The plight of being alive

A Study of Suicide in Thomas Hardy’s Novels of Character and Environment

[...] and all before him was bleak open down (Hardy, Jude 16)

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INTRODUCTION

I started reading Thomas Hardy’s work after encountering the title Far from the Madding Crowd in a local bookshop years ago. It was only later that I learned that Hardy had borrowed this grand line from Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” but by then I was already sold on his work. My love for Hardy’s writings seems reason enough for selecting him as the focus of my dissertation, but it was definitely not the easiest choice. Hardy belongs to that group of canonical writers who have been studied so intensely the last decades that one might consider it impossible to add something to the field. However, having read a lot of the available material on Hardy, I felt that many critics went down the same road. I was determined to take another direction and chose to write a literary sociological dissertation, as I not only find the connection between literature and society immensely interesting, but also thoroughly enlightening.

I chose to focus on the self-destructive characters in Hardy’s Wessex novels and look at them in the light of the Victorian attitudes to suicide. When researching the subject, I came across several studies on the theme, but all of them seemed to take the link between the rise of modernity and the rise of suicide as a sociological topic, as a starting point. It is my intention to counter this mistaken supposition and illustrate my analysis with Hardy’s novels, in which suicide is primarily situated at the countryside. Many critics have attributed the suicides or self-destructiveness of Hardy’s characters to fate or even worse, have denied the presence of them altogether. I, however, would like to argue that the suicides in Hardy’s six major novels – Far from the Madding Crowd (1874), The Return of the Native (1878), The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886), The Woodlanders (1887), Tess of the D’Urbervilles (1891), and Jude the Obscure (1895) – are to be explained from a purely sociological perspective. I will look at the settings in Hardy’s Wessex novels in the light of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of the primitive socius and consequently treat them as traditional communities. I believe that in these societies the individual cannot fully develop his or her own personality, as the community’s interest is constantly put above the well-being of the individual. Strong social bonds may lie at the basis of this savage socius, but so does strong social control. Consequently, narrow-mindedness typifies these cultures, as they leave their inhabitants no other option than fully conforming to the community’s rules and regulations if they want to survive in it. I will argue that in Hardy’s novels, the suicidal characters feel trapped in these traditional communities, as they cannot find their place in them on the one hand, and fail to break out of them on the other.
I am, however, very much aware that Deleuze and Guattari’s society theory is a much wider concept than I will let it appear in the following chapters. Yet, it is merely my intention to use the basic concept of the savage socius to enlighten some of the misunderstandings about both the Victorians’ and Hardy’s view on suicide. As in all literary sociological studies, it is impossible to expect a one-on-one outcome, and therefore I inserted the necessary nuances in my dissertation, to stress that it was never my intention to simply stick Deleuze and Guattari’s theory on Hardy’s novels. Through thorough study of the existing scientific literature on suicide – primarily Emile Durkheim and Olive Anderson – I try to give an idea of the nineteenth century conception of suicide. Secondly, I support my theoretical frame by borrowing Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the primitive socius, as set out in their seminal work *Anti-Oedipus*. Finally, by a close reading of Hardy’s Novels of Character and Environment, I studied the link between the self-destructive characters and their confinement in the traditional communities of Wessex.

My dissertation covers two parts, namely Suicide and Literature. In the first I discuss the general attitudes towards suicide in the nineteenth century, the existing theoretical works on the act of self-murder and Hardy’s link with the theme. I start the second part by motivating my choice of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the primitive socius as a theoretical framework. Consequently I go over all Hardy’s Novels of Character and Environment in a chronological order. For each novel I discuss three characteristics of the primitive socius and end with an intermediary conclusion. I employ a slightly different approach for the last narrative, *Jude the Obscure*, and treat this novel as the odd one out in my analysis. Finally, I end with a general conclusion which answers my research question and gives a full overview of my dissertation’s findings.
PART 1: SUICIDE

1.1. General context: Suicide in the nineteenth century

During the nineteenth century, suicide rose as a sociological phenomenon across the world. Obviously, the occurrence of suicide had long preceded it, but with the rise of modernity, it became a welcome topic for discussion in the public sphere and no longer a hidden subject confined to the private realm. In Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England, Olive Anderson explains the upcoming interest in the act of self-murder:

[I]f natural death was becoming less familiar, unnatural death was becoming even more so; and suicide accordingly stood out the more not only as an abnormal mode of death and a personal human drama (these it had always been), but also as a rare kind of happening altogether, and a socially significant one. (69)

More and more writers acted on this sudden interest in the act of self-murder, as suicide “while remain[ing] humanly shocking, [had] at the same time become respectable; that is, it [had] become the subject of intensive scientific research” (Alvarez 99). While it was still very much considered an unmentionable matter in Victorian England, “[o]n the Continent where social taboos and editorial pressures were less inhibiting to serious artists than in England” (Giordano 40) it grew to be a well-used topic for both novelists and researchers. Anderson remarks that “[i]ncreasing publicity was given to the ‘suicide mania’ [...] which began to be seen as the outcome not simply of ‘civilization’ or educational ‘over-pressure’, but of ‘new views of life, the beginning of the universal wish not to live’ (as with Jude the Obscure’s children)” (242). As time went on, one could speak of a real suicide trend, as illustrated by the abundant use of the phenomenon in literary works. “Balzac felt free to depict twenty-one suicides in his work,” Frank R. Giordano Jr. explains in his suicide study, “and Dostoevsky depicted thirteen in his five great novels [alone]” (40). In non-fiction, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim provided the cherry on the cake in 1897 with his treatise on the act of self-murder: On Suicide, which he aptly subtitled “A study in Sociology”. A. Alvarez states that precisely this “sub-title made the point unequivocally; the question was no longer the morality of the act but the social conditions which produce such despair. ‘To be or not to be’,” he explains, “had given way to ‘the reason why’” (99).
In nineteenth-century England, however, things were different. In fiction and non-fiction suicide was looked upon as a scandalous act and considered detestable. Fictional accounts are rare, as the primary function of Victorian literature was didactic. The prime audience existed out of young bourgeois girls, on whom such subjects were thought to have an unpredictable and above all, negative impact:

The prototypical reader was a young girl, with a “passive, languorous body displaying itself on a sofa and neglecting domestic duties as it ‘devoured’ the texts that fed its romantic and sexual fantasies” (Ferris 1992: 18). One major function of Victorian criticism was to censure such novels, and praise those which would be safe for the “young person” […]. (Latané 399)

Things lay differently, though, in poetry than in prose. David E. Latané Jr. states that while the rules of propriety were more strictly followed in prose, in poetic circles “chaste verse suitable for girls was generally chastised” (399). In the middle of the nineteenth century the Pre-Raphaelites established themselves as a literary and artistic group, in which death and sexuality were not regarded as taboo subjects, but instead formed the prime ingredients of the artistic manifest.

Next to that, in early non-fiction, suicide was condemned and treated as a contagious disease, to be extinguished as soon as possible. In Suicide and Its Antidotes Solomon Pigott, who saw suicide primarily as a crime against God, calls the act a “dreadful crime” (xi), an “atrocious deed” (xii) and even a “demon from the human breast” (xiii). He attacks the law for its condemnation of all suicides as acts of insanity and thus charging those having attempted suicide with minor punishments. In his charge against suicide he proposes the following penalties:

The law of this land must, without misjudging lenity, by the faithful investigation of jurymen, who shall refuse to bring in a verdict of lunacy upon every self-murderer, be rigorously executed ere sufficient terror is held out to restrain these evil doers from this act of rashness and barbarity. The law decrees that the body of a felo de se, or self-murderer, shall suffer contempt by an ignominious interment; his goods and chattel be confiscated; and his name and family be branded with marks of infamy. (221)
In his study *The Anatomy of Suicide*, the British physician Forbes Winslow takes it even a step further as he considers the “self” in self-murderer rather redundant. “The alliance between suicide and the murder of others,” he states, “is a closer one than is generally supposed. How many instances are recorded in which suicide and homicide have been conjoined! He who will not scruple to take away his own life, will not require much reasoning to impel him to sacrifice another’s.” (39) In stating that “[s]uicide is an injury to our neighbour and to society” (41), Winslow actively supported the attitude towards suicide shared by most Victorians at the time. In early and mid-Victorian England suicide was still considered as homicide and the penalties, for those who survived the attempt, were accordingly equally harsh as those for murder.

In practice, however, no effort was spared to hide this hideous stain on Victorian society. Most often, suicides were not reported – and thus not classified in the death registers, as families “looked upon suicide as ‘the greatest disgrace to have in the family’” (Bailey 23). As “[…] the non-registration did not become a penal offence until 1874” (Anderson 22), families and government remained silent about the occurrences of suicide and thus corrupted entire death records throughout the Victorian era. People who planned suicide seemed to think ahead and most often chose the acts that would be most easily concealed as accidental. Anderson points out that “found drowned” was a popular euphemism for female suicide (43), a notion that will appear to be vital in the study of the death of Hardy’s heroine Eustacia Vye in *The Return of the Native*.

People had reason to conceal their final act of despair, as it was still considered illegal in Victorian times. Anderson explains how “[…] neither at the beginnings nor the end of Victoria’s reign was interested support lacking for the policy of controlling suicide through meting out severe penalties for the deed” (264). Those penalties – mainly prison sentences –, however, rarely followed through, as the focus lay more on the state warning against a criminal offence than on the actual rehabilitation of those charged of attempted suicide. The fact is that “[…] the continued existence of legal penalties for self-murder, even though they were only occasionally and erratically enforced, must have helped to sustain traditional feelings that suicide was ‘a bad deed’, best concealed […], and if known, needing convincing explanation” (Anderson 282). Moreover, as “[…] in England Church and State were in entire agreement that there was no ‘right to die’” (Anderson 269), suicides were not only considered illegal acts, but also denied a proper Christian burial. “[S]uicides were indeed often buried in
the ‘backside’ of the churchyard,” Anderson explains, “and without any service; in this they were treated no differently from the unbaptized” (234).

