate only indirectly to *Tess*, some of Hardy’s poems actually recreate specific characters and locations from the novel. In “Tess’s Lament,” also published in the previously mentioned 1901 collection, Hardy contrasts the comfort, joy, and hope of life at the dairy with Tess’s misery after Angel has gone. The poem cannot stand alone without the novel, as it does not sufficiently explain Tess’s situation. Hardy tells the reader that Tess’s husband has left and that she blames herself for being the one “who made the blow to fall / On him who thought no guile,” but he does not reveal Tess’s fate beyond these hints. Without knowledge of the novel, the reader would not understand Tess’s situation and would thus not likely be moved by her sorrow. Moreover, the depiction of the dairy in the poem is rather simplistic, lacking the complexities of the novel’s version of Talbothays. The poem does, however, effectively call attention to a concern that Hardy emphasizes in *Tess* as well, regarding the transitory way of life for many late nineteenth-century laborers. Tess reflects, “I wonder...how / She feels who milks my favourite cow, / And takes my place at churn” (176). She implies that dairymaids are expendable and that their security is impermanent, as they simply revolve through the farm, each replaced by another woman as soon as she has bonded with the cows she milks.

In “We Field-Women,” part of a collection compiled late in Hardy’s life and published just after his death, Hardy recreates Flintcomb-Ash Farm and again mentions the dairy. The poem’s three stanzas are repetitive, each focusing on a different farm task engaged in during a different season of the year. The speakers tell us of “How it rained” during the swede trimming, “How it snowed” during the reed drawing, and “How it shone” at the dairy. This repetition emphasizes the laborers’ closeness to the cyclical rhythms of nature; the seasons completely determine the type of work they must do. Their labor at Flintcomb-Ash is grueling. The rain “washe[s] through” them so relentlessly that they “[can] not stand upon the hill.” The snow drives them into the barn, but the brutal work continues. The field-women of this poem, unlike Tess, leave Flintcomb-Ash in order to “start at dairywork once more,” which again emphasizes the cyclical nature of farm labor. Though the “laughing meads” of the dairy seem idyllic, the women have not escaped from their bleak situation. Trapped within the cycle of seasonal farm work, they will presumably be forced to work somewhere like Flintcomb-Ash “once more” the next winter. The joy of the dairy is also ruptured by the “love – too rash” that the women encounter there. This phrase, especially as it is followed by a repetition of “How it shone,” jolts us into the realization that the idyllic appearance of the dairy has concealed certain hazardous realities (881). Like “Tess’s Lament,” this poem creates similar characters, settings, and themes to those in the novel, but does not offer as complex a picture of rural life as *Tess* does.

Farming appears in Hardy’s poetry from the beginning to the end of his career. In his 1915 poem “In Time of ‘The Breaking of Nations,’” he describes a laborer: “Only a man harrowing clods / In a slow silent walk / With an old horse that stumbles and nods /

Half asleep as they stalk.” Despite his frequent comments upon the changes affecting the countryside, he writes that this image “will go onward the same / Though Dynasties pass” (543). The laborer’s practices, of course, will not continue “the same” indefinitely.

Agriculture today looks vastly different from agriculture in Hardy’s time, but issues surrounding the production of food and our relationship to the land we till continue to be pertinent. The lines quoted above are reminiscent of Hardy’s description of the mill, on the premises of a former abbey, which Angel visits in *Tess*: “The mill still worked on, food being a perennial necessity; the abbey had perished, creeds being transient” (233).² Hardy incorporates agricultural topics like these into his poetry, but embodies them more particularly and communicates their lasting importance more powerfully in *Tess*.

In the chapters that follow, I will discuss Hardy’s treatment of agricultural modernization in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* by examining his depictions of the traditional practices at Talbothays Dairy and the modern machinery at Flintcomb-Ash Farm. Of course, Hardy was not the first Victorian novelist to represent farming; situating him against one of the nineteenth century’s most critically acclaimed novelists, George Eliot, will help to contextualize Hardy’s novelistic approach to agriculture. Eliot’s portrayal of the Poysers’ dairy in *Adam Bede*, published in 1859 but set at the close of the eighteenth century, is an obvious influence on Hardy’s representation of Talbothays. Eliot’s first idealized description of the dairy invites her city readers to experience the wonderful freshness of the farm:

[I]t was a scene to sicken for with a sort of calenture in hot and dusty streets – such coolness, such purity, such fresh fragrance of new-pressed cheese, of firm butter, of wooden vessels perpetually bathed in pure water; such soft colouring of red earthenware and creamy surfaces, brown wood

² Unless otherwise noted, quotations in this paper from *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* are from the Penguin edition of the novel, included on the Works Cited list.

and polished tin, grey limestone and rich orange-red rust on the iron weights and hooks and hinges. (91)

The beauty of Hetty Sorrel, the Poyser's niece, adds to the dairy's romantic appearance for the visiting landlord, Arthur Donnithorne, who observes the "tossing movements that give a charming curve to the arm, and a sideward inclination of the round white neck; little patting and rolling movements with the palm of the hand, and nice adaptations and finishings which cannot at all be effected without a great play of the pouting mouth and the dark eyes." As Hetty works, even the butter "communicate[s] a fresh charm – it is so pure, so sweet-scented" (93). Mrs. Poyser, however, points out the practical struggles that the family faces in this world that is idyllic only on the surface. She tells Donnithorne about "the limited amount of milk that [is] to be spared for butter and cheese so long as the calves [are] not all weaned, and a large quantity but inferior quality of milk yielded by the short-horn" (91). Throughout the novel, Mrs. Poyser differentiates between outsiders' perceptions of her dairy and the real experience of running it: "The Miss Irwines allays say, 'Oh, Mrs Poyser, I envy you your dairy; and I envy you your chickens; and what a beautiful thing a farmhouse is, to be sure!' An' I say, 'Yes; a farmhouse is a fine thing for them as look on, an' don't know the liftin', an' the stannin'. An' the worritin' o' th' inside, as belongs to't" (236). The realities of farm life are brought home not only in the realistic representation of farm work toward which Mrs. Poyser gestures, but also in the tragedy of the dairymaid Hetty. That said, Eliot does not offer her readers the detailed scenes of difficult farm life that Hardy produces. While Eliot alerts readers to this tendency to make idealized generalizations about rural life, Hardy commits more of his novel to the complexities of such a life, including the uneasy relations between tradition and modernity.

Even before Hardy depicts Tess Durbeyfield's work at the dairy and in the turnip fields, he sets up an opposition in the early chapters of *Tess* that anticipates, on a smaller scale, the more fully imagined clash between the traditional and the modern. The contrast between her home village of Marlott and the Stoke-D'Urbervilles' impractical hobby farm establishes the sense that familiar rural life is rapidly disappearing and being replaced by an alternative of questionable value. Marlott is located in the isolated Vale of Blackmoor, "an engirdled and secluded region, for the most part untrodden as yet by tourist or landscape painter." The valley is characterized not by large, modern farms, but by more traditional holdings: "the world seems to be constructed upon a smaller and more delicate scale; the fields are mere paddocks" (12). Tess is rooted in this landscape, and thus "Every contour of the surrounding hills [is] as personal to her as that of her relatives' faces" (37). And yet, life in Marlott is not idyllic. Forced to take the goods to market herself due to her father's drunkenness, Tess gloomily tells her brother that the stars they see in the sky are other worlds, differing in quality "like the apples on our stubborn-tree. Most of them splendid and sound – a few blighted" (31). Evoking an image of rotting decay, Tess explains to her brother that they live on one of the blighted worlds.

Marlott represents not only traditional, small-scale farming and village life, but also the impulse to preserve tradition. Ancient pagan customs "linger...in a metamorphosed or disguised form," like the May Day celebrations that have transformed into women's "club-walking" (13). Hardy witnessed such events in the real Vale of Blackmoor (Millgate 177). In this spring agricultural ritual, the women dance wearing white dresses and carrying willow wands and flowers. Village women have "walked for hundreds of years, and [they walk] still," yet the tradition has nearly disappeared from the

region by this time, for “The club of Marlott alone live[s] to uphold the local Cerealia” (Hardy, *Tess* 13). The editor’s footnote explains that “Cerealia” refers to an ancient “festival in honour of Ceres, the Roman goddess of agriculture” (403). In the late nineteenth century, the Church condemned practices reminiscent of paganism, like “Village wakes and fairs, dancing round the maypole, club dinners and wrestling matches” (Green 92). Marlott has held onto remnants of the pagan past that have already vanished in many English villages.

The tenuous continuation of traditions like club-walking implies a lost sense of connection to the land, the community, and local history. The differences between Tess and her mother also emphasize the rapid changes impacting the countryside, despite the narrator’s insistence upon Marlott’s isolation and rootedness in the past:

Between the mother, with her fast-perishing lumber of superstitions, folklore, dialect, and orally transmitted ballads, and the daughter, with her trained National teachings and Standard knowledge under an infinitely Revised Code, there was a gap of two hundred years as ordinarily understood. When they were together the Jacobean and the Victorian ages were juxtaposed. (Hardy, *Tess* 23)³

The standardization of knowledge and the “infinitely Revised Code” connote to some extent a sense of constriction and loss of individuality, but the changes mentioned in this passage are for the most part beneficial to the rural poor. Tess was able to stay in school until just “a year or two” before the start of the novel’s action, though once she left her

³ Based upon the difference between Tess’s speech and her mother’s dialect, we can place *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* in the late nineteenth-century agricultural context described earlier in my Introduction: “Mrs Durbeyfield still habitually spoke the dialect; her daughter, who had passed the Sixth Standard in the National School under a London-trained mistress, used it only when excited by joy, surprise, or grief” (21). Dennis Taylor states: “The Education Act of 1870 helped promote the spread of a standardized English idiom, so that by the 1890s non-standard dialect was little tolerated in the schools” (83).

studies she had to help with haymaking, harvesting, and dairy work on nearby farms to help support her many siblings (37).

Tess's father works independently, like Hardy's father, but his old-fashioned peddling business is very shaky. One missed trip to market has the potential to cause significant harm to the family. Though Durbeyfield is not a farm laborer, his business is closely tied to the rhythms of the natural world; as Tess tells her mother, "It is late for the hives already. Swarming will soon be over for the year; and if we put off taking 'em till next week's market the call for 'em will be past, and they'll be thrown on our hands" (29). Tess and Abraham leave to take the hives to market, but their horse is killed along the way by the pointed shaft of a mail-cart travelling in the opposite direction. This dramatic event destroys the family business and traps Tess in her mother's scheme to claim kin to the wealthy Stoke-D'Urbervilles.

The Stoke-D'Urberville estate further reveals the changes affecting the countryside. A new type of country dwelling, the Slopes is "not a manorial home in the ordinary sense, with fields, and pastures, and a grumbling farmer, out of which a living ha[s] to be dragged by the owner and his family by hook or by crook. It [is] more, far more; a country house, built for enjoyment pure and simple." Their version of agriculture has little to do with food production, as the house has "not an acre of troublesome land attached to it beyond what [is] required for residential purposes, and a little fancy farm" (38). When Alec D'Urberville gives Tess a tour of the property during her first visit to her supposed cousins, Hardy demonstrates the impracticality of this "fancy farm." Instead of fields of crops, they have "lawns, and flower-beds, and conservatories" (41). When Alec asks Tess if she likes strawberries, she responds that she likes them "when they

come,” implying that the natural season has not yet arrived (42). At the Slopes, however, the strawberries are already ripe. The D’Urbervilles have roses ahead of the natural season as well, with which Alec adorns Tess. When she is on her way home after this first visit, a fellow traveler remarks, “Why, you be quite a posy! And such roses in early June!” (44). With modern techniques for producing unseasonal fruits and flowers, the estate is distanced from the rhythms of the natural world.

The work Tess does at the Slopes is the reverse of practical farming. Alec arranges for her to move there as manager of his mother’s hobby poultry farm. “I don’t know that I am apt at managing fowls,” she remarks anxiously to her family before leaving home (45). Her lack of qualifications for the job indicates that her hiring is motivated by factors other than practicality. The chickens, absurdly, reside in their own cottage: “The lower rooms were entirely given over to the birds, who walked about them with a proprietary air, as though the place had been built by and for themselves, and not by and for certain dusty copyholders who now lay east and west in the churchyard.” The replacement of peasant farmers by pet birds connotes the disappearance of traditional rural life. The family who previously owned the cottage lived there for generations, and was offended by the building’s conversion into a coop: “The descendants of these bygone owners felt it almost as a slight to their family when the house which had so much of their affection, had cost so much of their forefathers’ money, and had been in their possession for several generations before the D’Urbervilles came and built here, was indifferently turned into a fowl-house” (58). Tess’s chores make this mockery of a farm appear even more nonsensical. Mrs. D’Urberville demands that every chicken be brought to her for a daily inspection; she is blind, but recognizes every beloved bird by touch and

remembers each one's name. As well as caring for the chickens, Tess must whistle to the bullfinches in order to teach them tunes to replace their instinctive songs. Her work at the Slopes is not natural, productive, or fulfilling.

Early in the novel, Hardy begins to emphasize Tess's objectification as both a woman and a farm laborer. After she is raped by Alec and becomes pregnant, she returns to Marlott. As she is leaving the Slopes, she periodically "stop[s] to rest in a mechanical way by some gate or post" (75). This is the first instance of a technique that reappears throughout the novel. Hardy emphasizes industrial agriculture's dehumanization of laborers through using the vocabulary of machinery to describe them.