“Ordinary people,” Anderson explains, “seem to have been uneasy about the fin de siècle romanticization of suicide, and to have continued to believe that suicide was something ‘which the ordinary man did not do, and ought not to do’, and hence to return verdicts of ‘temporary insanity’ or ‘mind unsound’” (422). Things changed however towards the end of the century, as the understanding of the act of self-murder rose:

By 1870 public opinion about suicide had already liberalized sufficiently to allow for the abolition of forfeiture, and the bodies of suicides were no longer sent to anatomy classes for dissection. Then in 1879 and 1882 came two further legal revisions. Suicide was no longer classed as homicide, so that the maximum sentence for attempted suicide would be reduced to just two years; and suicides were at last granted the right of burial in daylight hours, although the clergy were to decide on the question of allowing Christian rites. Also by the last quarter of the century, public records and statistics on suicide were far more reliable than they had ever been, so that more suicides were recorded and rates seemed higher. (Gates)

Yet, a remarkable difference still existed in the attitude towards suicide, between city and country folk. For the city population, worldlier and more connected to the spirit of the continent, “suicide was a sin which the moral, emotional, pathological, and even religious platitudes circulating at various social levels combined to make seem often a hard stroke of luck or a symptom of illness, but above all a private, personal matter, which called for human understanding and forgiveness and rarely for judgement” (Anderson 241). The country people, on the contrary, were less forgiving and more opinionated. They regarded suicide as “a deed which could still affront the collective moral feelings of a community” (Anderson 241). It is primarily this narrow-mindedness that will be the focus of my study of the suicides in Hardy’s rural societies.

1.2. Theoretical studies

1.2.1. Durkheim: On Suicide

In 1897, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim published his groundbreaking work On Suicide. In this innovative study he looks at suicide as a sociological phenomenon and
uses actual statistics to support his argument. To start with, Durkheim broadened the established connotation of the term suicide. While, for a long time, it had been considered a desperate act out of insanity, suicide was now seen as a much wider concept. “‘Suicide’,” Durkheim states, “is the term applied to any case of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act, carried out by the victim himself, which he was aware would produce this result.” (19) Even though only two lines long, this definition changed the whole understanding of the suicidological phenomenon. Firstly, the definition stresses both the possibility of a positive and violent act “implying a certain deployment of muscular force” (Durkheim 16) and of a “negative attitude or simple abstention [which] achieves the same result” (Durkheim 17). In other words, refusing to eat is as much a suicidal act as hanging oneself. Secondly, Durkheim’s description emphasizes the intentionality of the act, as “the death of a man suffering from hallucinations who jumps from a high window because he thinks it to be level with the ground [differs from] that of a man who, sound in mind, strikes a mortal blow against himself while knowing full well what he is doing” (17). This aspect of the self-consciousness of the self-destructive tendency will appear to be imperative in the study of the suicides in Hardy’s novels.

Next to establishing a proper definition of the subject, Durkheim also categorized different types of suicide. He came up with four kinds of self-murder: egotistical, altruistic, anomic and fatalistic suicide – of which he discusses only the first three profoundly.

The first, egotistical suicide, is the result of a lack of social integration and a disproportionate focus on the self. In the introduction to On Suicide, Richard Sennett points out that egotistical suicide “is [the result] of distress at not belonging to a group” (xvii). Durkheim finds unmarried people and members of small families especially susceptible to this first type of suicide. In his study on Hardy’s suicides, where he employs Durkheim’s theory on suicide, Giordano puts Eustacia Vye (The Return of the Native) and Michael Henchard (The Mayor of Casterbridge) under this heading, as both display an exaggerated individuation (xvii).

The second kind, altruistic suicide, makes up the exact opposite of the first. Here, an excessive integration in society and a lack of individual development leads to the ultimate self-sacrificial act of suicide. Durkheim situates this second type mainly in war situations and in primitive societies, where the sake of the group overpowers that of the individual. Of
Hardy’s characters, Giles Winterborne (The Woodlanders) and Tess Durbeyfield (Tess of the D’Urbervilles) fit this category best, as both sacrifice their own life for the benefit of others.

Thirdly, Durkheim discusses anomic suicide. This is by far the category which he elaborates most on, as he mentions several different versions of the type, but in general we can assert that “[a]nomie is a state in which there is weak social regulation between the society's norms and the individual, most often brought on by dramatic changes in economic and/or social circumstances. This type of suicide happens when the social norms and laws governing [...] society do not correspond with the life goals of the individual.” (“Suicide”)

The fourth type, fatalistic suicide, is briefly discussed in a footnote in On Suicide, as “the [kind of suicide] that results from an excess of regulation, the one committed by those whose future is pitilessly confined and whose passions are violently constrained by oppressive discipline” (Durkheim 305n). Durkheim illustrates his case by the examples of “married men who are too young,” “married women without children” and slaves, but quickly concludes that “it affects so few people today [...] that it seems unnecessary for it to detain us further” (305n). As none of Hardy’s self-destructive characters suffers from excessive self-discipline – their suffering is rather derived from external forces, to which they refuse to succumb and escape from through their deaths –, I too will proceed without further elaborating on this fourth type.

This categorization shows how Durkheim looks at the act of self-murder from a sociological perspective. For him, it is the organization of society that leads to the well-being or alternatively the discomfort of its members. In On Suicide, he stresses the importance of strong social bonds for the happiness of each individual. In modern society, however, he argues, these bonds crumble under the pressure of the division of labour and industrialization (Sennett xx).

Modern-day sociologists, however, reject much of Durkheim’s methodology and conclusions. Still respecting the overall ideas mentioned in On Suicide, several twentieth-century researchers discard the use of statistics in the study of suicide. Victor Bailey points out that “[t]he official suicide statistics are now seen at worst as elaborate fictions, at best as social constructions based upon commonsense perceptions held by the various actors in the drama of investigation and inquisition” (27) and in The Social Meanings of Suicide, Jack Douglas “rejects the use of suicide rates, on the grounds that the figures are inaccurate and
invalid for research purposes. The figures, it is said, depend more on coroners’ definitions of suicide and their search procedures than on what actually happened” (qtd. in Bailey 3).

1.2.2. Later theories

Suicide studies first came up around 1800. The scarcity of materials turned Durkheim’s grand publication into the bible of self-murder and it took several decades for the reliability of Durkheim’s statistics to be questioned. However, for a long time these statistics were the primary sources of suicidologists and thus the basis for many misinterpretations. In her practically all-embracing book *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, Olive Anderson looks into these various misconceptions about suicide and concludes that previous studies have overlooked some crucial understandings due to the faulty use of the available statistics (13). For this dissertation I will mainly focus on her critical study of the city-country divide in suicide statistics.

In her treatise Anderson shows how the literary representations of suicide and the studies following Durkheim’s statistics created an erroneous conception of the dispersion of suicide. “[T]hose most prone to doing away with themselves in Victorian and Edwardian England were not the victims of the new industrial economy,” as many wanted to believe. Instead, she argues, “[t]he highest suicide rates were in rural villages and nonindustrial towns and resorts, [and thus] not in industrial cities” (qtd. in Bailey 26).

1.3. Hardy and suicide

Throughout his oeuvre Hardy mentions numerous suicides or suicide attempts. I will discuss seven acts of self-destruction in his major Novels of Character and Environment, but Giordano points out that Hardy’s interest in self-murder is in fact omnipresent:

Some minor figures who commit suicide are the neurotic invalid John South and the South Carolina Gentleman in *The Woodlanders*, and Jude’s mother and his son, Little Father Time. When we add to these all the characters who considered, threatened, or are thought to have attempted suicide (Gabriel Oak, Fanny Robin, and Bathsheba in *Far From the Madding Crowd*; Christian Cantle and Clym in *The Return of the Native*; Grace Melbury in *The Woodlanders*; and Retty Priddle and Jack Durbeyfield in *Tess*), we have an expanded sense of the pervasiveness of the death instinct and the fragility of so many lives in the world of Hardy’s novels. (43)
One of the reasons why these minor characters never really cross the line between life and death is because the emphasis lies more on the process, namely the harsh struggle with life, rather than the result of this struggle, in other words, death. Even in his masterpieces not all of the acts of self murder are explicitly shown as suicides – that is, in the customary sense of the word. Durkheim, however, broadened the accepted meaning of the act of suicide and included not only positive but also negative acts, such as hunger strikes or murder with the knowledge of being sent to death row. Consequently, since Durkheim argues that “[…] when resolution entails certain sacrifice of life, scientifically this is suicide” (qtd. in Giordano 30), then Giles Winterborne’s self-neglect in The Woodlanders for example, is as much a suicidal act as Eustacia Vye’s drowning herself in The Return of the Native. Another reason for the implicitness of the suicides in Hardy’s work is the simple fact that it was not an accepted theme in Victorian fiction. “While the Victorians were increasingly aware of suicide as a spiritual and social threat,” Giordano argues, “artists were not inclined – nor were they permitted by publishers and readers – to treat the subject openly” (39). Even though Hardy, as a real enfant terrible, mostly tried to ignore the demands of propriety in his writing, he was thus just as much subjected to censorship and conventions. Most notably in his final novels, Tess of the D’Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure, but just as well in the previous ones, Hardy struggled with publishers’ revisions and omissions whenever the content clashed with the established norms.

So, even though Hardy did not always carry out the tragic fates of the characters – as for example the final release of Farmer Boldwood in Far from the Madding Crowd after the man’s death sentence, the frequency of suicidal tendencies in his work remains remarkable. Hardy is known to have collected news items on crime and suicide (Giordano 12) during his life and in Thomas Hardy: The Time-Torn Man, Claire Tomalin discusses Hardy’s strong interest in the subject of death:

His idea that death was preferable to life led him into playing a game in which he imagined he was already dead. He describes it in a note made in 1888 after a conversation with Leslie Stephen’s sister-in-law Anny Ritchie […]: “If there is any way of getting a melancholy satisfaction out of life it lies in dying, so to speak, before one is out of the flesh; by which I mean putting on the manners of ghosts, wandering in their haunts, and taking their views of surrounding things. […]” (224).
While Hardy’s interest in death and suicide was obviously already present, it undoubtedly rose with the death of his friend and mentor Horace Moule, who took his own life in 1873 after years of depression and alcohol addiction (TH Web). This event not only devastated the writer, but probably led him into further disbelief in a benevolent God.

**PART 2: LITERATURE**

2.1. **Main theoretical frame: Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the primitive socius**

   Even though I will be using all of the before mentioned theories to discuss Hardy’s suicidal characters, I will primarily focus on yet another pair of sociologists to drive my point home. Several critics state that Hardy’s naturalism and determinism function as an explanation for the cruel fate many of his characters have to endure. In their train of thought the characters are deprived of all self-government and function as mere victims of a cruel nature and environment. Their suicides accordingly seem either the final act of despair after a life which ruled them, or yet another malicious trick played on them by their unforgiving surroundings. Others, like Giordano, argue that “[…] Hardy’s protagonists refuse to endure paralysis and emotional deprivation; instead, they make choices and perform acts that are self-destructive, even suicidal” (7) In “I’d Have My Life Unbe”: Thomas Hardy’s Self-destructive Characters Giordano argues that Hardy’s personages seek their own downfall in continually making the wrong decisions on their path of life. Instead of looking at external forces such as heredity, environment, chance and coincidence, Giordano focuses on Hardy’s remarkable understanding of “the potency of man’s death instinct” (xv).

   I, however, would like to argue that the suicides in Hardy’s six major novels – *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Return of the Native* (1878), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *The Woodlanders* (1887), *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891), and *Jude the Obscure* (1895) – are to be explained from a purely sociological perspective. In line with Giordano, I feel that the characters search their own doom, but in my opinion, only because the narrow-minded social circumstances give them no other option. In this, I follow Durkheim’s argument that the social conditions are the prime source of suicidal tendencies. However, where Durkheim puts the rise of suicide next to the rise of modernity, I will locate the foundations of the suicides in Hardy’s novels at the countryside. As previously stated, Anderson shows in *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* how fictional accounts and theories based on Durkheim’s incomplete statistics have romanticized the concept of suicide:
National suicide rates were rising throughout this period, and especially from the 1890s [...] suicide was closely associated with great cities by a network of familiar literary and visual images as well as by traditional moral, medical and sociological discourse. Yet what the county suicide rates reveal is that it was as often in rural as in urban areas that [...] suicide was increasing most rapidly in these years. (85)

The illusionary link between the rise of modernity and suicide created an incorrect conception of the actual dispersion of suicide. “In the historical, no less, in the sociological, examination of suicide,” Victor Bailey explains, “the dominant conceptual framework, which [...] claimed that suicide, industrialization, and urbanization were closely associated, has come under vigorous attack” (27). Accordingly, I will follow Anderson’s findings which, contrary to popular statistics and fictional accounts, show that suicide rates were proven to be the highest in rural communities.

In line with these conclusions, Hardy’s suicides all take place in the rural towns of his fictional Wessex. Rather than the novelty of the city, I would argue, it is the narrow-mindedness of countryside community life that leads the characters to this final act of despair. To support my argument I will use the society theory of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as the rural communities Hardy creates show remarkable similarities to what the former call “the primitive socius”. In Deleuze and the Political Paul Patton describes the concept of the socius, as explained in Anti-Oedipus, as follows:

Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between different kinds of social machine according to the manner in which coordination and control of material social flows are carried out. What they call the socius is the imagined surface upon which this control and coordination take place. The socius thus appears to be the agent of the social production process: the business of the socius, they argue, is to code desire [...]. (89)

As the socius is historically variable, there are three kinds of coding desire and thus three kinds of socius. Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between the savage, the despotic, and the civilized socius, as “the socius takes different forms according to the means of codification of flows [...]” (Patton 89). As my aim is to look at Hardy’s rural communities in the light of the savage socius, I will only discuss this first category here. “The first form of socius,” Patton explains, “is the primitive territorial machine: territorial not because it operates upon
territories but because in these societies it is the earth itself which is the recording surface or full body of all social processes” (89). Being part of the tribe or community thus presupposes a strong connection to the earth and nature, as “[t]he earth is the primitive, savage unity of desire and production . . . It is the surface on which the whole process of production is inscribed, on which the forces and the means of labour are recorded, and the agents and the products distributed” (qtd. in Patton 89). This form of society “in which the social body remains integrated with the natural body of the earth” (Schedler) is typical for Hardy’s Novels of Character and Environment. Often, as I will discuss later on, natural settings or parts of the natural process dominate the characters or even function as a character in the novel themselves.

Closely related to this first aspect, is the element of tradition, which is an essential part of both the primitive socius and Hardy’s storylines. Tradition resembles the circularity of nature and shows the rural communities in the light of long-established societies with their own continued customs and practices. Next to that, “[t]he primitive territorial socius is above all a system of organising people, and its principal mechanism for doing so is the kinship system” (Patton 90). Just as there is a strong connection with the body of the earth, these powerful kinship ties often form a guiding principle in Hardy’s narratives. Patton points out that “[k]inship systems specify the classes or groups to which individuals belong and the relationships between them” (90) and this class mobility and difference often plays a major part in the life of Hardy’s characters. Moreover, the dominant presence of superstitious elements in the Novels of Character and Environment, also typifies the primitive sociusvii, as it entails a strong belief in supernatural and mythical affairs. This superstitious trait more than often blinds Hardy’s characters to see the true state of things and only leads them further into their downfall, as I will illustrate further on. While certain elements of the primitive socius do not apply hereviii, these four characteristics appear to be typical for both Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the savage socius and Hardy’s Novels of Character and Environment.

Hardy’s rural towns are all models of traditional societies where nature dominates culture, superstition rules rationalism and conservatism is more rampant than open-mindedness. The combination of these features turns the Wessex towns into primitive societies rather than modern cultures, as an article in The Tribune illustrates:

For [Hardy] sleepy villages and towns respectively drowsed and bustled as they had for long centuries past. He could still hear the plodding of footsteps,
the clopping of horse’s hooves and the rumbling of cart wheels. Seasons bringing with them their own particular festivals and rites; the ploughing, harvesting; the feasts and dancing and the inhabitants rooted in ancient myths and superstitions enjoying old-time celebrations at the ushering in of a new season fascinated him and became subject of his novels. (“The Wonder”)

For each novel I will discuss the three main characteristics of the primitive socius, namely the close connection to nature, superstition and tradition, and the importance of kinship ties. I believe that in these rural societies the individual cannot fully develop his or her own personality, as the community’s interest is constantly put above the well-being of the individual. Strong social bonds may lie at the basis of this savage socius, but so does strong social control. Consequently, narrow-mindedness typifies these cultures, as they leave their inhabitants no other option than fully conforming to the community’s rules and regulations if they want to survive in it. I will argue that in Hardy’s novels, the suicidal characters feel trapped in these traditional communities, as they cannot find their place in them on the one hand, and fail to break out of them on the other hand. This failure to break out of the stifling community is due to the strict division between inside and outside in Hardy’s settings. Most of the rural communities are firmly closed off from the outside urban world, according to Norman Page who points out that “the major novels employ a more restricted locale, usually either a rural community or a small town intimately linked with the surrounding countryside” (Thomas Hardy 36):

In most of the novels the locale is remarkably small and self-contained. […] Distances are often measured in terms of a man’s capacity to walk, a journey from one village to another involves a significant change of scene, and the normal life of the community is enclosed by the surrounding hills or woods, and controlled by the natural rhythms of the day and the year. (Page, Thomas Hardy 45)
Then Boldwood entered and the door was closed behind him, and he walked the world no more. (Hardy, *Crowd* 333)
2.2. Suicide in the Novels of Character and Environment

2.2.1. A thing strong as death: Farmer Boldwood in Far from the Madding Crowd (1874)

The title of Hardy’s first masterpiece, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, taken from Thomas Gray’s popular poem “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”, already reveals the provincial and enclosed nature of the characters’ surroundings. The narrative action is limited to the rural district of Weatherbury, where Bathsheba Everdene, the heroine of the tale, owns a large farm. The novel primarily centers on this young woman and her three pursuers: the shepherd Gabriel Oak, the gentleman farmer Boldwood and the soldier Sergeant Troy. I will mainly focus on the second of these enamoured men, as he decides to step out of life after a succession of tragic events, among which primarily the rejection by his beloved. However, this is the only novel where the suicidal tendencies of the tragic character are not brought to its end, as *Far from the Madding Crowd* was Hardy’s first literary breakthrough and thus not yet as groundbreaking as his later provocative work. Instead, we can classify the narrative more under the genre of the pastoral novel, as it was Hardy’s main intention to celebrate the beauty of rural life. I will argue, though, that it is exactly this primitive character of the community that stifles Boldwood and ultimately drives him to despair.

2.2.1.a. Strong connection to the body of the Earth

In this novel Hardy sings a song of praise on the rural character of Weatherbury town, located in his fictional region: Wessex. “*Far from the Madding Crowd* features Hardy’s first use of the term […] ‘Wessex’” (Shires xvii) and signalled the start of a series of novels which would attempt to preserve, and foreground the beauty of, the rural world’s primitive character. This first in line of the Novels of Character and Environment accentuates the rural beauty of its setting through its various references to the intimate bond between man and nature. The following extract depicts Bathsheba’s shearers at work, illustrating the smooth amalgamation between nature, man and animal:

To-day the large side doors were thrown open towards the sun to admit a bountiful light to the immediate spot of the shearers’ operations, which was the wood threshing-floor in the centre, formed of thick oak, black with age and polished by the beating of flails for many generations till it had grown as slippery and as rich in hue as the state-room floors of an Elizabethan mansion. Here the shearers knelt, the sun slanting in upon their bleached shirts, tanned
arms, and the polished shears they flourished, causing these to bristle with a thousand rays, strong enough to blind a weak-eyed man. Beneath them a captive sheep lay panting, increasing the rapidity of its pants as misgiving merged in terror, till it quivered like the hot landscape outside. (Hardy, Crowd 126)

In Weatherbury life revolves around and follows the rhythm of the body of the earth, as the seasons determine the inhabitants’ activities and the people survive on what nature provides them with. So, when natural disasters, such as flood, storms or fire, occur, they do not only form an immediate threat to the land, but also to the people and their possessions. Hence, the strong bond with their natural surroundings forms an essential part of the existence of the Weatherbury people, as their dependence on nature is their weakest point in times of trouble.

The prime example of the nature-loving inhabitants of the rural community is undoubtedly Gabriel Oak. The local shepherd seems to be at one with his surroundings as he not only “blends into the landscape but also into those people around him” (Shires xxviii). Gabriel, a man appreciative of “the speaking loneliness of [natural scenes]” (Hardy, Crowd 12), is always to be found out of doors in the novel, worshipping the workings of the natural world. When he does seem to come into contact with other people, he seems to blend in as easily with their mood as he does with nature’s: “[…] when his friends and critics were in tantrums he was considered rather a bad man; when they were pleased he was rather a good man; when they were neither he was a man whose moral colour was a kind of pepper and salt mixture” (Hardy, Crowd 3). However, the novel especially stresses his extraordinary attachment to the natural world, as John Alcorn explains:

In Hardy’s novels man’s body seems to grow, like a tree, from the soil. Farmer Gabriel Oak, in Far From the Madding Crowd, is deeply rooted in the soil from which he derives his sustenance, his name, and his sturdy character. Bathsheba, Fanny, Troy, Boldwood – all move around the monumental figure of Oak and the land he symbolizes. (2)

Oak is described as one who can read the time from the sky and the stars (Hardy, Crowd 4) and can predict the weather through the animals’ behaviour (Hardy, Crowd 212), as he always instinctively knows what the “direct message[s] from the Great Mother meant” (Hardy, Crowd 212). His nature-loving and unselfish character forms a definite contrast with that of the other two men, namely Soldier Troy and Farmer Boldwood, who both hold a more
individualistic view of life. The latter, for instance, is shown at first to direct all his attention on the farm business, and yet to have no mind for anything else than the lovely novel’s heroine Bathsheba Everdene later on. Unlike Gabriel, he does not really care for his farm itself or the wonders of nature; instead he seems more interested in the materialistic aspects of life. Lance St John Butler points out that in “Far from the Madding Crowd, Hardy […] countenances the possibility of a love based on affection and on mutual involvement in a joint enterprise” (8) which is shown by the novel ending with the union of Bathsheba and Gabriel, instead of with the marriage of the young girl and Farmer Boldwood. To illustrate his point, Butler refers to the scene just before the storm, where “Oak is working on the ricks beside Bathsheba, working because he cares”. According to Butler, “[Oak] cares not merely about the woman (Boldwood does that) but about the corn too” (8).