Once Tess is back in Marlott and has had her baby, we see the first major discussion of actual farm machinery in the novel. The villagers use a reaping-machine, pulled by horses, to harvest the crop of wheat. The women follow the machine to bind the sheaves. Continuing his technique of revealing objectification by likening humans to machines, Hardy writes that Tess's work "proceeds with clock-like monotony" (88). The machine's appearance, especially its two red arms, is supernaturally threatening: "The paint with which they were smeared, intensified in hue by the sunlight, imparted to them a look of having been dipped in liquid fire" (86). The paint reminds us that the color red has already been pursuing Tess throughout the text, marking her out for doom. The fate of the animals inhabiting the increasingly bare field also evokes Tess's entrapment:

Rabbits, hares, snakes, rats, mice, retreated inwards as into a fastness, unaware of the ephemeral nature of their refuge, and of the doom that awaited them later in the day when, their covert shrinking to a more and more horrible narrowness, they were huddled together, friends and foes, till the last few yards of upright wheat fell also under the teeth of the unerring reaper, and they were every one put to death by the sticks and stones of the harvesters. (87)

Hardy foreshadows Tess's inescapable path toward destruction, especially as he includes a similar event during the threshing at Flintcomb-Ash. The passage also serves as a barrier against a romanticized understanding of old-fashioned villages like Marlott. Commenting on Hardy's approach to modernization, Millgate argues that "Hardy was too much of a progressive to believe that the social consequences of this historical process were entirely bad, and too much of a realist to imagine that the process could somehow be reversed" (220). Balancing his criticism of modernization with comments on the universal bleakness of the human experience, past and present, Hardy often allows the sense of doom in the novel to reach beyond modern agriculture's abuses of the rural poor.

Additionally, the reaping passage reflects Hardy's concern for the wellbeing of animals, a topic that appears frequently in his fiction. In *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy's last novel, the title character is traumatized by the experience of slaughtering a pig. He is horrified when Arabella explains that in order to make the evisceration process easier and cleaner, she has not fed the pig for the last several days of its life. Having formed a relationship with the pig, he hates having to kill "A creature [he has] fed with [his] own hands." Hearing "surprise," then "rage," then a "cry of despair; long-drawn, slow and hopeless," and finally a "shriek of agony," Jude identifies human emotions in the doomed pig's voice. Arabella insists upon letting the pig die slowly to improve the quality of the meat: "We shall lose a shilling a score if the meat is red and bloody...He ought to be eight or ten minutes dying, at least." Objecting to this plan, Jude retorts, "He shall not be half a minute if I can help it, however the meat may look" (64). After accomplishing his task, he accidentally overturns the bucket they have used to collect the blood. Jude is not thinking of practical concerns, but Arabella laments, "Now I can't make any blackpot.

There's a waste, all through you" (65). She sees the pig as a product, which can both feed her and her husband and provide them with a small income; he sees it as a "fellow-mortal," deserving of humane treatment (66). Like this scene in *Jude*, the reaping scene in *Tess* emphasizes both the obligation to attend to practical concerns and the reluctance to suspend one's compassion for other living creatures.

In the sections of the novel that follow those that I have already discussed, Hardy contrasts the fullness of traditional rural life at Talbothays Dairy with the bleakness of mechanized agriculture at Flintcomb-Ash Farm, thereby communicating the instability, detachment, and lack of agency that affect landless laborers. The romanticized harmony of the dairy, however, is limited. Though Hardy firmly and convincingly critiques industrial agriculture in the novel, he resists the nostalgic idea that the past and the natural world offer idyllic alternatives to the unfulfilling present.

I. Nature and Tradition at Talbothays: Resisting Nostalgia

While Tess is working at Talbothays Dairy, pre-industrial peacefulness and a deep connection with nature appear at times to be inherent in the simple life and work of the farm. Arnold Kettle argues that the harmony of the dairy allows Tess to recover from her past pain, the dairy's healing force stemming from "a closeness to the actual rhythms of nature itself and a retention of many of the traditional habits and relationships of country life" (21). These qualities are sharply opposed by the portrayal of Flintcomb-Ash Farm that follows, reflecting both the lack of harmony in mechanized agriculture and the painful trajectory of Tess's fate.

Despite the romanticized elements of Talbothays, however, the sense of alienation and powerlessness in the novel, intensified while Tess is at Flintcomb-Ash, is in fact introduced well before then. Agricultural laborers cannot escape the abuses of modernity by turning to a more natural or traditional way of life, for total seclusion is impossible, even at Talbothays. Moreover, while connecting to the land and the community through simple, shared work is a positive endeavor, nature and tradition are not true opposites of heartless machinery, not dependable sources of benevolence and safety. This chapter will analyze the idyllic aspects of the dairy and then indicate the ways in which Hardy punctures this façade.

The reader's first introduction to Talbothays Dairy arrives in a letter, a response to Tess's appeal for employment from "an old friend of her mother's" (Hardy, *Tess* 99). Though Dairyman Crick turns out to barely remember Joan Durbeyfield, the hint of personal connection in the job offer establishes Talbothays as a place of meaningful

human relationships. The letter contrasts with the impersonal contract Tess signs at Flintcomb-Ash later in the novel.

Hardy also introduces Talbothays as a place of natural bounty and beauty. As Tess approaches the dairy for the first time, the cows actually appear to sparkle: “The ripe hue of the red and dun kine⁴ absorbed the evening sunlight, which the white-coated animals returned to the eye in rays almost dazzling, even at the distant elevation on which she stood” (102-103). Tess finds her living quarters to be as satisfactory as the lovely herds. She falls asleep to “the smell of the cheeses in the adjoining cheese-loft, and the measured dripping of the whey from the wrings downstairs” (113). Living in the midst of stinky, dripping dairy products, an arrangement one might expect to find unpleasant, in fact soothes and comforts her. The manual labor at the dairy is often idyllic, too. Following the “serpentine trail” left in the wet grass by each cow and thus locating the ambling herd, the dairymaids can either “dr[i]ve the animals back to the barton, or s[i]t down to milk them on the spot, as the case might require” (131). The act of strolling through the fields and sitting to work wherever the cows may be exudes a sense of freedom, peacefulness, and connection to the rhythms of nature, all qualities that industrial agriculture lacks as shown through Flintcomb-Ash Farm.

In the Valley of the Great Dairies, “milk and butter [grow] to rankness,” produced in such abundance (102). A mere glimpse of the cows’ udders implies that Talbothays is a successful business: “Their large-veined udders hung ponderous as sandbags, the teats sticking out like the legs of a gipsy’s crock and as each animal lingered for her turn to arrive the milk oozed forth and fell in drops to the ground” (106). In the late nineteenth century, dairy farming was indeed a relatively profitable endeavor. The decreasing

⁴ The OED defines “kine” as “archaic pl. of cow.”

profitability of growing grain encouraged farmers to raise cattle, especially dairy cows (Seebohm 329).

Once chilled transportation overseas became possible, the English began to import certain animal products, such as meat, butter, and cheese, from other countries where their production was less expensive. Milk, however, could still not be effectively transported great distances, so foreign competition was not a major obstacle for dairy farmers (Seebohm 329). In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, regions where dairy farming was prevalent were least affected by the depression (Curtler 297). The shift to dairy farming in counties like Dorset was also connected to the improvement of living standards in urban centers, which led to a growing demand for dairy products. Dairy work demanded less labor than grain cultivation did, which may have led to higher rates of unemployment and outmigration. For those with dairy jobs, however, work was more consistent throughout the year (Snell 377).

In late nineteenth-century England, the grain industry depended more heavily on male laborers, while livestock and dairy farms depended upon female laborers (Snell 40). In Dorset, where dairy farming was widespread, the decline in female labor thus occurred later than it did in other counties (377-378). While an 1843 parliamentary report on women's work finds female involvement in Dorset in a wide variety of farm tasks, by the 1860s women were primarily involved in dairy work (392-393). A dairy farm is therefore an unsurprising place for Tess to find employment.

Before the 1840s in Dorset, family members were typically hired together, both genders taking part in all areas of agricultural work (Snell 406). While historical accounts show increasing gender division in farm labor over the course of the century, the

milkmen and milkmaids at Talbothays work together on all tasks. Angel Clare woos Tess “at the cow’s side, at skimmings, at butter-makings, at cheese-makings, among broody poultry, and among farrowing pigs,” even though these were often considered to be areas of women’s work (Hardy, *Tess* 181). Although Snell criticizes Hardy for this anachronism, he also offers a compelling explanation for it; he argues that Hardy is trying to imagine “the conditions in which affectionate and lasting relationships could take place” (399). Hardy finds one of the scenarios that encourage meaningful human connection to be shared labor between men and women, a practice that is ended by modern hiring patterns. Tess and Angel fall in love in an idyllic community of shared work, though this situation would not have likely occurred within the economic context of the late nineteenth century. Many social divisions do not apply at the dairy as they do elsewhere.

Angel is living and working at Talbothays for six months in order to learn about dairy farming. Though his family is not immensely wealthy, the fact that his father is a parson qualifies Angel to be defined by the milkmaids as “quite the gentleman-born” (Hardy, *Tess* 113). The purpose of his apprenticeship is practical; he hopes to gain the skills he needs in order to run his own farm in the Colonies, America, or at home in England. Unlike his brothers, Angel does not have a university degree, because he did not want to take Orders in the Church. His position as an apprentice, learning how to do all of the physical tasks of the farm, is unusual, “a step in the young man’s career which had been anticipated neither by himself nor by others” (114). His motives are significant; he believes that farming will “afford an independence without the sacrifice of what he

value[s] even more than a competency – intellectual liberty” (117). Offering the path to Angel’s future career, the dairy must be a place of freedom.

Snell argues that real agricultural laborers in the late nineteenth century would not have encountered the chance for upward social mobility that Tess finds in her relationship with Angel, an apprentice who plans to eventually employ others on his own farm (388). In fact, class relations between farmers and laborers were extremely hostile in Dorset in the late nineteenth century (381). On many farms, discontented workers committed arson and maimed their employers’ cattle (388). Although Hardy makes no mention of any such class tension in the dairy portion of *Tess*, his characters say repeatedly that a marriage between a milkmaid and a parson’s son is nearly impossible. Izz Huett remarks, “Of course he won’t marry any one of us, or Tess either – a gentleman’s son, who’s going to be a great landowner and farmer abroad” (137). All the maids have a “full recognition of the futility of their infatuation, from a social point of view” (147). Hardy does not claim that relationships like Tess and Angel’s are common occurrences, but he does celebrate the couple’s idealized cooperative labor.

In certain instances, Hardy also celebrates Tess’s closeness to nature at Talbothays, though as I will later show, he does not always portray the natural world as a positive force. Tess’s association with nature is one of the factors that Hardy uses to justify her purity in contrast to society’s unnatural standards. Revealing his tendency to idealize and simplify her, Angel thinks of Tess as “a genuine daughter of Nature” (120) or a “daughter of the soil” (126). As Tess works, she merges with the dairy cow, her rhythms not diverging from those of the natural world: “Nothing in the picture moved but Old Pretty’s tail and Tess’s pink hands, the latter so gently as to be a rhythmic pulsation

only, as if they were obeying a reflex stimulus, like a beating heart” (150). The other milkmaids share in Tess’s connection to nature. Walking through the fields, they are a “bevy advancing with the bold grace of wild animals” (173). The combination of their “bold” wildness and their belonging to a “bevy” simultaneously communicates their freedom and their close ties to their community. Neither their bodies nor their spirits are checked by limiting social conventions, as they walk with “the reckless unchastened motion of women accustomed to unlimited space – in which they abandoned themselves to the air as a swimmer to the wave” (173-174). Through the contrast between the interconnectedness of laborers at Talbothays and the detachment of those at Flintcomb-Ash later in the novel, Hardy criticizes industrialized agriculture for distancing workers from the land and each other.

Tess’s connection to nature is a positive force specifically when it opposes the constrictions of religion and society.⁵ Earlier in the novel, when Tess is pregnant and living in Marlott, she is uncomfortable leaving home in daylight. Even when she walks in the woods at night, she feels that nature condemns her as guilty: “The midnight airs and gusts, moaning amongst the tightly-wrapped buds and bark of the winter twigs, were formulæ of bitter reproach. A wet day was the expression of irremediable grief at her weakness in the mind of some vague ethical being.” Hardy tells us that this reproach is imagined, for Tess is in fact much more aligned with nature than society is:

⁵ In *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy associates Arabella with nature also, but his characterization of her is quite different from that of Tess. He uses nature to emphasize Arabella’s earthiness and physicality. Early in the novel, Arabella is working on her father’s pig farm. It is a small, un-mechanized family business, but the work is coarse and vulgar rather than idyllic. To catch Jude’s attention as he walks past her, she throws a hunk of pig flesh at him (38). Once Jude is courting her, Arabella attempts to incubate a bantam’s egg, wrapped in wool and a piece of pig’s bladder and stored in the bodice of her dress. She teases and flirts with Jude by repeatedly showing him the egg and then burying it in her dress (55). The scene emphasizes her closeness to nature, but not in a positive or pure way as with Tess.

[T]his encompassment of her own characterization, based on shreds of convention, peopled by phantoms and voices antipathetic to her, was a sorry and mistaken creation of Tess's fancy – a cloud of moral hobgoblins by which she was terrified without reason. It was they that were out of harmony with the actual world, not she. Walking among the sleeping birds in the hedges, watching the skipping rabbits on a moonlight warren, or standing under a pheasant-laden bough, she looked upon herself as a figure of Guilt intruding into the haunts of Innocence. But all the while she was making a distinction where there was no difference. Feeling herself in antagonism she was quite in accord. She had been made to break a necessary social law, but no law known to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly. (85-86)

When closeness to nature signifies independence from religion and society, Hardy celebrates it. In other contexts, as I will discuss, nature is much more threatening.

Tess and the dairymaids are not the only residents of Talbothays whose work brings them close to nature. Angel, too, has “made close acquaintance with phenomena which he had before known but darkly – the seasons in their moods, morning and evening, night and noon in their temperaments, winds in their several dispositions, trees, waters, and clouds, shades and silences.” This reference to the revolving seasons and days links Angel to the cyclical rhythms of nature that Tess already embodies. Learning to hear “the voices of inanimate things” in nature, Angel is not merely observant of his environment, but also in communication with it (118). Like Tess and the female laborers, Angel at Talbothays is not limited by unnatural social constraints, for he “see[s] only Life, [feels] only the great passionate pulse of existence, unwarped, uncontroled, untrammelled by those creeds which futilely attempt to check what wisdom would be content to regulate.” These creeds of modern society and religion, in contrast, must therefore be not only unnatural but also devoid of life. Again, nature is a positive force specifically when it is held up against religion. This passage occurs while Angel is visiting his family and comparing himself to his two brothers; they think he is “getting to

behave like a farmer,” while he sees them as “all Church” on the one hand and “all College” on the other (158-159). Only after Angel’s cruel reaction to Tess’s revelation of her past do we conclusively ascertain that his connection to nature does not disentangle him from social conventions. His demeaning reduction of Tess from a complex human being to a “daughter of the soil” is perhaps an early clue that even at the dairy he is not entirely free from the influences of society.

In addition to linking life at Talbothays to the natural world, Hardy links the dairy to folk traditions and superstitions that recall a time before large-scale industrial agriculture. When the cows give less milk than usual during Tess’s first day on the farm, the laborers sing to the reluctant ruminants, for “Songs were often resorted to in dairies hereabout as an enticement to the cows when they showed signs of withholding their usual yield” (109). When the cream will not turn into butter, Mrs. Crick says that someone on the farm must be in love. Crick and several of the laborers debate the merits of various local conjurors, who they believe can help in such situations. Referring to Conjuror Trendle’s son, Crick insists, “I have said fifty times, if I have said once, that I don’t believe in him,” but admits that he will seek the conjurer’s help if the problem persists (133). When a cock crows on the afternoon of Tess and Angel’s wedding, Crick finds the untimely occurrence to be a bad omen, though his wife reassures him that it merely foretells a change in the weather (217). These folkloric and superstitious conversations expand the gap between Talbothays and modern, mechanized farms.

Several other elements of life at Talbothays also recall an earlier style of farm life, further developing the peaceful contentment of Talbothays as an alternative to the unsatisfying, dehumanizing modern agriculture explored later in the novel. Mrs. Crick’s

role on the farm is one example. Farmer's wives in nineteenth-century England typically oversaw the dairy, as well as the care of the pigs and poultry (Seebohm 320). Earlier in the century, they had many other responsibilities as well, including preparing remedies in the stillroom, making wines and ciders, malting, and brewing beer. By the late nineteenth century, women were doing fewer of these tasks themselves, as products from other sources came to be available and affordable (Seebohm 362, Green 16). Perhaps because Talbothays is such a large and successful farm, Mrs. Crick does not participate in the physical labor, feeling that she is "too respectable to go out milking herself" (Hardy, *Tess* 112). She does, however, prepare homemade goods, as women did for centuries leading up to Hardy's time. When Angel goes to visit his family, Mrs. Crick sends him with homemade black puddings and a bottle of mead (156). Through Mrs. Crick's preparation of these goods, Hardy emphasizes the lack of alienation in the lives of the Talbothays residents; everything they eat and drink seems to come directly from the farm.

Talbothays, then, directly provides the workers with nourishing foods. So too does it offer them shelter. Angel Clare and four of the milkmaids, including Tess, live in the dairy-house, while the rest of the workers live in cottages. The maids live comfortably and "merrily" in this small community, sleeping in a loft and eating meals with the Cricks and Clare. This living situation further establishes Talbothays as a place of community, where the industrialization of agriculture has not yet disrupted traditional patterns of farm life. Perhaps downplaying the dairymaids' financial struggles, Hardy argues that their situation is ideal, for they live "below the line at which the *convenances* begin to cramp natural feeling, and the stress of threadbare modishness makes too little of enough" (128). They are indeed lucky in certain respects, for in the early nineteenth century, the custom

of offering laborers a place to live in the farmhouse began to decline. Farmers' wives, who typically had to cook for any resident laborers, objected to the inconvenience (Seebohm 354-355). Those fortunate enough to find lodgings in the farmhouse later in the century ate much better meals than those living off the farm (359). Life at Talbothays accurately reflects the merits of dairy farming at a time when other areas of agriculture did not fare as well. Hardy's choice to give the dairymaids a place to live in the farmhouse shows that the dairy is a particularly good place to have found work; the reader thus better understands the bleakness of Tess's transition to Flintcomb-Ash.

Perhaps the most important area in which Hardy idealizes Talbothays is the dairy work itself. In the nineteenth century, English dairy farmers tended to shun large factories and creameries for their products, preferring to process the milk themselves (Curtler 304). By late in the century, however, many new practices and machines had been developed to modernize and mechanize dairy farming. One writer in a late nineteenth-century magazine article, lamenting the loss of the simple, rustic dairy, declares that the charming image of "milkmaids and snowy curds and labouring wains" can no longer be found (Poetic Future 444). Technological advancements in dairy farming were rendered necessary as foreign competition increased (Prothero 388).

Milking by hand was still common practice, but milking machines were used on some farms, though the challenge of cleaning the machines' tubes was initially an obstacle to their broader implementation. The most modern dairies started to pasteurize their milk, and used machine-operated churns for their butter. After 1879, dairies used centrifugal cream-separators cranked by hand or powered by horse or steam (Seebohm 334-335). Wealthy dairy farmers could choose from a wide range of other modern

implements as well: “churns to suit every fancy, milk-testers, milk-coolers, centrifugal butter driers, butter workers, butter hardeners, steel pails, tin-lined utensils, down to grease-proof paper, and chip or paper boxes for marketing the produce” (Prothero 390). Smaller farms rarely used such devices, but nearly all dairy farms utilized thermometers in order to maintain the proper temperature of their milk, cream, and curds with scientific accuracy (Seebohm 335). Dairy farms also moved toward a greater emphasis on absolute cleanliness of facilities, water, and equipment (Prothero 388).

Due to the rapid progress in dairy technology, ordinary dairymen began to face “some risk that this branch of the farming industry [would] become confined to creameries and associations, and that wholesale dealers [would] refuse the products which [had] not come from a factory” (Prothero 390). A magazine article published in the same decade as *Tess* claims that the old-fashioned dairy has been supplanted by the “creamery, with its wheels and shafts and bands, its engineers, and its steam separators” (Poetic Future 444). Talbothays looks nothing like this image of a factory farm.

Hardy describes dairy processing at Talbothays in a scene in which Tess and Angel are separating the cream from the milk, presumably in preparation for butter making. Tess does not use a centrifugal separator. Instead, she uses a handheld skimmer to scoop the cream off the top of the milk, held in a series of rectangular pans. This is an inefficient method, both slower and less thorough than the modern devices available around that time (Seebohm 335). It takes a great deal of effort to “hit the exact under-surface of the cream with...delicate dexterity” as Tess must do, without “cutting down into the milk” or leaving behind some of the cream (Hardy, *Tess* 171). On this particular day, the method is even less efficient than usual, as Tess is distracted by Angel’s

attention. Hardy explicitly remarks on its inefficiency, admitting that “Possibly the Talbothays milk was not very thoroughly skimmed that afternoon.” If Tess did not have to skim the cream by hand, we would not witness the physical expression of her strong emotions: “Every time she held the skimmer under the pump to cool it for the work her hand trembled, the ardour of his affection being so palpable that she seemed to flinch under it like a plant in too burning sun” (170). The scene may not accurately reflect contemporary dairy work, but it does effectively communicate Tess’s emotions in a way that a scene involving modern machinery would not.

The old-fashioned methods also allow Hardy to emphasize further the Talbothays community’s vivacity and freedom from social constraints. Though the agricultural texts insist that strict cleanliness protocols prevailed on late nineteenth-century dairy farms, Hardy emphasizes Tess and Angel’s connection with nature and growing, irrepressible attraction by disregarding this modern sterility: “when she had done running her forefinger round the leads to cut off the cream-edge he cleaned it in nature’s way.” As Angel shows his affection to Tess more confidently, Hardy explains that “the unconstrained manners of Talbothays dairy came convenient now” to the apprentice (170). Hardy does mention the necessary attention to cleanliness when Deb, another milkmaid, arrives to “scald out the leads for the new milk” after the skimming is complete (173). Tess and Angel’s romance is detached from these practical concerns, which perhaps hints at an unstable quality within their relationship. Through her work, however inefficient and outdated it may be, Tess connects with the natural world and with Angel, though she refuses his marriage proposal in this scene. Any reader with knowledge of dairy farming, however, would have recognized that Tess’s fate is

continuing to close in on her, as the Talbothays way of life was on the verge of disappearing by the late nineteenth century.

Another scene of dairy processing occurs soon after the skimming, when Tess and Angel make cheese together:

They were breaking up the masses of curd before putting them into the vats. The operation resembled the act of crumbling bread on a large scale; and amid the immaculate whiteness of the curds Tess Durbeyfield's hands showed themselves of the pinkness of the rose. Angel, who was filling the vats with his handfuls, suddenly ceased, and laid his hands flat upon hers. Her sleeves were rolled far above the elbow, and bending lower he kissed the inside vein of her soft arm. Although the early September weather was sultry, her arm, from her dabbling in the curds, was as cold and damp to his mouth as a new-gathered mushroom, and tasted of the whey. (176)

Once again, Hardy creates a romantic image of human connection through simple work.

We see neither the modern attention to efficiency, cleanliness and scientific accuracy, nor the conclusion of the process of cheese making, as the scene does not go beyond placing the curds in the vats. As Angel touches Tess's hands among the curds and kisses her whey-covered arm, the strength of their affection is more important than the actual task in which they are engaged. The "immaculate whiteness" of the curds connotes Tess's purity as justified by her connection to nature. But even in this apparently harmonious scene, the pink of Tess's hands against the white curds reminds us that the color red has followed her throughout the novel, as if marking her out for doom. Additionally, the mushroom simile in this passage recalls a very similar image from much earlier in the novel; as Alec kisses Tess goodbye when she is leaving the Slopes to return to Marlott, her cheeks are "damp and smoothly chill as the skin of the mushrooms growing around them" (78). The repetition of this image, first pertaining to Alec and then to Angel, alerts the reader that all is not right at the dairy.

Including these moments of unease within the apparent harmony of Talbothays, Hardy prevents us from seeing the dairy as an unspoiled remnant from a carefree rural past. After all, as Dairyman Crick tells Tess when she arrives at Talbothays, “‘Tis comfortable enough here for rough folk; but we don’t live in a cowcumber frame” (107). Tess is not free from strenuous physical labor at Talbothays. Every morning, she must rise at three o’clock for the careful skimming and arduous milking, which must leave her with aching hands as she adjusts to the work. Crick periodically confronts economic concerns that threaten his business. Though the farm in general appears to be successful and stable, a single bite of wild garlic by a single cow is enough to ruin an entire day’s yield of butter; plentiful dairy produce is worth little if it tastes terrible (139-140). An unusually wet July postpones the mowing of hay, a crop necessary to the survival of the farm, as it will feed the cows during the winter (142). As summer advances, the idealization of farm life slips away in terms of both personal comforts and the practical concerns relating to the business:

The cows jumped wildly over the five-barred barton-gate, maddened by the gad-fly...The flies in the kitchen were lazy, teasing, and familiar, crawling about in unwonted places, on the floor, into drawers, and over the backs of the milkmaids’ hands. Conversations were concerning sunstroke; while butter-making, and still more butter-keeping, was a despair. (149)

Conditions become increasingly uncomfortable, warning us against the tendency to romanticize rural life. This process runs parallel to Tess and Angel’s convergence, leaving the reader with an unsettled feeling about both the dairy’s long-term economic viability and the couple’s relationship.

As well as evidence of unease, evidence of modernization is present intermittently throughout Tess’s stay at Talbothays, despite the farm’s nostalgic, old-fashioned

appearance. Home to over one hundred cows, the dairy is modern in terms of its size (108). When Tess first arrives in the Valley of the Great Dairies, she is immediately struck by the vast scale of the farms there compared to those in her home village: “The world was drawn to a larger pattern here. The enclosures numbered fifty acres instead of ten, the farmsteads were more extended, the groups of cattle formed tribes here about; there only families” (102). Though it resembles a small family farm in many ways, Talbothays, “having no resident landlord,” in fact has an absentee owner like Flintcomb-Ash does (168).