But apart from Boldwood and Troy, the entire community of Weatherbury seems to be lovingly engaged in a close relationship with the natural wonders of the countryside. John Alcorn points out that the rustics in Far from the Madding Crowd, as Giles and Marty do in The Woodlanders, “haltingly learn, like children, a new language” (14):

> The instinctive act of human-kind here was to stand, and listen, and learn how the trees on the right and the trees on the left wailed or chanted to each other in the regular antiphonies of a cathedral choir; how hedges and other shapes to leeward then caught the note, lowering it to the tenderest sob; and how the hurrying gust then plunged into the south to be heard no more.

(Hardy, Crowd 9)

### 2.2.1.b. Tradition and superstition

To show the striking traditionalism of the Weatherbury community, I will start by discussing some of the numerous examples of the long-established character of the rural town. Firstly, Hardy situated Weatherbury in his fictional region ‘Wessex’, which was named “after the medieval Anglo-Saxon kingdom that existed [in the south and southwest of England] prior to the Norman Conquest” (“Thomas”). Merely by naming its surrounding region after this ancient kingdom, Hardy places this rural community in a long line of tradition. Secondly, in The Forms of Tragedy Dale Kramer refers to the Weatherbury people’s peculiar notion of time: “[…] the peasants’ view of time is paramount,” he explains, “[as it] establishes an aura of permanence – in values, in personality traits, in social customs” (44). Further on he explains how the rustics’ lives are measured in centuries, rather than years, as they “do not
[seem to] distinguish themselves apart from their forefathers and progeny” (44). Indeed, the rustics seem to have merged so much with their surroundings, that they appear as old as nature. They slavishly follow the cyclical rhythm of the seasons and possess an “oriental indifference to the flight of time” (Hardy, Crowd 121), as is illustrated by the discussions about old Smallbury’s actual age:

“You must be a very aged man, malster, to have sons grewed up so old and ancient,” remarked Gabriel […]
“Father’s so old that ‘a can’t mind his age; can ye, father?” interposed Jacob. “[…] Well I don’t mind the year I was born in; but perhaps I can reckon up the places I’ve lived at, and so get it that way. I bode at Juddle Farm […] till I were eleven. […] Then I went to Norcombe and malted there two and twenty years, and two and twenty years I was there turnip-hoeing and harvesting. […] How much is that?”
“Hundred and seventeen,” chuckled another old gentleman […].
“Well then, that’s my age,” said the maltster, emphatically. (Hardy, Crowd 57)

A third example of the ancient, traditional character of the town is Hardy’s description of the Shearing Barn. J.B. Jones points out that “[the barn] serves as a symbol of the long continuity of life through time in the countryside of Wessex” (147), as Hardy states that “the old barn embodied practices which had suffered no mutilation at the hands of time” (Crowd, 126) and that “four centuries had neither proved it to be founded on a mistake, inspired any hatred of its purpose, nor given rise to any reaction that had battered it down” (Crowd 126). Typified by the same eternal character, the barn thus seems to be in perfect harmony with its surrounding landscape. However, the description of the unchanging outlook of the place only really seems to reach its climax in the following extract:

In comparison with cities, Weatherbury was immutable. The citizen’s Then is the rustic’s Now. In London twenty or thirty years ago are old times: In Paris ten years or five. In Weatherbury three- or four-score years were included in the mere present, and nothing less than a century set a mark on its face or tone. Five decades hardly modified the cut of a gaiter, the embroidery of a smockfrock, by the breadth of a hair. Ten generations failed to alter the turn of a single phrase. In these nooks the busy outsider’s ancient times are only old, his old times are still new; his present is futurity. (Hardy, Crowd 127)
Next to the numerous references to its timelessness, the community’s traditional characteristics are also shown in the depiction of its various local customs, such as the hiring fair and Hardy’s exceptionally detailed description of the sheep-shearing. The locals seem to scorn anyone who attempts to break with the traditional customs of the community, as for instance the young Bathsheba Everdene who takes matters in her own hands on her Weatherbury farm: “‘Our miss’ess will bring us all to the bad,’ said Henery. ‘Ye may depend upon that – with her new farming ways. And her ignorance is terrible to hear. Why only yesterday she cut a rasher of bacon the longways of the flitch!’” (Hardy, Crowd 93)

However, even though the young Miss Everdene may be introducing some new farming ways, she certainly fits in the traditional community in other aspects. The primitive country town is namely also imbued with superstitious beliefs and although Bathsheba at first pretends to distrust these ideas, she is soon shown to be as susceptible of them as the locals. When her servant Liddy proposes to predict Bathsheba’s future partner, for instance, the superstitious beliefs of the maid soon get a hold of the mistress:

“Did you ever find out, Miss, who you are going to marry by means of the Bible and Key?”
“Don’t be so foolish Liddy. As if such things could be.”
“Well – there’s a good deal in it all the same.”
“Nonsense, child.”
“And it makes your heart beat fearfully! Some believe in it: some don’t. I do.”
“Very well – let’s try it,” said Bathsheba bounding from her seat with that total disregard of consistency which can be indulged in towards a dependent, and entering into the spirit of divination at once. “Go and get the front door key.”
(Hardy, Crowd 83)

Hardy aptly titled this chapter “Sortes Sanctorum” or “the oracles of the holy scriptures”, as this ritual originally went back to “a method of fortune-telling by opening the Bible at random and reading the first passage one sees to gain advice” (Falck-Yi 409). It is moreover immediately emphasized that this was a frequent undertaking, as “[a] rusty patch […] upon the verse, caused by previous pressure of an iron substance thereon, told that this was not the first time the old volume had been used for the purpose” (Hardy, Crowd 83). Conclusively, to emphasize the superstitious nature of the entire community, I must point out that the women are definitely not alone in possessing such credulous minds; the men are shown to be just as
susceptible to beliefs of the supernatural, as is illustrated by their late night discussion in the bar about the ill omens of the past days:

“Ay – there’s some sorrow going to happen,” said Matthem Moon. “I’ve had three very bad dreams lately; and Sally put the bellows upon table twice following last week.”

“A sure sign that sommat wrong is coming,” said Joseph Poorgrass. “I had a white cat come in to me yesterday breakfast-time. And there was a coffin-handle upon my sister-law’s candle last night.”

“And I’ve seed the new moon two months following through glass. I was told, too, that Gammer Ball dreamed of bees stinging her.”

“Horrible. O depend upon it there’s something in all this,” said Joseph Poorgrass, drawing his breath fearfully, with a sense that he lived in a tragedy. (Hardy, Crowd 93)

2.2.1.c. Kinship ties

Typical for Hardy’s style is the use of the rustics as a sort of chorus, reacting to the events passing in the community. This rustic chorus seems to function as one whole and on their arrival, the semi-outsiders Bathsheba and Gabriel seem to be accepted into the group right away, as one of the locals says about Gabriel on their first encounter: “[…] yes, this very man’s family” (Hardy, Crowd 48). As a group, the Weatherbury people are all “subordinated to the novel’s central preoccupation – the care for the land and flocks, and the maintenance of the community in a condition of health” (Williams 130) and one quintessential part of this healthy condition is the support of the community by strong social bonds and family ties. For one, the Weatherbury populace does not only function as one large family at work, in times of need, such as the fire or the flood, but also in their spare time, as illustrated by its gatherings at social events such as the Christmas party and the Harvest supper. Moreover, the significance of kinship ties is for instance also expressed through Bathsheba’s sudden rising on the social ladder after a considerable family inheritance and the emphasis is laid on the long-established and dispersal of certain families’ pedigree: “Smallburys and Coggans were as common among the families of this district as the Avons and Derwents among our rivers” (Hardy, Crowd 67).

Although he is “the most dignified and valuable man in the parish” (Hardy, Crowd 86), Farmer Boldwood does not seem to fit in with this closely tied rural community. From
the start, Boldwood is described to live a secluded existence as a bachelor, much to the
dismay of the townspeople, as Bathsheba’s servant Liddy explains:

‘Never was such a hopeless man for a woman! He’s been courted by sixes and
sevens – all the girls gentle and simple for miles round have tried him. Jane
Perkins worked at him for two months like a slave, and the two Miss Taylors
spent a year upon him, and he cost Farmer Ives’s daughter nights of tears and
twenty pounds worth of new clothes, but Lord – the money might as well have
been thrown out of the window.’ (Hardy, Crowd 67)

Next to lacking any interest in a love engagement, Boldwood is known to be short of any kind
of family relations, much to his distress in times of need: “No mother existed to absorb his
devotion, no sister for his tenderness, no idle ties for sense” (Hardy, Crowd 107). As is the
case with all of Hardy’s suicidal characters, Boldwood’s social isolation leads to his being
extra sensitive to self-destructive tendencies, resulting in a final suicidal act. However, before
attempting that, Boldwood, by then blinded by his obsession with Bathsheba, cuts all bonds
with the primitive community by first “[neglecting] his farm – a [clear] symbolic
abandonment of social responsibility – and subsequently by [committing] the most extreme
anti-social act, murder” (Williams 133). In Thomas Hardy and Rural England, Merryn
Williams argues that “the easy-going Weatherbury community” attempted to “[restore] the
desirable norm to the village: the norm of maintaining communal labour, looking after sheep,
getting food from the land” through “[expelling] the destructive forces [i.e. Boldwood and
Troy] which menaced it” (135).

2.2.1.d. Conclusion

Giordano describes the community of Little Hintock in The Woodlanders as a place
which is ruled by “a powerful form of collective supervision over the individual” (141), and I
feel that the same could be said of the Weatherbury society, as “the individual’s life is [as]
rigorously governed by custom and habit” here as it is in the woodlands (141). I have tried to
illustrate this by the character of William Boldwood, who, as a rich and handsome bachelor,
was forced to partake in the community’s obsession with strong social ties. As a convinced
bachelor, Boldwood had not felt the need to engage in any kind of love relation and thought
of women merely as mysterious objects not worth to unravel:
To Boldwood women had been remote phenomena rather than necessary complements: comets of such uncertain aspect, movement and permanence that whether their orbits were as geometrical, unchangeable, and as subject to laws as his own, or as absolutely erratic as they superficially appeared, he had not deemed it his duty to consider. (Hardy, Crowd 102)

This as much baffled as it exasperated the rest of the community, as they considered it an immense waste not to start a family and thus not to contribute to the community’s endurance. After the encouragement in the form of Bathsheba’s valentine card, Boldwood decides to consent to the community’s demands and throws himself in the game of love. The man is, however, a man of extremes:

That stillness which struck casual observers more than anything else in his character and habit, and seemed so precisely like the rest of inanition, was the perfect balance of enormous antagonistic forces – positives and negatives in fine adjustment. His equilibrium disturbed, he was in extremity at once. Boldwood was thus either hot or cold. If an emotion possessed him at all, it ruled him: a feeling not mastering himself was entirely latent. Stagnant or rapid it was never slow. He was always hit mortally or he was missed. (Hardy, Crowd 105)

Consequently, the man’s initial liking for Bathsheba, soon turns into an all-encompassing obsession for this woman he considers being the love of his life, and while in former days he felt perfectly at ease as a celibate, he now devotes his entire life to winning over the object of his affection. From one day to the next, he loses all control over himself and in a fit of desperation he clings to the young woman, exclaiming: “I feel – almost – too much – to think […] I have come to speak to you without preface. My life is not my own since I have beheld you clearly. Miss Everdene – I come to make you an offer of marriage.” (Hardy, Crowd 110)

The headstrong Bathsheba repeatedly declines the offer, but Boldwood time and again begs her to take the proposition into consideration, as he feels at a total loss what to do without her: “You know what that feeling is,’ continued Boldwood deliberately. ‘A thing strong as death. No dismissal by a hasty letter affects that.’” (Hardy, Crowd 176) But the numerous rejections nevertheless take a hold of Boldwood, as he feels the social pressure rising in his attempt to win her over: “[…] Now the people sneer at me –the very hills and sky seem to laugh at me till I blush shamefully for my folly. I have lost my respect –my good name –my standing –lost
it, never to get it again” (Hardy, Crowd 179). The unfortunate lover loses all zest for living and becomes the talk of the town, as “Boldwood [day by day started to live more and more] secluded and inactive. Much of his wheat and all his barley of that season had been spoilt by the rain. […] The strange neglect which had produced this ruin and waste became the subject of whispered talk among all the people round […].” (Hardy, Crowd 289) Indeed, his irrational passion for his funny valentine eventually ends into a deathly obsession, as he shoots Bathsheba’s husband Sergeant Troy in a jealous fit and directs the second of the double-barrelled gun upon himself. One of his servants averts this second drama in the nick of time, but is unable to protect Boldwood any further from his resolute self-destructive behaviour, as the farmer exclaims: “Well, it makes no difference, [t]here is another way for me to die” (Hardy, Crowd 332) after which he leaves for the gaol to turn himself over, where “the door was closed behind him, and he walked the world no more” (Hardy, Crowd 333). In Man Against Himself, Karl Menninger points out that “suicide must be regarded as a peculiar kind of death which entails three internal elements: the element of dying, the element of killing, and the element of being killed” (24), as is exactly the case here: we see Boldwood’s death wish first externalized in his murder of Troy, subsequently in his attempt at pointing the gun towards himself and finally in his voluntary consent to receive the death penalty. At the very end of the novel, however, Boldwood is acquitted from the death sentence, as Hardy probably felt he did at that time not yet possess the narrative freedom to take this novel to its tragic ending, as he convincingly did in his later work. Nevertheless, I concur with Giordano’s assumption that Boldwood’s death wish, caused by the social pressure for uniformity by the primitive community, is a irrefutably suicidal, as the farmer started displaying self-destructive behaviour from the moment he had been forced to give up his celibacy: “My life is a burden without you […]” (Hardy, Crowd 111), “You’ll chatter with him doubtless about me. Say to him, ‘Boldwood would have died for me’” (Hardy, Crowd 180), “[…] I feel it is better to die than to live” (Hardy, Crowd 225), “[S]ometimes, when I am excessively hopeful and blithe, a trouble is looming in the distance: so that I often get to look upon gloom in me with content, and to fear a happy mood” (Hardy, Crowd 315).
An environment which would have made
a contented woman a poet,
a suffering woman a devotee,
a pious woman a psalmist,
even a giddy woman thoughtful,
made a rebellious woman saturnine.

(Hardy, Return 76)
2.2.2. The Queen of Solitude: Eustacia Vye in The Return of the Native (1878)

In 1878 Hardy published his second grand novel, The Return of the Native (Return). Some, most notably D.H. Lawrence, argue, quite rightfully, that the novel’s true protagonist is the astonishingly detailed setting Egdon Heath, but I will instead focus on the equally powerfully portrayed heroine of the tale, Eustacia Vye. Nevertheless, the dominance and strength of the heath will appear to be vital in my analysis of the community as a prime example of Deleuze and Guattari’s primitive socius. The death of the novel’s heroine has been a much discussed subject in the study of The Return of the Native, as her death is not explicitly related. Some see her death as a merely accidental drowning, others – like Giordano and myself, feel that Hardy’s running commentary on her death abundantly illustrates the suicidal nature of her act. As a suicide, Eustacia Vye fits Durkheim’s categorizations perfectly. She is free from all social bonds, as she lives as an orphan with her grandfather in a desolate house on the heath. In the community she is regarded as some sort of hermit, who refuses to mix in with the ordinary people. Durkheim found that people who are unmarried or without a family are especially prone to suicide, as they have lost all connection with the everyday world (Sennett xvii). Below, I will describe how her strong resemblance to the loneliness of the heath, the superstitious nature of the community in which she lives and her lack of true kinship ties turn Eustacia into the ultimate victim of the countryside’s narrow-minded population.

2.2.2.a. Strong connection to the body of the Earth

The opening chapter of The Return of the Native focuses solely on the setting of the novel, namely Egdon Heath. From the start the moorland, as “[c]ivilization was its enemy” (Hardy, Return 14), and its inhabitants are described as being of a primitive kind. The narrator explains how the heath’s populace seems to be at one with the landscape in this traditional mode: “A person on a heath in raiment of modern cut and colours has more or less an anomalous look. We seem to want the oldest and simplest human clothing where the clothing of the earth is so primitive.” (Hardy, Return 15) This striking resemblance between the landscape and its dwellers is further described as follows:

It was at present a place perfectly accordant with man’s nature – neither ghastly, hateful, nor ugly: neither commonplace, unmeaning, nor tame; but, like man, slighted and enduring; and withal singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy monotony. As with some persons who have long lived apart,
solitude seemed to look out of its countenance. It had a lonely face, suggesting tragical possibilities. (Hardy, Return 14)

This personification of the setting undoubtedly contributed to the interpretation of many critics who feel that "Egdon is not only the scene of the tale; it dominates the plot and determines the characters. It is sentient: it feels, it speaks, it slays" (Duffin 128). Ironically, while Eustacia is the one that hates the heath the most, she is the one that resembles it most in character. Like the landscape that surrounds her, she is utterly lonely and full of tragic observations. Giordano points out that “[f]rom her initial appearance in the novel, when she is seen standing ‘so dead still’ in her ‘extraordinary fixity, her conspicuous loneliness,’ Eustacia Vye is separated from the community and associated with isolation and death” (58). The young girl’s intimate bond with the heath is at its height when she wanders in the storm alone, musing over her late experiences, as the narrator explains: “[there] never was harmony more perfect than that between the chaos of her mind and the chaos of the world without” (Hardy, Return 348). The two seem to fuse into one single being in their shared restlessness and utter sadness:

Extreme unhappiness weighed visibly upon her. Between the drippings of the rain from her umbrella to her mantle, from her mantle to the heather, from the heather to the earth, very similar sounds could be heard coming from her lips; and the tearfulness of the outer scene was repeated upon her face (Hardy, Return 348).

In The Nature Novel from Hardy to Lawrence, John Alcorn states that especially in this decisive scene “[Eustacia’s] ‘discourse’ mingles strangely, and becomes identified, with the ‘wild rhetoric of night’” (14):

Suddenly, on the barrow, there mingled with all this wild rhetoric of night a sound which modulated so naturally with the rest that its beginning and ending were hardly to be distinguished. The bluffs, and the bushes, and the heather-bells had broken silence; at last, so did the woman; and her articulation was but as another phrase of the same discourse as theirs. (Hardy, Return 61)

However, the striking resemblances between herself and the wild landscape that surrounds her never overpower her profound hate of the heath. “Budmouth was her native place, a fashionable seaside resort at that date” (Hardy, Return 74) and Eustacia never adapted
to the sudden change of location after her parents’ death. “Eustacia's conflict with the spirit of the heath,” Philip Allingham explains, “is an aspect of her rejection of the community and her changed circumstances” (“Defending”). Unlike Clym, she never connects with the natural beauty of the rural community, but instead considers it as the cause of all her suffering. When Clym feels he has been her ruin by wronging her in their relationship, she corrects him immediately by stating: “Not you. This place I live in.” (Hardy, Return 336).

Things get even worse when the two move to a little cottage on the heath after their marriage and Eustacia comes to realize this will be her home for the rest of her life, instead of the glamorous life she had planned on having while staying in Paris. Giordano points out that from this point on the young woman displays the typical features of Durkheim’s egotistic suicides, as her whole being is overcome with apathy and depression (59). She feels utterly oppressed by her function as a mere housewife and Clym’s reduction to a furze-cutter after his partial blinding erases every spark of hope for the life she had in mind with him. The house stifles her, as the heath did, and her apathetic mood leaves her only to say that “the place will serve as well as any other – as somewhere to pass from – into my grave” (Hardy, Return 325). For Clym, and the rest of the heath’s population, the earth is the body of everything. Their strong bond with nature fulfils them and moreover, connects them to each other. Eustacia, however, falls outside of this closed community, as she opposes the intimate union with the body of the earth. The discussion between Clym and herself illustrates this well:

‘[…] I have not much love for my fellow-creatures. Sometimes I quite hate them.’