The farm utilizes several modern implements and practices as well, though so much of the work Hardy describes is done by hand. Angel’s objective in apprenticing at different farms is to learn modern, rather than traditional, methods. Departing from the mill at Wellbridge, where he briefly visited after leaving Talbothays, Angel tells the miller that the facility is “not of the modern kind which he wishe[s] to investigate” (251). As a major step in Angel’s training to become an up-to-date landowner and agriculturist, Talbothays must not really be a relic from the pre-industrial past. The dairy’s “great churn” is large enough for a man to fit inside, as we know from a story told by Mr. Crick. Powered by “a spiritless horse walking in a circle and driven by a boy,” the churn turns its human and animal components into pieces of machinery, like many of the devices used at Flintcomb-Ash (119). After the churning process, the farm sells not only simple logs of country butter, but also “ornamental butter-pats for the Anglebury and Sandbourne ladies” (202). Though Hardy frequently emphasizes the freedom that laborers experience at Talbothays, the social life of the dairy diverges from the rowdier, less constrained ways of the past; Mr. Crick complains that Tess and Angel’s wedding

cannot be celebrated with “a rattling good randy wi’ fiddles and bass-violis complete, as we should ha’ done in old times” (210). This complaint suggests that the farm has modernized significantly over the course of Mr. Crick’s lifetime.

As discussed in the Introduction above, Hardy often emphasizes the dehumanizing effects of modern agriculture by attributing machine-like qualities to living beings. Though this technique is most prevalent when Tess is at Flintcomb-Ash, Hardy actually makes use of it during Tess’s time at Talbothays as well. Life at the dairy may seem to be full of contentment, but Tess is nevertheless objectified. When Crick recounts a tale about a dairymaid deceived by a dishonest man, most of the listeners laugh, while Tess becomes noticeably uncomfortable. She invents an excuse for her strange reaction: “‘I was faint – and – I think I am better out of doors,’ she said mechanically” (135). Though she is not yet a cog in the machinery of industrial agriculture to the extent that she will be at Flintcomb-Ash, she is already trapped on a path toward a grim fate. When she wanders outside to calm herself after this incident, she hears “a solitary cracked-voiced reed-sparrow greet[ing] her from the bushes by the river, in a sad, machine-made tone” (136). Rather than offering an escape for Tess, nature echoes her entrapment.

Machinery continues to haunt her after she has married Angel and revealed her past to him, to which he reacts with cruelty. The morning after the disastrous conversation, Angel sees Tess “mechanically readjusting the breakfast things” (236). As the two discuss their dismal future, Tess tries to hide her despair, “the sunk corners of her mouth betraying how purely mechanical [a]re the means by which she retain[s] that expression of chastened calm upon her face” (243). Angel shows signs of mechanization, too: “Breakfast over he rose, and telling her the hour at which he might be expected to

dinner, went off to the miller's in a mechanical pursuance of the plan of studying that business" (240). Angel's apparently progressive morals have failed to be consistent when tested. Though he appears to be free from the pressures of social conventions at the dairy, he too is a cog in the unnatural machinery of modernity. Shortly before Angel leaves for Brazil, Hardy exposes him unmercifully: "With all his attempted independence of judgment this advanced man was yet the slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into his early teachings" (265). The Oxford Clarendon edition of *Tess* includes in this same passage a reference to Angel as "a sample product of the last five-and-twenty years," which further defines him as figuratively machine-made (369).

Modernity seeps through into life at the dairy most strongly when Tess and Angel transport a batch of milk to the train station. The railway, a part of Dorset life only after 1857, places Talbothays unquestionably in the context of the second half of the nineteenth century, despite the remnants of older techniques and customs that persist there (Snell 377). Tess and Angel's cart "crept" toward the station, moving cautiously toward something unfamiliar and intimidating. They approach "a point in the expanse of shade before them at which a feeble light was beginning to assert its presence," literally a lamp to illuminate the station but figuratively a sign that modernity is gradually taking over the countryside. Its hold over the landscape is still tentative, as the only sign of the railway during the day is "a fitful white streak of steam at intervals upon the dark green background." Even that trace of steam, though, clearly signifies "contact between their secluded world and modern life," implying that Talbothays is not as secluded as the

reader might have previously inferred.⁶ In fact, the seclusion is breached every few hours, as modern life “stretche[s] out its steam feeler to this point three or four times a day, touche[s] the native existences, and quickly [withdraws] its feeler again, as if what it touched had been uncongenial” (Hardy, *Tess* 186). While the weak station lamp and plume of steam are unthreatening, this personified image of modern life’s infiltration of the countryside is ominous and monstrous, as if machinery will soon complete its colonization of the Valley of the Great Dairies.

Machinery has already begun to displace nature in the region. Hardy writes that the station with its weak lamp is “a poor enough terrestrial star, yet in one sense of more importance to Talbothays Dairy and mankind than the celestial ones to which it [stands] in such humiliating contrast.” Though unimpressive at first glance, the railway station plays a central role in the lives of farmers and laborers. The comparison of the lamp to a star brings to mind the image of a town or city so well lit at night with artificial lights that one cannot see the stars. This familiar image reinforces the sense that machinery is supplanting nature, even in a place like Talbothays, where people tend to connect deeply to the natural world.⁷ The arrival of the train, “hissing” and sliding into the station “almost silently upon the wet rails,” intensifies the threatening tone of the scene. Tess is out of place at the station: “No object could have looked more foreign to the gleaming cranks and wheels than this unsophisticated girl, with the round bare arms, the rainy face and hair, the suspended attitude of a friendly leopard at pause, the print gown of no date

⁶ At Max Gate, Hardy’s home after 1885, seclusion was similarly breached by signs of modernity; Millgate describes Max Gate as “fairly isolated—though close to the road and within sound of the railway and the whistle of the Eddison steam-plough works” (238).

⁷ In *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy uses the railway to suggest that machinery is supplanting religion; Sue Bridehead says, “I think I’d rather sit in the railway station...That’s the centre of the town life now. The Cathedral has had its day” (134-135).

or fashion, and the cotton bonnet drooping on her brow” (186-187). Her brief contact with machinery dehumanizes her, as Hardy categorizes her here as an “object.” Marked by the weather and resembling a leopard in her behavior, she belongs to nature, while the train belongs to the realm of lifeless machinery. And yet, this station is presumably where Crick sends the milk every day. Rather than being a nostalgic escape from modernity, Talbothays depends on the railway, and thus on the mechanized, modern world.

This glimpse of mechanization introduces the sense of alienation that Hardy emphasizes so strongly in the Flintcomb-Ash portion of the novel. Tess reflects on the customers who will purchase the milk she is sending away on the train: “Londoners will drink it at their breakfasts to-morrow, won’t they?...Strange people that we have never seen.” The laborers at Talbothays are not providing milk to their own community, but rather sending it far away to customers who know nothing about its origins. Angel responds to Tess, “Yes – I suppose they will. Though not as we send it. When its strength has been lowered, so that it may not get up into their heads.” The Londoners will not even be consuming the exact commodity that is produced on the farm. The milk will be skimmed until it is the product the city-dwellers desire. Tess goes on to imagine the identities of these unknown customers, the “Noble men and noble women, ambassadors and centurions, ladies and tradeswomen, and babies who have never seen a cow...Who don’t know anything of us, and where it comes from; or think how we two drove miles across the moor to-night in the rain that it might reach ‘em in time” (187). These people are as unfamiliar with farm life as Tess is with city life. She is struck by a great sense of

detachment, as she realizes that not only physical distance separates the farm from its customers, but also a great distance in terms of life experience.⁸

Anticipating the greater detachment from land and community to come once Tess goes to Flintcomb-Ash, this sense of alienation appears not only at the train station, but also at the dairy itself. When Tess first arrives at Talbothays, she drinks some milk at chore time, “as temporary refreshment – to the surprise – indeed, slight contempt – of Dairyman Crick, to whose mind it had apparently never occurred that milk was good as a beverage” (107). Hardy emphasizes Tess’s connection to nature; drinking right out of the pail, she views the milk as nourishment rather than commodity. This scene also distinguishes between Talbothays and Marlott. The dairy may seem old-fashioned, but it is modern compared to Tess’s home village. Crick’s reaction reveals that the milk is not intended for the community in which it is produced. The only contact that Crick ever has with a customer while Tess is at the dairy is a letter from a man, “complain[ing] that the butter [has] a twang” (139). Apart from this moment, those who drink the milk and eat the butter are utterly distant from those who care for and milk the cows.

In some instances, Hardy also suggests that the laborers themselves are detached from the land where they work. After Tess tells Angel that she is descended from the D’Urberville family, he remarks that “many of the present tillers of the soil were once owners of it” (188-189). The presently rootless laborers once had a greater connection to the land through generations of ownership and cultivation. Daily work at the dairy also

⁸ As mentioned in the Introduction, the Poysers’ dairy in George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* is an interesting precursor to Talbothays. Eliot’s novel is set nearly a century before Hardy’s. Mrs. Poyser and the neighboring women discuss “the bad price Mr Dingall, the Treddleston grocer, was giving for butter, and the reasonable doubts that might be held as to his solvency, notwithstanding that Mrs Dingall was a sensible woman, and they were all sorry for *her*” (212). Though they do sell their butter to a grocer rather than directly to consumers, they do not feel the sense of alienation that Tess experiences at the railway station. Their butter does not travel far, and they personally know Mr. and Mrs. Dingall, who will be selling it to those who will eat it.

involves detachment. The laborers tend to become attached to certain cows, who will only behave well for their favorite caretakers, but Crick objects to these bonds: “It was Dairyman Crick’s rule to insist on breaking down these partialities and aversions by constant interchange, since, in the event of a milkman or maid going away from the dairy, he was otherwise placed in a difficulty” (121). The laborers usually manage to milk their favorite cows anyway, but Crick’s attempt to prevent relationships from forming connotes instability and impermanence.

Hardy’s refusal to define nature as a source of nurturing punctures the apparent harmony of Talbothays, though he frequently celebrates the laborers’, and especially Tess’s, connection to the natural world. He demonstrates that traditional agricultural methods can allow for laborers to connect to the land, but refrains from wholehearted nostalgia toward rural life. He therefore creates threatening images of nature to counteract the temptation to romanticize it. Tess’s “past sorrows,” the “doubt, fear, moodiness, care, shame” from which she wants to escape, wait for her “like wolves just outside the circumscribing light.” She manages to be happy during much of her time at Talbothays, but hardship lurks in the shadows. She is able to keep her cares “in hungry subjection,” but as the wolves grow increasingly ravenous, we cannot expect a positive outcome (195). As the temporary “circumscribing light” of the dairy blinds her to anything just outside of its reach, Tess is vulnerable to the danger of the wolves. This simile does not present nature as a safe haven.

The dairy is not a dependable place of refuge either. In the simile mentioned above, the light of the dairy is what prevents Tess from recognizing the precariousness of her position. The employment patterns at the dairy also drive Tess toward her doom. Still

trying to resist her love for Angel, she is reluctant to decide upon a date for the wedding. Crick tells Angel that the winter is “a time of year when he [can] do with a very little female help,” effectively forcing Tess to choose between marriage and unemployment (201). Breaking off the engagement would force her “to go to some strange place, not a dairy; for milkmaids were not in request now calving-time was coming on” (202). Though Tess seems to have found a home at Talbothays, the seasonality of agricultural employment traps her in a disastrous situation that ends in her separation from Angel just after their marriage.

At Flintcomb-Ash, laborers give up control over their lives to the machines they operate, while laborers at Talbothays are clearly not oppressed by machinery in this way. That said, what control do the Talbothays laborers have over their lives? What choices do they make? Hardy raises these questions throughout the novel, in his depiction of Talbothays as well as Flintcomb-Ash. The characters in *Tess* cannot truly be free from all constraints, for their natural instincts are often at odds with their intentions, drawing them, unwilling, into painful situations. Though she is reluctant to form a relationship with Angel, Tess’s intentions are “mastered” by “The irresistible, universal, automatic tendency to find sweet pleasure somewhere.” This tendency seems benign at first; after all, its mission is the pursuit of joy. And yet, Tess struggles against it and feels unnervingly powerless. Declaring that this tendency “pervades all life, from the meanest to the highest,” Hardy suggests that biology inevitably directs our lives, though we insist we are different from animals (103). Tess cannot determine her own path, for “the strength of her own vitality” is too great to allow her “to lead a repressed life” (125). This lack of control is an inevitable component of the natural world with which she has

bonded. Tess is following her natural impulses as she falls in love with Angel, “drifting into acquiescence. Every see-saw of her breath, every wave of her blood, every pulse singing in her ears, was a voice that joined with nature in revolt against her scrupulousness” (178). Her love for Angel is natural while her “scrupulousness” is not, but the two sides cannot be reconciled, cannot leave her at peace.

When Hardy exposes how fully natural impulses control Tess at Talbothays, he offers an attack that focuses more on Victorian contempt for sexual expression than on the abuses of agricultural modernization. Alternatively, when he shows her powerlessness at Flintcomb-Ash, he takes clearer aim at industrial agriculture. A closer look, however, reveals that Hardy’s representation of the tyranny of industrial agriculture is not so different from his representation of the tyranny of our natural impulses. For instance, Tess’s instincts move her “to snatch ripe pleasure before the iron teeth of pain could have time to shut upon her” (178). This machine-like image suggests that both nature and modern agriculture ensnare and injure Tess. Hardy’s characters cannot simply turn away from their dependence upon machines and find agency in the natural world. When Tess finally agrees to marry Angel, the “appetite for joy” is victorious over the “social rubric” (190). Though Tess feels inevitably pulled toward that which will bring her temporary joy over that which society deems right, the forces of nature that control her are not benevolent but indifferent to her happiness, as they lead her toward greater suffering.