‘[…] There is no use in hating people – if you hate anything, you should hate what produced them.’

‘Do you mean Nature? I hate her already. […]’ (Hardy, Return 188)

2.2.2.b. Tradition and Superstition

In line with Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the primitive socius, Egdon heath and its population display a number of traditional characteristics and a tendency to superstitious conduct. Dale Kramer points out that the novel incorporates various “rural rituals […] – the bonfire-making, for instance, or the mumming, or the maypole-dance” (Cambridge 22). These traditions function as a cohesive device in the process of community bonding, as they bring all members of the population together and emphasize the shared beliefs and interests of the group. Hardy accentuates the long lasting traditions and rites of Egdon Heath as follows:
The instincts of merry England lingered on her with exceptional vitality, and the symbolic customs which tradition has attached to each season of the year were yet a reality on Egdon. Indeed, the impulses of all such outlandish hamlets are pagan still: in these spots homage to nature, self-adoration, frantic gaieties, fragments of Teutonic rites to divinities whose names are forgotten, seem in some way or other to have survived mediaeval doctrine. (Hardy, Return 378)

For the average member of the community, these rituals and traditions are part of everyday life and bring fulfilment and entertainment to their lives. Eustacia, however, seems to lack this interest in the rural display of tradition – that is, in the customary sense of the word. Firstly, while the others celebrate an old pagan custom when making their bonfires, the young girl has other motives for building hers. The day is the fifth of November, Guy Fawkes Day, but Hardy states that “such blazes as this the heathmen were now enjoying are rather the descendants from jumbled Druidical rites and Saxon ceremonies than the invention of popular feeling about Gunpowder Plot” (Return 24, qtd. in Schirf). Doing away with all the deeper implications of the rural ritual, Eustacia, however, reduces her fire to a base and superficial medium to signal her lover. Secondly, when the young Miss Vye joins the mummers in their play as a substitute for Charley, she only does this to get in contact with Clym, not out of respect for the group’s yearly custom. Like the others, she draws immense pleasure from it, but while they get it from giving a good performance for their superiors and being true to the tradition, she considers it merely as a break from her dull existence: “Charley departed, and Eustacia felt more and more interest in life. Here was something to do: here was some one to see, and a charmingly adventurous way to see him. ‘Ah,’ she said to herself, ‘want of an object to live for – that’s all is the matter with me!’” (Hardy, Return 130). Lastly, when bored with Clym’s presence, she leaves for the traditional maypole dance on the heath. For the countryside people this dance is one more celebration of nature’s beauty and changeability, but for Eustacia it is yet another chance to get away from her stifling married life. At another level, the dance functions as a renewal of the strong social bonds between the community’s inhabitants. The young girl, however, at no point joins in with the group’s bonding, but instead directs all her attention to herself and her old lover, Wildeve. Her actions in these three situations show that she establishes herself as an outsider in the traditional society of Egdon Heath and they lead Giordano to classify Eustacia’s behaviour as utterly egoistic:
“[e]ven when Eustacia participates in social or communal activities, her participation is essentially selfish and anti-social” (63).

This asocial behaviour is the direct result of Eustacia’s hatred of the traditional, primitive sphere that typifies Egdon Heath on the one hand and her love for the exciting, modern life which she believes to lie beyond the borders of the rural community, on the other hand. The only reason she develops an interest in Clym is the idea that he will be her way out of Egdon Heath, as he is introduced to her as the prospering young businessman from Paris. When Clym reveals his deep love for the countryside, however, Eustacia feels betrayed:

But do I desire unreasonably much in wanting what is called life – music, poetry, passion, war, and all the beating and pulsing that is going on in the great arteries of the world? That was the shape of my youthful dream; but I did not get it. Yet I thought I saw the way to it in my Clym. (Hardy, Return 280)

While her husband feels he would rather “live in a hermitage” on the heath (Hardy, Return 200) than anywhere else in the world, Eustacia fails to understand his decision to descend the social ladder. When Clym partially loses his eyesight after too much studying, he retires to outdoor work as a furze-cutter, much to the dismay of his wife. “But it is so dreadful – a furze-cutter!” Eustacia screams out when coming to the full realization of her shattered hopes of a Paris life. “And you a man who have lived about the world, and speak French, and German, and who are fit for what is so much better than this.” (Hardy, Return 225) With her, the bond with nature and the social commitment, which so typify Clym Yeobright, is entirely absent. She experiences her life on the heath as empty “because of the inadequacy of the self as a sustaining goal” (Durkheim 356), and she feels she could only “be something” when enjoying an exciting city life (Hardy, Return 200). Hence, even though she shows remarkable resemblances to the heath, Eustacia is definitely not a country girl, as Clym’s mother pointed out from the start: “Her notions be different. I should rather say her thoughts were far away from here, with lords and ladies she’ll never know, and mansions she’ll never see again” (Hardy, Return 181).

Apart from the association with the traditional elements, the primitive socius is also typified by a strong tendency to superstitious conduct. In The Return of the Native the superstitious nature of Egdon Heath’s population is made abundantly clear through the characters of Christian Cantle and Susan Nunsuch. The former is a young man who works for the Yeobright family and is presented by Hardy as a “man of the mournfullest make” (Return
Throughout the tale he is afraid of pretty much everything, and although the heath folk continually make fun of him, his character is in fact the expression of the entire superstitious population. Diggory Venn, the reddleman, is the first to awaken fear in young Christian’s heart, as the latter believes him to be a ghost that haunts the heath. At this point, his friends do not confute his assertion about the red ghost and consider it to be a devilish creature: “A red one. Yes, most ghosts be white; but this is as if it had been dipped in blood” (Hardy, Return 33). The novel is full of references to Christian’s irrational and superstitious nature, but there is one that explicitly illustrates the young man’s deep fear for the unknown. When Mrs. Yeobright, Clym’s mother, gets stung by an adder on her way back from a visit to her son’s house, the townspeople gather to find a cure for her. They find that according to an ancient remedy, the only way to cure her is by putting adders’ grease on the wound. Accordingly, they kill several adders, from which they distract the healing lotion – much to the dismay of young Christian:

‘Look at that,’ murmured Christian Cantle. ‘Neighbours, how do we know but that something of the old serpent in God’s garden, that gied the apple to the young woman with no clothes, lives on in adders and snakes still? Look at his eye – for all the world like a villainous sort of black currant. ‘Tis to be hoped he can’t ill-wish us! There’s folk in heath who’ve been overlooked already. I will never kill another adder as long as I live. (Hardy, Return 292)

Even though Christian’s conduct excellently illustrates the superstitious quality of the traditional community, there is yet one character that supersedes him in it. Susan Nunsuch, a local village woman, is portrayed as the most superstitious character of the novel. It is she who labels Eustacia as an evil-minded witch, thus widening the gap between the villagers and the young Miss Vye even further. When Susan’s young boy, Johnny Nunsuch gets ill, she believes it to be caused by Eustacia’s wicked influence. When the two meet in church a little later on, Susan stabs the young girl with a stocking pin, “so as to draw her blood and put an end to the bewitching of Susan’s children that has been carried on so long” (Hardy, Return 179). Eustacia accordingly decides never to attend church again, and apart from having ruined her reputation, the accident has few further consequences. However, Susan’s witch-hunt does not end there: when her son’s health deteriorates even further, she moulds an effigy of the young girl and burns it while uttering an “incantation usual in proceedings for obtaining unhallowed assistance against an enemy” (Hardy, Return 351). Susan’s conduct is moreover represented as a common custom on the heath:
To counteract the malign spell which she imagined poor Eustacia to be working, the boy’s mother busied herself with a ghastly invention of superstition, calculated to bring powerlessness, atrophy, and annihilation on any human being against whom it was directed. It was a practice well known on Egdon at that date, and one that is not quite extinct at the present date. (Hardy, Return 349)

Unlike the other inhabitants of the heath, “Clym at first laughs at such superstitions, but later embraces the majority opinion when he rejects his wife as a murderer and [adulteress]” after his mother’s death (“The Return”). Eustacia seems to have the whole community against her, and only finds a final clearing of her name in her death. I cannot but disagree with Philip Allingham when he states that Eustacia’s “death in the Narcissistic pool of Shadwater Weir reinforces her 'marginalized' witch-identity” (“Defending”, emphasis added), as I feel that “by drowning in the weir like any woman instead of floating, witchlike – she proves her essential innocence to the community” (“The Return”). But even if I were to leave this matter in the middle, it should be abundantly clear by now that the primitive community of Egdon Heath is saturated by traditional and superstitious demeanour, as is the case for the primitive socius.

2.2.2.c. Solid kinship ties

A third prominent characteristic of the savage socius is the importance of strong kinship ties. On Egdon Heath, the central family unit is that of the Yeobright’s, consisting of Mrs. Yeobright and her son and daughter, Clym and Thomasin Yeobright. They are clearly economically and socially superior to many of the other families on the heath and are described as having an especially tight bond with each other. As a truly caring mother, Mrs. Yeobright takes on the troubles with the wedding arrangements of her children, as if they were her own. When Thomasin’s engagement threatens to fall through, both mother and daughter find themselves in sackcloth and ashes. Mother Yeobright wanted to protect Clym’s good reputation and kept quiet to him about his sister’s misfortune. When he discovers the truth of the matter, however, and demands an explanation, Mrs. Yeobright answers him: “You don’t know how bad it has been here with us all these weeks, Clym. You don’t know what a mortification anything of that sort is to a woman. You don’t know the sleepless nights we’ve had in this house [...] since that Fifth of November” (Hardy, Return 164). Notwithstanding her stubbornness in certain matters, Mrs. Yeobright is shown throughout the novel as a mother.
who would go through fire for her offspring. However, the striking part is that her children would do the same for her at any moment. When Mrs. Yeobright comes to die after an unfortunate incident with Eustacia, Clym loses all control over himself and ends up suffering a serious mental breakdown. Only then does he realize how deeply he loved his mother, and he irrationally blames himself until it destroys him:

‘[...] Poor people who had nothing in common with her would have cared for her, and visited her had they known her sickness and loneliness; but I, who should have been all to her, stayed away like a cur. If there is any justice in God let Him kill me now. He has nearly blinded me, but that is not enough. If He would only strike me with more pain I would believe in Him for ever!’ (Hardy, Return 307)

Clym’s excessive love for his mother comes to stand between him and his wife as an insurmountable issue and the two eventually part. One of the reasons why Clym and Eustacia’s marriage was doomed to fail from the start is the fact that the latter has never known this kind of intense family bonding. Eustacia lost her parents as a child and moved to Egdon Heath as a young girl to live with her grandfather, who disregards her most of the time. As noted in the introduction, Durkheim “[...] finds unmarried people more prone to suicide than married couples, and members of small families more prone than those in large families. He reasons that the denser a web of family associations, the more likely people are to be kept from egoistic despair.” (Sennett xvii) “Eustacia, because she has no siblings and because both her parents are dead when the novel begins,” Giordano argues, “would ordinarily be more vulnerable to suicide than a person from a large family” (60):

Without the bracing regulation of family life and familiar society – ungoverned by her grandfather, living too far from the world to feel the impact of public opinion, and scorning her new neighbors’ values – Eustacia is thrown more upon herself and conducts herself solely in terms of personal interests and feelings. (Giordano 65)

The “queen of solitude” (Hardy, Return 21) finds it extremely difficult to overcome her loneliness and has trouble to let herself feel true love for someone, for fear that they too will abandon her at one time in her life. However, there is nothing she desires more than to be loved, and “[h]er prayer was always spontaneous, and often ran thus, ‘O deliver my heart from this fearful gloom and loneliness: send me great love from somewhere, else I shall die.’”
When she meets Clym, she feels her search has finally come to an end, and everything seems to suggest she will find the family she has so longed for. However, when the moment has come, she fails to connect with Clym’s mother and the two find themselves in continual dispute. In the end, “Eustacia departs from life for lack of anyone to love,” Giordano points out, “of any reason to live, and to relieve herself of a comfortless existence” (74).

Moreover, not only do strong kinship ties characterize the traditional communities, but also intense bonds between the different families of inhabitants. Egdon Heath is persistently portrayed as consisting of one small but tight group of country folk, with one tiny exception: Miss Eustacia Vye. The young girl lives practically alone on the top of the hill, geographically and socially dissociated from all the other inhabitants. As she feels no “love for [her] fellow-creatures” (Hardy, Return 188), Eustacia “lived very much to herself: [e]xcept the daughter of one of the cotters, who was their servant, and a lad who worked in the garden and stable, scarcely anyone but [herself] ever entered the house.” (Hardy, Return 93) Her asocial behaviour leads the heath folk to refer to the young girl as “the isolated beauty who lived up among them and despised them” (Hardy, Return 92). When Clym enquires about the nature of the lonely beauty on the heath for the first time, his mother answers him:

‘[She is] a woman who seems to care for nothing at all, as you may say.’
‘She is melancholy, then?’ inquired Clym.
‘She mopes about by herself, and don’t mix in with the people.’
(Hardy, Return 181)

Finding no one to love with all her heart and having no place in the social realm of the community, Eustacia longs but for one thing:

While she looked a heron arose on that side of the sky and flew on with his face towards the sun. […] Up in the zenith where he was seemed a free and happy place, away from all contact with the earthly ball to which she was pinioned; and she wished that she could arise uncrushed from its surface and fly as he flew then. (Hardy, Return 286)

2.2.2.d. Conclusion

I hope that by now I have made it abundantly clear that Egdon Heath lives up to all the characteristics of the primitive socius. The community described is an extremely closed one:
it despises all nonconformity and thus rejects the lonesome character of Eustacia Vye right from the start. “Some critics – notably D. H. Lawrence – see the novel as a study of the way communities control their misfits. In Egdon Heath, most people (particularly the women) look askance at the proud, unconventional Eustacia” (“The Return”). I want to argue that this narrow-mindedness ultimately drives her to suicide, as she never gets the chance to find her true self in this stifling society. Eustacia is very much aware of her own contribution to her isolated existence, but seems to find it impossible to turn things around:

She cast about for any possible course which offered the least improvement on the existing state of things, and could find none. She imagined how all those Budmouth ones who should learn what had become of her would say, 'Look at the girl for whom nobody was good enough!' To Eustacia the situation seemed such a mockery of her hopes that death appeared the only door of relief if the satire of Heaven should go much further. (Hardy, Return 256)

From the start of the novel she is introduced as one who feels “an agonizing pity for [her]self that [she] ever was born” (Hardy, Return 198) and before she finally drowns herself in the weir, she seriously considers suicide once before. Just in time, Charley, one of the locals who works for her, discovers her looking at her grandfather’s guns and takes them away from her. She is enraged by Charley’s intervention, as she feels that her presence on earth is absolutely redundant to everyone around her:

‘Why should I not die if I wish?’ she said tremulously. ‘I have made a bad bargain with life, and I am weary of it – weary. And now you have hindered my escape. O, why did you, Charley! What makes death painful except the thought of others’ grief? – and that is absent in my case, for not a sigh would follow me!’ (Hardy, Return 331)

After this failed attempt, she has made up her mind and on her wandering on the heath in the storm she utters her last words of utter despair:

‘How I have tried and tried to be a splendid woman, and how destiny has been against me! . . . I do not deserve my lot!’ she cried in a frenzy of bitter revolt. ‘O, the cruelty of putting me into this ill-conceived world! I was capable of much; but I have been injured and blighted and crushed by things beyond my
control! O, how hard it is of Heaven to devise such tortures for me, who have done now harm to Heaven at all!’ (Hardy, Return 349)
The whole land ahead of him was as darkness itself; there was nothing to come, nothing to wait for.
(Hardy, Mayor 371)
2.2.3. That no man remember me: Michael Henchard in The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886)

The third in line of the Novels of Character and Environment portrays the comings and goings of Michael Henchard, a young hay-trusser who climbs the social ladder after a life of sin, only to fall back into his old habits ever so hard. Craving for love and overcome by superstition Henchard tries to hide his past secrets, but ultimately fails to escape the stifling power of the community and retreats into solitude. Cut off from all social networks, he deteriorates quickly and ends his sad life by neglecting his health in times of sickness.

The novel was published in 1886 and provided a definite break with Hardy’s previous Wessex Novels, as “[nearly] all of his novels had dealt with an agricultural background” (Weber 146). “The characters,” Carl J. Weber explains, “had been farmers and shepherds, dairymen and field-workers. He now planned to turn to town life and to deal with merchants, grain-dealers, and other townsmen.” (146) This novel’s analysis will therefore be slightly different from the others’, as the matters are turned upside down here. In this narrative, it is the suicidal character that represents the primitive socius – characterized by traditionalism, a superstitious nature and a strong bond with the earth – while the formerly rural setting has moved towards the modern realm. However, I feel that my theory still holds as the town of Casterbridge has not lost all of its traits of the primitive socius with the threat of modernity (signified by the character of Donald Farfrae), and the main figure Michael Henchard would, in my opinion, not have survived in the town in its former state either, as I will illustrate below.

2.2.3.a. Strong connection to the body of the Earth

The setting of this novel is based on Hardy’s hometown, Dorchester, praised for its exceptionally detailed architecture. Even though Hardy places his characters in a town instead of an actual rural community, the emphasis still lies on the strong relation between man and nature, as “Casterbridge was the complement of the rural life around; not its urban opposite” (Hardy, Mayor 126). In other words, the town is a country town, where the inhabitants are still very much dependent on the weather, the crops and harvests, to survive. In Casterbridge “[c]ountry and town [meet] at a mathematical line” (Hardy, Mayor 94) and there is no real distinction between the business people and the day-labourers, concerning their vital interest in nature’s comings and goings:

Casterbridge lived by agriculture at one remove further from the fountain-head than the adjoining villages – no more. The townsfolk understood every
fluctuation in the rustic’s condition, for it affected their receipts as much as the labourer’s; […] And even at the dinner-parties of the professional families the subjects of discussion were corn, cattle-disease, sowing and reaping, fencing and planting […]. (Hardy, Mayor 130)

What perhaps best exemplifies the inhabitants’ dependence on nature is the fact that even the highest in function, the mayor, loses everything from one day to the next, after a single bad crop. The town still very much depended on people with an agricultural character, as it was “[…] untouched by the faintest sprinkle of modernism” (Hardy, Mayor 94). Throughout the novel there is a clear tension between innovation and tradition, but from the start the stress lies on the primitive quality of the town, and the possible loss of it. For one, “business is [still] conducted by word of mouth” in Casterbridge (“The Mayor”), as Pamela Dalziel explains: “it is a place where communication does not necessarily require verbal articulation, satisfaction being indicated by ‘a broadening of the cheeks, a crevicing of the eyes, a throwing back of the shoulders, which was intelligible from the other end of the street (58)’” (xvi). Secondly, this traditional form of business communication goes hand in hand with the fact that in Casterbridge “[…] the townsfolk retain ‘the primitive habit of helping one another in time of need’ (181), joining their neighbours in the fields during the harvest” (Dalziel xvi).

However, one of the major themes of the novel is the loss of this primitive character to the upcoming threat of modernism, represented in the figure of Donald Farfrae. As is typical for Hardy, this character is an outsider, who intrudes upon the closed community and forms an immediate danger to the rural norms and values: “Casterbridge had sentiment – Casterbridge had romance; but this stranger’s sentiment was of differing quality” (Hardy, Mayor 122). Farfrae is a corn-merchant, just like Henchard, but one with an exceptional knowledge of modern machinery and up-to-date agricultural business plans. The townspeople immediately like him and his new ways, and push the old-fashioned mayor Michael Henchard from his throne. Henchard, originally a hay-trusser, tried to repress his true nature and emotions to be part of the community as a mayor, but eventually he is forced to return to his roots and ends up working as a day-labourer again under the supervision of the new leader, Donald Farfrae. Henchard counts his losses and can no longer hold on to his strong connection to nature, as Claire Tomalin points out:

Part of [Henchard’s] wish to wash his hands of life arose from his perceptions of its contrarious inconsistencies – of Nature’s jaunty readiness to support bad
social principles. He is thinking of her illegitimacy, although you might expect him to take some comfort from ‘Nature’s jaunty readiness’, this man who moves like a great tree in the wind, who gazes ‘stormfully’ (a word Hardy coined for him) and emits ‘a blaze of satisfaction’ when he carries a point; who is described as leonine and with tigerish affections. But Henchard has been defeated, and Nature has become his enemy. (208)

2.2.3.b. Tradition and Superstition

One of the striking themes of Hardy’s novels is the loss of traditionalism. It seems as if Hardy wanted to collect all the local customs and write them down, so that they would not be forgotten with the upcoming of modern times. The first rural custom he touches upon is the wife-selling tradition, which forms the opening of the novel. In this painful scene at a local fair, the young Henchard in a drunken impulse sells his wife and child to the sailor Newson. This scene might seem odd for contemporary readers, but Hardy defended the use of the event on page 91 of the novel, by claiming that such sales were far from uncommon:

> It may seem strange to sophisticated minds that a sane young matron could believe in the seriousness of such a transfer; and were there not numerous other instances of the same belief the thing might scarcely be credited. But she was by no means the first or last peasant woman who had religiously adhered to her purchaser, as too many rural records show. (Mayor)

“In the Macmillan edition of the novel published for Canadian high schools in 1962, editors Andrew A. Orr and Vivian De Sola Pinto point out that the novelist had researched the wife-selling tradition in British newspapers of the early nineteenth century” (Allingham, “Wife”):

Thomas Hardy had heard of such a case at Portland [not far from Dorchester, on the English Channel], and that it suggested this incident to him. In the "Observer" of March 24, 1833, the following extract from the "Blackburn Gazette" appeared: "Sale of a Wife--A grinder named Calton sold his wife publicly in the market place, Stockport, on Monday week. She was purchased by a shop-mate of the husband for a gallon of beer. The fair one, who had a halter round her neck, seemed quite agreeable.”