Suggesting that this powerlessness is relevant in situations beyond Tess’s specific story, Hardy applies the indifferent but controlling forces of the natural world to other characters as well. All of the dairymaids, in their unrequited love for Angel, feel their natural instincts leading them toward misery:

The air of the sleeping-chamber seemed to palpitate with the hopeless passion of the girls. They writhed feverishly under the oppressiveness of an emotion thrust on them by cruel Nature's law – an emotion which they had neither expected nor desired. The incident of the day had fanned the flame that was burning the inside of their hearts out, and the torture was almost more than they could endure. The differences which distinguished them as individuals were abstracted by this passion, and each was but portion of one organism called sex. (147)

For these women, nature is not a nurturing refuge, but rather a torture. The sounds of the dairy house, once a soothing lullaby, become part of this torture, preventing them from sleeping: "They tossed and turned on their little beds, and the cheese-wring dripped monotonously downstairs" (148). Angel, too, is controlled by these forces. He attempts to avoid forming a closer relationship with Tess, but is "driven towards her by every heave of his pulse" (155). Led forward against their own wills, Tess and Angel are "converging, under an irresistible law, as surely as two streams in one vale" (129). Angel's lack of agency at the farm does not absolve him from blame in his cruel treatment of Tess after their marriage; in his cruelty to her, he is asserting the unnatural rules of society in place of the direction of the natural world.

While Flintcomb-Ash is the obvious place where individuals are reduced to cogs in the machinery of modernity, Hardy locates this loss of individuality in traditional rural communities as well as in the alienating modern world. He does not negate his critique of modern agriculture, but rather shows that romanticizing nature is a naïve response to the ills of modernity. As Tess approaches the dairy for the first time, Hardy diminishes her by comparing her to a fly: "Tess stood still upon the hemmed expanse of verdant flatness, like a fly on a billiard-table of indefinite length, and of no more consequence to the surroundings than that fly." This image is eerily similar to a passage, discussed in my next chapter, in which Tess is compared to a fly in the fields at Flintcomb-Ash. Her

presence is not remarkable as she arrives at the dairy; men shouting and dogs barking are not an “expression of the valley’s consciousness that beautiful Tess had arrived, but the ordinary announcement of milking-time” (105). Tess herself expresses a lurking fear that her own life, so special to a few, is insignificant:

[W]hat’s the use of learning that I am one of a long row only – finding that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me, and to know that I shall only act her part; making me sad, that’s all. The best is not to remember that your nature and your past doings have been just like thousands’ and thousands’, and that your coming life and doings’ll be like thousands’ and thousands. (126)

Hardy attributes a similar condition to creatures in nature: “The season developed and matured. Another year’s instalment of flowers, leaves, nightingales, thrushes, finches, and such ephemeral creatures, took up their positions where only a year ago others had stood in their place when these were nothing more than germs and inorganic particles” (128). Individuals are inconsequential in the impersonal machinery of industrial agriculture and in nature. These birds and plants are as trapped as Tess is; their lives involve no freedom, but merely a meaningless repetition, predetermined by biology, of the impermanent lives of countless generations of their species.

The true experience of reading *Tess*, however, is that we do care about the title character more than we would care about a fly, because Hardy makes us care about her. The temptation to think, or the fear to admit, that humans are as insignificant as flies resembles the tendency of city-dwellers to diminish all rural folk into mere repetitions of the stereotypical Hodge. Hardy repeatedly tells us that the rural poor are diverse in many ways and that the Hodge stereotype is a myth. Angel learns to see beyond “The conventional farm-folk of his imagination – personified by the pitiable dummy known as Hodge” (117). As he gets to know the other residents of Talbothays, Angel sees them as

individuals, rather than as inferior and unvaried drones: “variety had taken the place of monotonousness. His host and his host’s household, his men and his maids, as they became intimately known to Clare began to differentiate themselves as in a chemical process” (118).⁹ Rather than leaving it at that, Hardy reminds us several times to avoid generalizations about the people of Talbothays: “Differing one from another in natures and moods so greatly as they did, they yet formed, bending, a curiously uniform row – automatic, noiseless; and an alien observer passing down the neighbouring lane might well have been excused for massing them as ‘Hodge’” (140). He understands the temptation of the Hodge stereotype for ignorant “alien observer[s]” of farm laborers, but implies that people with any knowledge of rural communities do not believe in it. Those who have spent time among laborers recognize “that the magnitude of lives is not as to their external displacements, but as to their subjective experiences” (154).

Hardy similarly trains us to see the real rather than the ideal in Tess. Just as Angel initially sees the laborers as Hodges, he is tempted to see Tess as a goddess. During the morning milking, she appears to be “no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman – a whole sex condensed into one typical form,” and so he calls her “Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names.” “Call me Tess,” she insists, demanding that he return to reality (130). Hardy’s description of Tess as she milks emphasizes this transition from ideal to real:

Minute diamonds of moisture from the mist hung, too, upon Tess’s eyelashes, and drops upon her hair, like seed pearls. When the day grew quite strong and commonplace these dried off her; moreover, Tess then lost her strange and ethereal beauty; her teeth, lips, and eyes scintillated in the sunbeams, and she was again the dazzlingly fair dairymaid only, who had to hold her own against the other women of the world. (131)

⁹ Using very similar language, Hardy discusses this stereotype and its inaccuracy in describing rural laborers in his essay on Dorset laborers as well (252-254).

In her earthiness and connection to nature, Tess is a real person rather than a goddess. The other laborers are also distinct people, not repetitions of Hodge. When Tess defends herself after revealing her past to Angel, he tells her, “You are an unapprehending peasant woman, who have never been initiated into the proportions of social things. You don’t know what you say” (232). Having become familiar with rural life, Angel has no excuse for failing to recognize that Tess is not Hodge just as she is not Demeter. Hardy reveals the human fear that we do not matter, that individuals are insignificant, and yet he trains us to resist generalizations and idealizations of his characters. We do not find Tess to be as insignificant as a fly, despite the grim messages of alienation, dehumanization, and powerlessness introduced at Talbothays and intensified at Flintcomb-Ash.

II. Mechanization at Flintcomb-Ash: Social Commentary and Personal Tragedy

“With every desire to avoid pessimism, it is impossible to view the situation in Dorset as a whole without gloomy forebodings of the immediate future of agriculture,” quotes historian K.D.M. Snell from the records of the Royal Commission of Agriculture of 1895, just a few years after the publication of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (378). As I have discussed, the late nineteenth century was a bleak period for agriculture beyond Hardy’s home county of Dorset as well. A wet growing season in 1879, followed by a severe winter, resulted in failed crops and diseased livestock throughout England (Green 67). Farmers struggled for years to come, despite slight improvements in growing conditions (Prothero 380). The dismal economic situation intensified the hostility between laborers and the landowners and farmers for whom they worked (Snell 381).

The portion of Hardy’s novel that takes place at Flintcomb-Ash Farm, where Tess finds work after her abandonment by Angel and a brief return to her family’s home in Marlott, reflects this grim context. Tess’s character is simplified to some extent while she resides at Flintcomb-Ash, for Hardy looks beyond her particular story to comment on societal ills that affect Tess along with countless other laborers. Describing her work in the turnip fields, he communicates not only the physical hardship of the tasks, but also the instability, loss of control, and detachment from community and land that affect landless wage-laborers during this period of rapid mechanization.

The modern, mechanized agriculture practiced at Flintcomb-Ash contrasts with the simpler practices of Talbothays Dairy. As I show in the previous chapter, however, Hardy’s depiction of the dairy is not primarily characterized by nostalgia for a pristine rural past. Neither is his portrayal of Flintcomb-Ash a straightforward condemnation of

the unjust, unnatural present. Hardy's critique of modern farming is complicated by his rejection of the very notion that the pre-industrial countryside was a place of greater harmony, stability, and autonomy.

Though wages for agricultural laborers were extremely low around the time of the publication of *Tess*, they had actually increased over the past several decades, higher during the agricultural depression at the end of the century than they were during the prosperous 1850s and 1860s (Green 108). Some critics argue that in his scenes of fieldwork at Flintcomb-Ash Farm, Hardy depicts agricultural labor as bleaker than it really was. Tess's work in this "starve-acre place" is indeed grueling (Hardy, *Tess* 284). She digs swedes, or turnips, in the driving rain, trims their roots in freezing weather, and draws reeds until she collapses from exhaustion, "[sinking] down upon the heap of wheat-ears at her feet" (292).

At times, however, Hardy shifts his emphasis away from Tess's physical suffering. Her wages, though low, allow her to rent a room in a warm cottage. On rainy days, Tess and Marian do not "feel the wetness so much as might be supposed," for they are "both young, and [are] talking of the time when they lived and loved together at Talbothays Dairy" (286). Even in the turnip fields, the experience of shared work makes the women's physical burden more manageable. Still, Flintcomb-Ash is no Talbothays. The two farms differ both in terms of the physical conditions of labor and in terms of the laborers' relationships to one another, to their employers, and to their work. Though Tess's physical affliction at Flintcomb-Ash stands out to the reader, the instability and detachment she experiences are emphasized with greater urgency by the author. Kettle stresses the importance of the fact that at Flintcomb-Ash, "the workers are completely

proletarianized: between the girls and the farmer there is no link more human than the contract that commits Tess and her friends to work for a minimum wage from Candlemas to Lady Day” (21). I would add to this point that Tess’s contract at Flintcomb-Ash directly opposes the friendly letter from Crick that brings her to Talbothays; the difference in these two documents implies that the dairy is a place of human connection, while Flintcomb-Ash lacks any sense of community. Tess never meets the person who owns the land she works, for Farmer Groby, her harsh employer, is not himself the owner of the property (Hardy, *Tess* 285). One complication here is that Tess actually ends up breaking her contract, leaving before Old Lady-Day because her parents are ill. Her departure signals some humanity and resistance remaining underneath the dehumanizing conditions.

Hardy emphasizes the depopulation of the countryside and the transience of farm laborers to show how modern agriculture dissolves close human relationships to work, community, and the land. Approaching Flintcomb-Ash, Tess sees “the remains of a village,” the vestiges of what once was a community before it was emptied (281). The Candlemas Fair that takes place during her stay in the village, at which “new engagements were entered into for the twelve months following the ensuing Lady-Day,” reflects the migratory tendency of the laboring class, lacking a stable connection to any one place (319). Hardy stresses the prevalence of migration more explicitly in his essay on agricultural laborers in Dorset: “labourers now look upon an annual removal as the most natural thing in the world” (“Dorsetshire Labourer” 262). Criticizing Hardy’s portrayal of migration habits, Snell points out that daily and weekly hiring was actually more common than yearly engagements in the late nineteenth century (394-395).

Instability and impermanence of employment, however, were clearly common, whether workers were hired for a week or for a year.

It is almost a commonplace now to recognize how modernization disconnects the laborer from his work, but perhaps we are more inclined to think of that disconnection in the factory than on the factory farm. F.E. Green, in his book on agricultural laborers in England, argues that “divorce from the soil” was the result of modern agriculture’s creation of a class of landless wage-laborers (2). Hardy similarly asserts in his agricultural essay that regular migration leads to a “lost sense of home” (“Dorsetshire Labourer” 264).¹⁰ Sherman points out that Hardy knew personally what one could lose through migration:

His grandmother had doctored half the village, and she knew the exact locations of the graves of villagers. His grandfather, together with his father and uncles, had supplied the music at the parish church and at neighbors’ get-togethers for nearly forty years. One of the rewards of his father’s remaining on their Bockhampton lifehold, which had belonged to the Hardys for three generations, in spite of its remoteness for his building trade, was this personal and cultural richness to life. (117)

Millgate explains that though Hardy’s father’s business became increasingly successful, the Hardys remained in their cottage and continued “to lead their lives on a rural pattern that had changed little in several hundred years.” Both of Hardy’s parents died there, his father the year after *Tess* was published and his mother in 1904 (32). Millgate relates the importance Hardy placed on the fact that “his father had died, as the death notice put it, ‘in the house of his birth’. And that he had asked at the last for a drink of fresh well water to assure himself that he was indeed ‘at home’” (299). Hardy saw in his father an example of a life lived in a stable, rooted community.

¹⁰ George Eliot emphasizes this in her fiction as well. In *Adam Bede*, Mr. Poyser reflects, “I should be loath to leave the old place, and the parish where I was bred and born, and father afore me. We should leave our roots behind us, I doubt, and niver thrive again” (380).

The related topics of rootedness and migration come up again toward the end of *Tess*, after John Durbeyfield has died. To make room for a useful laborer and his family, the local tenant farmer forces the remaining Durbeyfields, of whom the village disapproves, out of their cottage once their lease has expired. The passage describing the Old Lady-Day migration carries a strong sense of disruption. In his discussion of the “labourers,” Hardy pauses to point out that this designation has been imposed upon the “‘workfolk,’ as they used to call themselves immemorially till the other word was introduced from without.” The changes in migration habits have taken place during Tess’s mother’s lifetime. Regular migration is now common, but when she was a child, “the majority of the field-folk about Marlott had remained all their lives on one farm, which had been the home also of their fathers and grandfathers” (351).

Those who migrate on Old Lady-Day are not all leaving behind unsatisfactory labor conditions to find other farm work; many are leaving the countryside altogether. Hardy acknowledges that this is the case: “the mutations so increasingly discernible in village life did not originate entirely in the agricultural unrest. A depopulation was also going on.” Tess’s parents’ class, “who had formed the backbone of the village life in the past,” is disappearing. This class, also including Hardy’s own parents, is made up of “the carpenter, the smith, the shoemaker, the huckster, together with nondescript workers other than farm-labourers; a set of people who owed a certain stability of aim and conduct to the fact of their being life-holders like Tess’s father, or copyholders, or, occasionally, small freeholders.” When these families lose their leases or move on, their cottages are “pulled down, if not absolutely required by the farmer for his hands” (352). Independent peddlers like Tess’s father are not useful to the local landowners and

farmers, but rather “disapproved of in villages almost as much as little freeholders, because of their independence of manner” (351). As more members of this class leave, those remaining cannot continue to run profitable businesses.

Many of the young families moving on Old Lady-Day are excited for new opportunities, rather than sad to leave their longtime homes, but Hardy suggests that they will not be satisfied for long. They will always feel an urge to move on to a place that looks better: “The Egypt of one family was the Land of Promise to the family who saw it from a distance, till by residence there it became in turn their Egypt also; and so they changed and changed” (351-352). Angel Clare is drawn away from home as far as Brazil, but his escape is not successful, nor are the escapes of countless other English farmers who have gone there: “The crowds of agricultural labourers who had come out to the country in his wake, dazzled by representations of easy independence, had suffered, died, and wasted away.” The experience of the families who have migrated there is brutal. Angel witnesses the plight of “mothers from English farms trudging along with their infants in their arms, when the child would be stricken with fever and would die; the mother would pause to dig a hole in the loose earth with her bare hands, would bury the babe therein with the same natural grave-tools, shed one tear, and again trudge on” (339). Angel is driven away from England by his “desire to escape from his past experience,” but he finds no relief in Brazil (340). His transience leads only to suffering.

Hardy’s comments on the transience of laborers may seem to be straightforward condemnations of agricultural modernization, but in fact they are not one-sided. Suggesting that migration out of the country is unnatural, Hardy writes, “the process, humorously designated by statisticians as ‘the tendency of the rural population towards

the large towns,' being really the tendency of water to flow uphill when forced by machinery" (352). Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City*, however, warns readers not to view this passage as a declaration that modernization and urbanization are the equivalent of "the rape of the country by the town." As I stated above, Hardy presents a complex explanation of why families like the Durbeyfields migrate. I agree with Williams here that we miss Hardy's more complex idea if we see only "a vision of a prospering countryside being disintegrated by Corn Law repeal or the railways or agricultural machinery" (208). The laborers' own impulses and struggles motivate migration as well. In certain instances, Hardy does lament the results of increased transience, but he does not consistently portray it as a negative tendency, forced upon the rural poor by outsiders.

At times, Hardy even suggests that the urge to wander is natural. In his article on the laborers of his county, Hardy argues that as well as losing their connection with each other, transient laborers lose their connection with the natural world, their "intimate and kindly relation with the land [they till]." On this same page, however, Hardy implies that some aspects of the increased mobility of laborers have been beneficial. The laborer has now "rise[n] above the condition of a serf who lived and died on a particular plot like a tree" ("Dorsetshire Labourer" 263). Rootedness, though natural for a tree, may be unnatural for a person. In *Tess*, even as the Durbeyfields are leaving Marlott for an unknown, unstable future, Marian and Izz, also moving on Old Lady-Day, have better prospects ahead of them. They have left behind a cruel employer at Flintcomb-Ash, and are now traveling with a ploughman's family in a freshly painted wagon pulled by healthy horses (360). For these two women, the ability to move from place to place offers

great freedom. In both *Tess* and “The Dorsetshire Labourer,” Hardy reveals his dual interpretations of mobility, as both a lamentable detachment from community and a release from centuries of serfdom. Returning to the ways of the past would not restore agency to the rural poor, for they have always lacked it, though the conditions of their imprisonment have changed. Hardy’s critique of agricultural progress, though it may seem straightforward based on the brutality of life at Flintcomb-Ash, is complicated by his more nuanced ideas about freedom of choice, informed by the influential works of people like Darwin.

As in his essay, Hardy uses arboreal imagery in *Tess* to describe the title character’s feelings of being drawn away from her home. When she leaves Marlott for Talbothays, she actually leaves behind an unhealthy rootedness, for “The sapling which had rooted down to a poisonous stratum on the spot of its sowing” is now “transplanted to a deeper soil” (129). After all, Tess is associated with the cyclical rhythms of the natural world, rather than with stasis. Before going to the dairy, her desire to leave home is described not as an unnatural repercussion of industrialization, but as an innate impulse: “A particularly fine spring came round, and the stir of germination was almost audible in the buds; it moved her, as it moved the wild animals, and made her passionate to go” (99). Hardy generates another complication by showing that Tess is drawn from her current, familiar home to her ancestral home: “such is human inconsistency that one of the interests of the new place to her was the accidental virtue of its lying near her forefathers’ country” (100). This detail further associates human migration with natural cycles. Tess completes a circle of D’Urberville and Durbeyfield movement that has

formed over centuries. This notion also emphasizes Tess's doom; she feels instinctively pulled toward her ancestral past, which is tied to her grim fate throughout the novel.

The potential dangers of rootedness appear both in *Tess* and in Hardy's last novel, *Jude the Obscure*. Young Jude, employed at scaring crows off of an agricultural field, does not care that "many of his own dead family" once walked along the path that he now uses. The place is full of family history: "in every clod and stone there really lingered associations enough and to spare – echoes of songs from ancient harvest-days, of spoken words, and of sturdy deeds. Every inch of ground had been the site, first or last, of energy, gaiety, horse-play, bickerings, weariness." "How ugly it is here," he thinks, seeing none of this history. For him, the field is "a lonely place, possessing...only the quality of a work-ground" (14). The reader feels that Jude would be better off if he were not stuck here. His employer is cruel, and his proximity to his family's past does not benefit him.

Though Hardy's parents were rooted in their home and Hardy himself was quite attached to his county, he too desired a transitory existence during part of his life. Millgate writes that despite the strong "pull of Dorset," Hardy felt out of place at home once he had entered into a higher professional class than his father's. His mother disapproved of Hardy and Emma's "deliberate avoidance of 'home,'" but Hardy was wary of bringing his wife and his mother too close together (163). Over the course of only several years in the mid 1870s, Hardy and Emma moved repeatedly, "from Surbiton to Westbourne Grove to Swanage to Yeovil, quite apart from house-hunting expeditions and foreign travels" (171). They eventually settled closer to home again, but until then they moved frequently, "driven primarily by economic considerations, including his own

perceived needs as a literary professional, but also by Emma's vague and always disappointed ambitions for a richer social life" (198). Though motivated by different factors, Hardy must have understood Tess's urge to leave home and to wander.

Upon arriving at Flintcomb-Ash after a series of other moves between Marlott, the Slopes, and Talbothays, Tess is confronted by large-scale, modern agriculture. She is amazed by the farm's immense size and monotonous appearance, compared to the small, diversified fields where she grew up: "There was not a tree within sight; there was not, at this season, a green pasture – nothing but fallow and turnips everywhere; in large fields divided by hedges plashed to unrelieved levels" (Hardy, *Tess* 284). In the hundred-acre field in which Tess works, herds of farm animals have eaten the top halves of the turnips, as was customary in livestock feeding at the time; the women must remove the lower halves in order to use these for feed as well (285). The field size itself is an indication that Flintcomb-Ash is a modern farm. The prevalence of small farms declined throughout the nineteenth century, especially in Dorset, where farms were on average fifty percent larger than those elsewhere in the country by the 1880s (Snell 378). With the enclosure of villages earlier in the century, large farms tended to grow even larger as wealthy landowners purchased additional land from small farmers, who could not afford to enclose their land with fences and could not make a living without the access to common land upon which they previously depended (Franklin 146). Losing the commonly held pasture and woodlot, English peasants became landless laborers (Seebohm 326).

Turnips, the main crop on Flintcomb-Ash Farm, played a major role in the abandonment of the old commons system. The number of animals one could feed through the winter depended previously upon one's supply of hay, straw, and oats (Seebohm

279). Improvements in cattle feeding were necessary, because increased urban populations due to industrialization led to a parallel increase in the demand for expensive products like meat (287-288). The use of root crops as winter fodder allowed farmers to feed their full herds year-round, leading to an increase in the production of manure and therefore in the amount of land that could be fertilized (279). By pasturing livestock on turnip fields in the winter, fertility could be easily added to the soil in the form of manure without the land being left fallow for a season (Franklin 122).

Turnips were introduced as feed for livestock in the seventeenth century in England, but their use was not widespread until the following century (Curtler 111-112). The eventual popularity of turnip cultivation was initially delayed by the commons system of agriculture, mentioned above, which had characterized the English countryside for centuries (Seebohm 279). Under the old system, one could grow anything in one's own strip of land, but all crops had to be harvested at around the same time in the fall, before the fields were commonly grazed by all of the village livestock (Franklin 121). Completed by the Enclosure Acts of the early nineteenth century, enclosure signified the end of the ancient communal system (Seebohm 325). Only on enclosed farms could farmers increase their production by growing winter turnips, which reached maturity later than other crops and were most useful as winter rather than fall fodder (Franklin 122). The turnip therefore symbolizes the end of traditional rural life. "[A]ll our mutton now-a-days is, alas! mere animated turnip," laments one writer in a nineteenth century magazine article, connecting the root crop with modern agriculture's departure from nature and tradition ("Ramble" 388).

Despite its role as a modern means of feeding livestock, turnip cultivation may seem like a relatively low-tech pursuit. Turnips, however, are implicitly associated with mechanization, as nineteenth-century readers familiar with agriculture would have understood. With the increase in turnip husbandry, farmers interested in modernizing their farms left behind the old broadcast method of scattering seeds in favor of planting them with drilling machines (“British Agriculture” 82). A “drill for depositing manure after turnips” was one of the new implements promoted at an 1839 exhibition organized by the Royal Agricultural Society, recently founded with the aim of encouraging modernization in agriculture (Curtler 273-274). Another type of drilling machine could plant turnips in straight rows, deposit manure, and also harrow the soil (Seebohm 304). A farm as large as Flintcomb-Ash may have utilized some of these implements.

In the Flintcomb-Ash portion of *Tess*, Hardy implies that this level of mechanization is dehumanizing. He continues his technique, introduced earlier in the novel, of using mechanical and other nonhuman language and images to describe his characters. Insignificant and anonymous, Tess and Marian look like “flies” against the expansive brown field and white sky. Recalling a similar image from the Talbothays portion of the novel, this comparison between the two women and flies reminds the reader that human life is equally ephemeral apart from the abuses of industrial agriculture at farms like Flintcomb-Ash. In this same passage, the effacement of Tess and Marian’s unique human attributes is underscored by the description of the drab field as “a complexion without features, as if a face, from chin to brow, should be only an expanse of skin.” By noting the “mechanical regularity” of Tess’s movements while working, Hardy then suggests that Tess herself is an inhuman piece of machinery, an anonymous

laborer in the apparatus of industrialized agriculture (285). When Tess is feeding swedes into the slicing machine, she “throw[s] down one globular root and tak[es] up another with automatic regularity,” forced by her work with a machine to become like one herself (315). Hardy’s descriptions of her body also reinforce her dehumanization, for when Alec attempts to grab her hand, “the buff-glove was on it, and he seized only the rough leather fingers which did not express the life or shape of those within” (318). As a transitory, landless wage-laborer, Tess has been converted into a shell of a human being; her relationship to her work is anonymous, temporary, and unfulfilling.

Hardy further communicates laborers’ powerlessness through the personification of machines and other inanimate objects. He depicts a world in which industrialized agriculture turns machines into animate beings, as well as turning humans into machines. These contraptions dominate the practice of farming, seizing control from the humans who operate them. This world of powerful objects threatens Tess and Marian as they work, for “even their thick leather gloves could not prevent the frozen [turnips] they handled from biting their fingers” (287). The “bright blue hue of new paint” on the turnip-slicing machine is “almost vocal in the otherwise subdued scene” (313). The turnip-slicer appears unnatural as it vibrantly and noisily dominates the natural world and human laborers around it. A more unsettling image of living machinery follows: “something crept upon ten legs, moving without haste and without rest up and down the whole length of the field.” Only after being introduced to this mysterious, spider-like monster do we find out that it is simply “two horses and a man, the plough going between them, turning up the cleared ground for a spring sowing” (314). The man’s identity is swallowed up in the machine of which he is a part; the machine is in control, actively

creeping over the soil, while the human and animals merely form part of its workings. As machinery gains power on farms, laborers lose control over their own lives and work.

The migratory farm laborers' lack of agency is addressed more explicitly in this section as well. The narrator's explanation of Tess's arrival at the gloomy farm is that "There seemed to be no help for it; hither she was doomed to come" (281). Denying Tess's control over her own life, Marian remarks that "something outside ye both" must have caused Tess and Angel's recent separation (283). When Tess sees that her new employer at Flintcomb-Ash is a man who once harassed her, she is "like a bird caught in a springe," an image that invokes the power of the literal metallic implements on the farm (291). She loses independence to the farm schedule as well; when she wants to visit Angel's family to ask them for help, she must go on a Sunday, for "To leave the farm on a week-day [is] not in her power" (295). The timing ends up preventing her from meeting with them. These passages, as well as the personification of machines and the objectification of human characters, contribute to the overwhelming sense of entrapment in the Flintcomb-Ash section of the novel.

The threshing scene that concludes Tess's time at Flintcomb-Ash continues to enact the loss of individual choice and stability that modern agriculture brings about, while also raising the suspicion that these lost elements of human existence have never been more than romanticized projections. Though Hardy writes most of the novel in the past tense, the threshing chapter starts with a paragraph in the present. The wheat rick "has stood forlornly here through the washing and bleaching of the wintry weather." This tense shift is disorienting, and upends the supposedly linear progress of agricultural development, gesturing toward a more cyclical sense of time. When Tess and Izz arrive

in the field, “only a rustling denote[s] that others [have] preceded them,” implying a confusion of the senses as well (324). This disorientation is a fitting entrance into a scene that Zena Meadowsong describes as “an image of life distorted—thrown out of proportion—by machinery” (246-247).

Threshing machines were introduced in England by 1800, but did not effectively replace the use of the flail until the middle of the century, at which time steam power began to be used to run the machines instead of horse power. In addition to the threshing machine, many other types of machinery that required fewer farm laborers became popular in the nineteenth century (Franklin 161). Five men using handheld sickles could only reap two acres in an entire day, while a machine could reap an acre per hour (Seebohm 350). A man using a scythe could mow one and a half acres per day, while a mowing machine could mow ten acres in the same period of time (352).¹¹ The threshing machine most strikingly did away with work upon which laborers previously depended, for “Work that used to take all the winter with the flail, was done by the threshing machine in a few days” (Franklin 163).

In *Tess*, Hardy hints at the class tension caused by this loss of winter employment. When a “preparatory hitch or two” delays the start of the threshing at Flintcomb-Ash, the problem “rejoice[s] the hearts of those who [hate] machinery.” Some laborers remember the time before the threshing machine was commonly used: “The old men on the rising straw-rick talked of the past days when they had been accustomed to thresh with flails on

¹¹ With such an emphasis on scientific advancement in agriculture, it is no wonder that many people in the late nineteenth century saw farming itself as a dying phenomenon. One 1894 magazine article discusses a recent prediction that by the year 2000, there would be no more “harvests, or flocks and herds, or shepherds, or husbandmen: the problem of existence by the cultivation of the soil will have been done away with by chemistry.” The author mentions warily that a man has already “taken out a patent for the manufacture of artificial eggs, which he declares he can make better than the hens” (“Poetic Future” 444).

the oaken barn-floor; when everything, even to winnowing, was effected by hand-labour, which, to their thinking, though slow, produced better results” (326). Emphasizing that hand labor produced better results “to their thinking,” Hardy suggests that the men’s memories may consist of nostalgic invention rather than actual, practical truth. His choice of words allows us to assume that, to others’ thinking, the machines’ efficiency is quite beneficial in the context of England’s growing population.

The opposition to machinery that Hardy alludes to in the passage quoted above recalls the real and physical opposition to the introduction of agricultural implements that reached a peak shortly before Hardy’s lifetime. John Common of Northumberland, inventing modern reaping and mowing machines in the early 1800s, faced a great deal of hostility from laborers and therefore had to test his machinery in the middle of the night (Curtler 303). Opposition to machinery in general narrowed its focus on threshing machines in particular in the Swing uprising of 1830, a decade before Hardy’s birth (Snell 222). Threshing by hand, though a tedious task, provided work during a time of year when little other work was available (“British Agriculture” 83). Objecting to the loss of winter work, laborers destroyed threshing machines and burned ricks (Seebohm 351, Curtler 266). Any attempts at organization were crushed. In Hardy’s home county of Dorset in 1834, seven farm laborers were sentenced to seven years imprisonment in Botany Bay, for attempting to unionize (Sherman 114).

During Hardy’s lifetime, the dissatisfaction of agricultural laborers continued. Though the fifties and sixties were prosperous decades for farmers, the laborers suffered, “ill-fed, ill-housed, scantily clothed, uneducated, and voteless” (Green 31). Having lived in “sordid misery” for generations, they resented the landowning class (Curtler 291). In

1872, hedge-cutter Joseph Arch organized the National Agricultural Labourers' Union in response to the laborers' frustration (Green 34). The Union's initial goal was to attain a small raise in weekly wages and a nine and a half hour working day (39). In his essay on farm laborers, Hardy attributes to Union efforts a small rise in wages in Dorset ("Dorsetshire Labourer" 265). Wages then fell again throughout England because of the unfavorable growing seasons and plummeting prices that I describe in my Introduction (Green 69). The Union declined throughout the eighties and collapsed by 1894, unable to achieve higher wages during the depression (Curtler 292). The weakening of the Union by the time Hardy wrote *Tess* is visible in its membership statistics: over 80,000 members in 1874, 15,000 in 1881, and only 4,254 in 1889. Agricultural laborers were, however, granted the right to vote by the 1884 Franchise Act (Green 70).¹² Millgate points out that Hardy was in favor of the Liberal efforts to enfranchise rural laborers, but tended to exclude explicit political opinions from his writing, and thus did not mention matters like this in his 1883 agricultural essay (219).

Both the frustration of the laborers in the first half of the nineteenth century and their unionization in the second half strongly impacted Hardy. In 1873 in Dorchester, Hardy heard Arch give a speech, in which he "denounce[d]...the inadequacy of agricultural wages and the iniquity of the hiring system itself." He admired the organizer's "humour and moderation, his speaking as a 'social evolutionist' rather than as an 'anarchic irreconcilable', and...his capacity to seize and hold the attention of his audience" (Millgate 136). In his essay on the laborers of his county, Hardy finds the hostile relationship between laborers and farmers to be "the natural result of generations of unfairness on one side, and on the other an increase of knowledge, which has been

¹² Town workmen were enfranchised in 1867 and trade unionists in 1871 (Green 29).

kindled into activity by the exertions of Mr. Joseph Arch.” He also argues that unionization has empowered farm laborers, who no longer submissively accept cruel treatment from farmers (“Dorsetshire Labourer” 264). His interest in Arch’s union explains his hesitancy to romanticize the past in *Tess* and in his agricultural essay, for he well knew that conditions had to some extent improved in terms of wages and political voice in the seventies and eighties. Laborers in the late nineteenth century, despite their imperfect present, did not have an idyllic past to which they could return.

In the threshing scene in *Tess*, as well as referring to class tensions, Hardy continues to communicate a sense of detachment and constraint. He accomplishes this mainly through his evocative descriptions of the threshing machine and the engineman. Meadowsong remarks that in his description of the machine, Hardy transitions from documentary realism to symbolic or mythic narrative, “literally creating a monster in the machine,” though the monstrous descriptions are “still *realistic*—consistent with the industrial menace of the scene and the tortures to which Tess is about to be exposed” (233-234). From the start of the scene, the machine is part torture device and part all-powerful monster, emphasizing both the physical hardships of labor and the laborers’ lack of control: “Close under the eaves of the stack, and as yet barely visible, was the red tyrant that the women had come to serve – a timber-framed construction, with straps and wheels appertaining – the threshing-machine which, whilst it was going, kept up a despotic demand upon the endurance of their muscles and nerves.” Hardy describes the machine’s engine as the “*primum mobile*” or primary mover of the farm world, again suggesting that human laborers have no control over their lives. The engine dominates the natural world as well, for “round [its] hot blackness the morning air quiver[s]” (325).

As in earlier scenes of work at Flintcomb-Ash, Hardy uses personification to emphasize the power of machinery and, in contrast, the powerlessness and dehumanization of the laborers. The sheaves of grain are “gulped down by the insatiable swallower, fed by the man and Tess.” This image suggests a sense of detachment from the purpose of growing food; the characters are feeding a greedy machine, not providing sustenance for their community. As the thresher becomes increasingly animated, the human beings seem less alive, “grow[ing] cadaverous and saucer-eyed” (333).

Hardy was not alone in using this tactic of personification in agricultural writing. Many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors, both in awe of and wary of the impressive contraptions, describe farm machines as animated. The historian F.E. Green laments that “the silken song of the scythe was drowned in the rattle of the mowing machine with its ugly chattering teeth” (68). One magazine article describes a group of laborers who are planting grain, using “one of those strange machines which seem almost gifted with sense” (“Ramble” 392). Another article describes a steam-threshing machine as “a black monster on wheels.” Its whistle “spitefully” tells the laborers that the machine “is hungry to get to work.” The author describes the machine as a monster, but also addresses it reassuringly, insisting that “there are no short-sighted Luddites to break thee to pieces now” (“Harvest Time” 457). This article reveals the conflict between the concern that mechanized agriculture is unnatural and destructive and the understanding that agricultural change is necessary in order to feed the country.

Hardy’s description of the engineman, who is “in the agricultural world, but not of it,” effectively solidifies the sense of disconnection between modern agriculture and the land and community (325). It was indeed common at the time for this detachment to

be built into the agricultural process by the fact that large pieces of machinery were typically owned and hired out by “some one who is only thus indirectly engaged in agriculture” (Arnold 304). Like the machine itself, the engineman in *Tess* is transformed into a mythic or demonic being, resembling “a creature from Tophet.” Not only is he from afar in a geographic sense, speaking “in a strange northern accent,” but also he is detached from the villagers through having “nothing in common” with them, though he is outwardly engaged in the same work as they (325). He identifies himself not as a farmer or a laborer, but as “an engineer.” He and the laborers, representatives of mechanized and traditional agriculture respectively, approach their work from fundamentally different positions: “He served fire and smoke; these denizens of the fields served vegetation, weather, frost, and sun.” His detachment from the land and the village community is symbolized by the strap connecting the engine to the thresher itself, “the sole tie-line between agriculture and him” (326). Hardy again reveals his skepticism toward the possibility of human agency; the engineman, though not a landless wage-laborer, is nevertheless powerless, “as if some ancient doom compelled him to wander here against his will in the service of his Plutonic master” (325).

While it is tempting to view the threshing scene and the novel in general as primarily focusing upon the struggle of “alien industrialism against rural humanity,” Raymond Williams cautions us against doing so. Williams argues that if the threshing scene is fully “abstracted” in this way, the reader will overlook the fact that the novel attends both to the widespread alienation affecting entire classes and to real, personal “life and work” on a smaller scale (211). The threshing machine is not just a symbol; it also has meaning beyond figurative social commentary, as it “stands in that field and

works those hours because it has been hired, not by industrialism but by a farmer. And there are whole human beings trying to keep up with it and with him” (212). The machine is representative, but it is simultaneously particular.

I would connect Williams’s argument with Tess’s particular experience on threshing day. Her work intensifies the sense that industrialized agriculture is relentlessly destructive to traditional rural life, but also emphasizes that her own path toward destruction is particularly grim. Williams describes this as “an individuation which yet does not exclude the common condition” (212). Tess is not merely a symbol for the doomed rural past, for her duty on threshing day is particularly grueling compared to the duties of the other laborers present. The others can take breaks from their work to drink and talk, but Tess, working upon the machine itself, cannot: “there was no respite; for, as the drum never stopped, the man who fed it could not stop, and she, who had to supply the man with untied sheaves, could not stop either” (Hardy, *Tess* 327). By the time she is able to pause for a brief dinner, she is “trembling so wretchedly with the shaking of the machine that she [can] scarcely walk” (328). The machine not only abuses her body, but also fractures the connection between her physical self and her emotional self: “She was the only woman whose place was upon the machine, so as to be shaken bodily by its spinning, and this incessant quivering, in which every fibre of her body participated, had thrown her into a stupefied reverie in which her arms worked on independently of her consciousness” (333). Her endless task also ensnares her by preventing her from seeing Alec’s approach, as she is unable to turn her head (327).

Meadowsong argues that Tess’s “physical exploitation as a farm laborer” can be linked with her “sexual objectification” throughout the novel (230). While Tess is

working on the thresher, she is simultaneously objectified by both the machine and Alec D'Urberville. Staring at her body, he says, "I saw it on the rick before you saw me – that tight pinafore-thing sets it off, and that wing-bonnet – you field-girls should never wear those bonnets if you wish to keep out of danger" (Hardy, *Tess* 329). To some extent, I agree that the novel supports Meadowsong's argument; Hardy certainly suggests that Victorian society inherently objectifies and dehumanizes people in general, and laborers and women in particular. And yet, Meadowsong's approach misses the particularity that Williams insists upon and that I, too, see in the novel.

According to Meadowsong, Alec and mechanized agriculture objectify Tess in the same way: "Just as Alec treats Tess as an object—a physical thing to be used as he wishes—the machine reduces her to a functional nonentity" (236). Alec, as a threat to Tess, becomes a representative of "the new mechanical forces" that threaten the traditional rural life that Tess represents (237). Meadowsong's alignment of Alec with machinery, however, oversimplifies Hardy's characterization of him. Seeing Tess on the rick and being drawn back from his evangelical ministry by his attraction to her, Alec, too, is subject to forces that he cannot resist. Like the engineman who operates the thresher, Alec is not a landless agricultural laborer and yet still shares some of the laborers' powerlessness. This differentiation between Alec and the machine as villains is consistent with Hardy's treatment of agency throughout the novel; while criticizing modern agriculture for its exploitation of the laboring class, he also suggests that full autonomy is impossible, even for those who outwardly appear to possess more power than the rural poor. Alec's questionable agency does not absolve him from blame for his treatment of Tess. It shows instead that, as Williams argues, one cannot thoroughly

reduce Hardy's novel to a conflict between two oppositional forces, with Alec and machinery on one side and Tess and humanity on the other. Alec and Tess are particularized characters, though their interactions reflect certain class relationships as well.

Farmer Groby insists that he has chosen Tess for the arduous task of untying the sheaves based upon her particular merits. Marked out for misery throughout the novel, she has now been specially selected for another difficult position, for she "best combine[s] strength with quickness in untying, and both with staying power." The reader recalls that Groby has a personal grudge against Tess because of his earlier altercation with Angel. Offering yet another explanation that undercuts Groby's justifications, Hardy states that "[f]or some probably economical reason, it was usually a woman who was chosen for this particular duty" (327). We find an expansion upon this "probably economical reason" in Hardy's agricultural essay, in which he states that a woman "fills the place of a man at half the wages." Outlining the seasonal changes in women's fieldwork, he mentions in his essay several of the tasks that he also includes in *Tess*:

In winter and spring a farm-woman's occupation is often 'turnip-hacking'—that is, picking out from the land the stumps of turnips which have been eaten off by the sheep—or feeding the threshing-machine, clearing away straw from the same, and standing on the rick to hand forward the sheaves. In mid-spring and early summer her services are required for weeding wheat and barley...In later summer her time is entirely engrossed by haymaking...Haymaking is no sooner over than the women are hurried off to the harvest-field...Not a woman in the county but hates the threshing-machine. The dust, the din, the sustained exertion demanded to keep up with the steam tyrant are distasteful to all women but the coarsest. ("Dorsetshire Labourer" 267)

He narrates a story about an old woman, who, like Tess, is so shaken by working on a threshing machine that she can barely walk afterward (268). Hardy demonstrates in his

essay that women are assigned to the most brutal agricultural work, but have little freedom to escape it, as they are paid much lower wages than male workers are.

When the job of threshing at Flintcomb-Ash is nearly complete, the time arrives for catching the rats at the bottom of the rick. The plight of these hunted animals reinforces Tess's entrapment and lack of control: "The creatures had crept downwards with the subsidence of the rick till they were all together at the bottom, and being now uncovered from their last refuge they ran across the open ground in all directions" (334). Emphasizing the relentlessness of Tess's suffering, this passage resembles the description of the cornered animals in the reaping scene earlier in the novel. After the threshing, Tess returns to her lodgings and "mechanically" eats supper, this adverb heavy-handedly stressing her objectification as part of the machinery of industrialized agriculture (336). Through Tess's experience at Flintcomb Ash, Hardy appears to be exposing the hardships, witnessed by him in his home county, faced by female farm laborers. This type of social exposé is typical of Victorian writers like Charles Dickens.

A number of historians point out that the tasks Hardy describes were not actually part of the typical experience of female laborers in the late nineteenth century. Despite the unusually poor working conditions in Dorset, Snell argues that Hardy's account of fieldwork at Flintcomb-Ash is unrealistic, for "it would have been very unusual, if not unheard of, to find women attending threshing machinery in the late 1870s or 1880s (as in *Tess*), and their work in the fields had been declining long before then – partly in favour of dairy work, but more significantly in favour of a role as housewife, domestic servant, or of migration from the land altogether" (378). In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the Southwest of England, where Dorset is located, male and

female unemployment patterns were very similar, showing less sexual division of labor (57n). By the time of the publication of *Tess*, near the end of the nineteenth century, this situation had changed; female farm laborers were mainly engaged in dairy work, spring weeding, and early summer haying (45). Some women were additionally employed at spreading manure and picking stones out of agricultural fields (Green 19).

Women's involvement in the harvest started to decline as early as 1750, at which time the scythe started to be used for wheat and rye in addition to its traditional use for barley, oats, peas, and beans. Only men typically used scythes, so their labor was in higher demand at harvest time and they were paid higher wages (Snell 50). Pressure against female field labor also came from male laborers themselves, who feared the seasonal unemployment inherent in farm work and wished to reduce competition over jobs (61). In the second half of the nineteenth century, once steam-powered machinery was in use, women's fieldwork further declined, no longer required because of the increased efficiency of the new machines. When the demand for field laborers decreased, male workers filled most of the remaining jobs (Seebohm 347).

In his agricultural essay, Hardy admits that he does not know whether his depiction of female fieldwork is realistic, conceding that he is "not sure whether, at the present time, women are employed to feed the machine, but some years ago a woman had frequently to stand just above the whizzing wire drum, and feed from morning to night" ("Dorsetshire Labourer" 267). And yet, the representation of farm labor in *Tess* attests to a greater familiarity with the details of women's work than Hardy allows in his essay or Snell acknowledges in his critique. Alec says to Tess, "I have told the farmer that he has no right to employ women at steam-threshing. It is not proper work for them; and on all

the better class of farms it has been given up, as he knows very well” (335). By nineteenth-century standards, Flintcomb-Ash is an unusually terrible workplace and Groby is a particularly cruel employer, emphasizing Tess’s persistent entrapment on a doomed path.¹³

Hardy repeats elsewhere that women do not typically do the types of brutal work that Tess must perform at Flintcomb-Ash. Dark Car the Queen of Spades and her sister the Queen of Diamonds do “all kinds of men’s work by preference, including well-sinking, hedging, ditching, and excavating, without any sense of fatigue” (290). The reader infers that reed-drawing, the two sisters’ and Tess’s current occupation, is therefore another example of “men’s work.” In this scene, Hardy indicates the discrepancy in wages between male and female laborers: “Female field-labour was seldom offered now, and its cheapness made it profitable for tasks which women could perform as readily as men” (284). This passage acknowledges that the type of work Tess does is rare for women, that she is stuck in unusually bleak circumstances. Given the wage inequality described here, it is nearly impossible for a female farm worker to make enough money to support herself without being subjected to grueling labor; this situation is part of what eventually drives Tess away from farm work and back to Alec.

Hardy’s account of female field labor at Flintcomb-Ash looks more like the brutal practices of the past than those of his present, further evoking a sense of resistance toward nostalgia. Indeed, the past looked as bad as, or worse than, Flintcomb-Ash. An

¹³ It is noteworthy that Alec is the one who speaks out against Groby’s taking advantage of Tess and forcing her into physically abusive work for low wages. Since Alec is the speaker, this comment should perhaps be read not as a protest against injustice, but as a sexist remark about the unladylike nature of physical work. He later protests against her working in the allotment plot in Marlott as well, though this is work that she actually enjoys. Alec’s critique of Flintcomb-Ash may also separate his abuse of Tess from mechanized agriculture’s abuse of Tess, showing that the story of these two characters is more than a simple allegory for the destruction of traditional rural life by industrialization.

1836 article states regarding the threshing machine, “Threshing by the flail can only be done by robust, athletic men. If the superior strength of these men can be employed in another way to produce corn, and the decrepit, the women, and children, and two or three old horses, can do it as well, and it is found equally to answer the purpose of the farmer, why should it not be adopted?” (“Threshing Machines” 235). Under the gang system used earlier in the century but stopped by Union efforts, employers, “often coarse bullies,” would exploit “gangs sometimes numbering 60 or 70 persons, including small children, and women” (Curtler 292). In the 1860s in Dorset, farmers “exercised a cruel mastery over labour, in claiming the labour of sometimes the entire family at a very low wage,” with women receiving lower wages than men and even six-year-old children having to work alongside the rest of the family (Green 18). Labor conditions had actually in some ways improved by Tess’s time.¹⁴ This association of Flintcomb-Ash with harsh labor practices from the past again reflects Hardy’s multivalent approach to reminiscence; the modern steam-threshing machine is destructive, but the era of whole families working side by side was also abusive rather than harmonious.

As harmful as mechanized agriculture can be, the laboring class would not free or empower themselves by returning to traditional or more natural ways. Despite the villainous role played by machinery at Flintcomb-Ash, Hardy’s resistance to nostalgia prevents the reader from comfortably equating mechanization with the destruction of the freedom that laborers once enjoyed. Hardy implies throughout the novel that people can never have control over their own lives, that the concepts of human agency and individuality are imagined. Millgate’s description of Hardy’s approach to philosophy

¹⁴ Some of the conditions exposed by Charles Dickens had also improved, to a limited extent, by the time of his novels’ publication. For example, Emily Heady explains that the Factory Act of 1847 and the Public Health Act of 1848 were “accomplished in the years just before *Bleak House* was published” (316).

helps to elucidate this grim message: “In his later years he spoke repeatedly of his essentially emotional and non-intellectual approach to life and of his lack of any systematic philosophy...What mattered emotionally, in terms of human experience, was the fact of individual unfreedom” (122). In *Tess*, this “unfreedom” is both imposed by society and inherent within human existence. Hardy’s description of the Durbeyfields’ fate toward the end of the novel relates to his commentary on freedom. Tess’s father dies, and the Durbeyfields lose their home:

Thus the Durbeyfields, once D’Urbervilles, saw descending upon them the destiny which, no doubt, when they were among the Olympians of the county, they had caused to descend many a time, and severely enough, upon the heads of such landless ones as they themselves were now. So do flux and reflux – the rhythm of change – alternate and persist in everything under the sky. (351)

Hardy connects this cycle of tragedy, affecting in turn those who previously caused it, to natural rhythms. Isolation, alienation, and detachment are not new phenomena; their targets simply change in different contexts.

After Tess’s flight from Flintcomb-Ash and her father’s death, Hardy depicts her path away from Marlott with her family, to Sandbourne with Alec, to Stonehenge with Angel after she has killed Alec, and finally to her death by execution. Hardy continues to occasionally refer to agricultural issues, though he includes no more detailed scenes of farm work. When Angel “arriv[es] with the milkman” at Tess and Alec’s residence in Sandbourne, this moment reminds us of Tess and Angel’s earlier discussion of the detachment between dairy farms and urban milk customers, thereby evoking once more a sense of alienation (377). Agriculture, however, is no longer a central focus of the novel at this point.

It is important to note that the last agricultural scene in *Tess*, just before Tess's father's death, is a positive rendering of farm work, though the circumstances surrounding it are grim. Both of Tess's parents have been suffering from illness. "[H]aving eaten all the seed-potatoes" in Tess's absence, they have accomplished no work in their garden plots. This "last lapse of the improvident," the thoughtless consumption of their only means of providing food for themselves, emphasizes the Durbeyfields' decline. Still hoping to prolong her family's survival, Tess acquires new seed potatoes. Her father works in the home garden, while she works in the "allotment-plot which they rented in a field a couple of hundred yards out of the village" (346).

Tess actually enjoys the work that ensues, though the respite it offers is fleeting. She works in the evenings alongside her neighbors, all of whom find the work to be pleasant: "though the air was fresh and keen there was a whisper of spring in it that cheered the workers on. Something in the place, the hour, the crackling fires, the fantastic mysteries of light and shade, made others as well as Tess enjoy being there" (348). Despite the exhausting nature of preparing garden beds by hand at the end of the day, the villagers find contentment in their shared labor and in the mysterious beauty of their surroundings at twilight. Though her neighbors work on separate plots, Tess feels their presence. The Durbeyfields leave Marlott before they can harvest anything from the plot, but Tess gains spiritual if not physical sustenance from the productive, communal work.

Of course, this scene is disrupted when Alec D'Urberville arrives, bathed in an ominous, reddish glow from the fires on the garden plots and holding a digging fork. When he declares that he has come in order to "protest against [her] working like this," Tess maintains that her enjoyment of the work has been genuine (348-349). Indeed,

Alec's overtly demonic presence does not erase the novel's suggestion that positive experiences of labor are possible, for once he appears, the scene is no longer about agriculture. This scene and the remaining chapters of the novel come to be primarily about Tess's personal doom.

In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams emphasizes the possibility of human connection within the alienating world of *Tess*: "Feeling very acutely the long crisis of separation, and in the end coming to more tragically isolated catastrophes than any others within this tradition, he yet created continually the strength and the warmth of people living together: in work and in love; in the physical reality of a place" (213). Tess's experience at the allotment plot supports this view of the novel, though Williams does not specifically address this scene. While much of *Tess* suggests that the trajectory of rural communities is strikingly bleak, Hardy shows that simple moments of connection through shared labor are still possible and powerful; such moments draw me to agriculture, too.

Reflecting the realities of strenuous, physical work and economic hardship, the allotment plot scene is not nostalgic or idyllic. And yet, there certainly are nostalgic moments in *Tess*. Such moments reveal, perhaps, the modernist that Hardy was becoming, for the modernist looks back at an unrecoverable past and forward to a future emptied of all connections that once tied people to one another and to the land, even if those connections were never as strong in reality as they are in reminiscence. But Hardy, publishing *Tess* in the 1890s, was also still a Victorian, and his gloomier rendering of certain aspects of traditional rural life may bespeak his lingering Victorian belief in progress: it may well be that the system of industrial agriculture commits injustices, but

the old ways were brutal too. Moving forward and attempting to make improvements is better than drifting back toward a past that can no longer support its growing population and that keeps laborers voiceless and impoverished. The complexity of feeling that Hardy instills in his readers by giving voice to both of these impulses explains for me why *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* remains relevant for readers in the twenty-first century. The fantasy of the idyllic family farm exposes our over-simplified fictions of past and present, while the unquestioning belief in progress obscures the costs of rapid, widespread change to rural communities, individual laborers, and the environment.

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