The second primitive practice Hardy refers to is the skimmington ride. Lucetta Templeman, the young woman with whom Henchard has an affair at the time that he still
supposes his wife Susan to be dead, is the main focus of this skimmity. The young woman was once deeply in love with Henchard, and the latter even promised to marry her. When he finds out that his wife is still alive and coming to Casterbridge, he calls off the whole thing and abandons the girl, leaving her with a damaged reputation. When, years later, Lucetta has inherited some money, she moves to Casterbridge and falls in love with Henchard’s rival, Donald Farfrae. After Susan’s death, Henchard welcomes her with open arms and even makes her promise to marry him. But, Lucetta ignores his commands and marries Farfrae outside Casterbridge. All secrets must out, however, and the affair between Henchard and Lucetta is made public through the skimmity ride. In an appendix to Hardy’s novel, Norman Page explains how “[…] the custom has its origin in a communal concern for morality and for the punishment of offenders, since its purpose was to express the moral outrage of the community by exposing those guilty of sexual misconduct” (391). According to Ruth Firor, the skimmingtons were “a common occurrence in many Dorset towns [as late as 1884],” but were made “punishable by fine and imprisonment” (qtd. in Page, Appendix 392) from 1882 onwards.

Next to these listings of traditional customs, the narrative is also permeated by references to superstitious conduct. The prime character to be named here is the mayor himself, as he displays an irrational demeanour at various points in the novel, due to his profound lack of self-confidence. One of the striking illustrations of his superstitious nature is his reaction to the skimmington ride mentioned above. Henchard is utterly unaware of the goings on and when desperately walking down the river, he believes he sees his own dead body in the water:

While his eyes were bent on the water beneath there slowly became visible a something floating in the circular pool formed by the wash of centuries; the pool he was intending to make his deathbed. […] In the circular current imparted by the central flow the form was brought forward, till it passed under his eyes; and then he perceived with a sense of horror that it was himself. […] The sense of the supernatural was strong in this unhappy man, and he turned away as one might have done in the actual presence of an appalling miracle. (Hardy, Mayor 372)

As his daughter Elizabeth-Jane later explains, the form he discerns is of course the effigy made for the skimmington ride, but the superstitious Henchard can only interpret it as a bad
omen following his suicidal thoughts. These ideas of the supernatural seem to visit the mayor “in time of moody depression, when all his practical largeness of view had oozed out of him” (Hardy, Mayor 263). When he realizes he has gambled everything away after disregarding the weather forecast, he refuses to accept his own mistake and muses accordingly:

The movements of his mind seemed to tend to the thought that some power was working against him. ‘I wonder,’ he asked himself with eerie misgiving: ‘I wonder if it can be that somebody has been roasting a waxen image of me, or stirring an unholy brew to confound me! I don’t believe in such power; and yet —what if they should ha’ been doing it!’ […]

(Hardy, Mayor 263, emphasis added)

This forecast is in itself another salient example of the mayor’s gullible nature. After the many arguments with Farfrae, Henchard decides to separate from the Scotsman as a business partner. Subsequently, he tries to outmatch his former associate by buying a large quantity of corn after consulting a local weather prophet, who predicts a rainy period. Things turn out differently, however, and Henchard suffers considerable losses.

Nevertheless, Henchard is not the only one who is prone to these superstitious beliefs, as the narrator explains: “[t]he people, too, who were not farmers, the rural multitude, saw in the god of the weather a more important personage than they do now” (Hardy, Mayor 257). Even though they are not all as eager to confess their superstitious nature as Henchard, the Casterbridge people seem to consult the local prophet on a regular basis as well, as

[he seemed to exist] on unseen supplies; for it was an anomalous thing that while there was hardly a soul in the neighbourhood but affected to laugh at this man’s assertions, uttering the formula, ‘There’s nothing in ‘em’, with full assurance on the surface of their faces, very few of them were unbelievers in their secret hearts. (Hardy, Mayor 258)

So, even though Casterbridge is on the verge of modernizing, it is still characterized by various traditional practices and a strong tendency to superstitious behaviour. In this way it still functions as a sort of savage socius, although its primitive characteristics are considerably diminishing. Elizabeth-Jane illustrates this weakened superstitious nature well by her answer to her father’s question whether miracles are still worked: “I don’t quite think there are any miracles nowadays” (Hardy, Mayor 373, qtd. in “The Mayor”, emphasis added).
2.2.3.c. Solid kinship ties

As already hinted at above, the town of Casterbridge seems to function as one big family, with the local mayor governing the community as a sort of pater familias. As “[c]ountry and town [meet] at a mathematical line” (Hardy, Mayor 94), the different classes of the community seem to live joyfully together:

Casterbridge, as has been hinted, was a place deposited in the block upon a corn-field. […] The farmer’s boy could sit under his barley-mow and pitch a stone into the office window of the town-clerk; reapers at work among the sheaves nodded to acquaintances standing on the pavement-corner; the red-robed judge, when he condemned a sheep-stealer, pronounced sentence to the tune of Baa, that floated in at the window from the remainder of the flock browsing hard by; and at executions the waiting crowd stood in a meadow immediately before the drop, out of which the cows had been temporarily driven to give the spectators room. (Hardy, Mayor 162)

As in a true traditional community, all hands join in when necessary: “[…] the townsfolk retain ‘the primitive habit of helping one another in time of need’ (181), joining their neighbours in the fields during the harvest” (Dalziel xvi). When Henchard arrives in Casterbridge, he accordingly keeps his past’s secrets under wraps in an attempt to find his own place in this traditional family. Like Eustacia Vye in The Return of the Native, it seems as if Henchard is usually utterly alone in the world, as he is devoid of all family connections. Claire Tomalin points out that “[…] the only family he ever mentions is a brother, long-since dead,” (205) and at his arrival in Casterbridge town he can no longer enjoy the support of a wife and child either. Thus, when Farfrae comes into the picture, he immediately embraces him as a part of the family, as Elizabeth-Jane’s observation of the two elucidates: “She saw that Donald and Mr Henchard were inseparables. When walking together Henchard would lay his arm familiarly on his manager’s shoulders, as if Farfrae were a younger brother […]” (Hardy, Mayor 161). In fact, Henchard is trying to replace his long lost brother and thus puts an immense stress on the relationship he has with Farfrae. Soon, the brotherly love tends to become quite oppressive as “[…] Henchard’s tigerish affection for the younger man, his constant liking to have Farfrae near him, now and then resulted in a tendency to domineer […]” (Hardy, Mayor 161). Henchard’s forceful bonding with Donald is not out of the ordinary,
though, as the mayor is known to have a profound yearning for somebody to love, and somebody to be loved by:

He was the kind of man whom some human object for pouring out his heat upon – were it emotive or were it choleric – was almost a necessity. The craving of his heart for re-establishment of this tenderest human tie had been great during his wife’s lifetime, and now he had submitted to its mastery without reluctance and without fear. (Hardy, Mayor 195)

After the death of his wife and the decline of his relationship with Farfrae, Henchard directs all his attention to his daughter Elizabeth-Jane. When he discovers her illegitimacy “and [finds] himself a childless man,” however, there rose “an emotional void in Henchard that he unconsciously craved to fill” (Hardy, Mayor 219). At first he cannot stand the idea of having her around, and his cold demeanour only drives his last support further and further away. When his secrets from the past come to the surface, though, and the entire community turns against him, he immediately seeks her company again: “He had liked the look of her face as she answered him from the stairs. There had been affection in it, and above all things what he desired now was affection from anything that was good and pure” (Hardy, Mayor 361). By then, the community is in the know of his darkest secrets, namely that he sold his wife and child at a fair, had an affair with a young girl from out of town and ruined her reputation by leaving her, and that he is an incurable alcoholic. Henchard can no longer take the pressure of the strong social control of the closed community, and leaves Casterbridge for a life of solitude. As Martin Seymour-Smith states it in his introduction to Hardy’s novel: “[i]t is not so much guilt that Henchard feels as ‘disgrace’” (25). So, like Eustacia in The Return of the Native, Henchard ends up as completely closed off from the community and without any real family to rely on. Mind you, Henchard is much more responsible for his own lonely end, than Eustacia is, as I will explain in my closing remarks below.

2.2.3.d. Conclusion

I hope that by now I have proven that Casterbridge once possessed, and clearly still partially possesses, the characteristics of the primitive socius. However, these remnants are accompanied by a more modern way of life, illustrated through the arrival of Donald Farfrae. Henchard, the mayor of Casterbridge, tries to hide his true self as a fieldworker to gain his place in this community. He attempts to cover up his primitive nature, but has to own up pretty soon: “Those tones showed that, though under a long reign of self-control he had
become Mayor and churchwarden and what not, there was still the same unruly volcanic stuff
beneath the rind of Michael Henchard as when he had sold his wife at Weydon Fair” (Hardy,
Mayor 183). In his study on Thomas Hardy, Ralph Pite points out that: “[…] Henchard [only]
survives [in Casterbridge] by the suppression of his feelings. He cauterizes his emotions,
warding off the violence that he knows he is capable of and, inevitably, restraining his native
warm-heartedness as well.” (285) Henchard loses his social position, his friends and family,
and retreats into solitude to work as a field-labourer again. Ultimately, the lonesome man dies
from self-neglect and seclusion. Abel Whittle, a former employee of Henchard’s, is one of the
mayor’s last companions and explains how the man came to his end: “[…] he didn’t gain
strength, for you see, ma’am he couldn’t eat – no, no appetite at all – and he got weaker; and
today he died” (Hardy, Mayor 409). In line with Durkheim’s definition, the act of refusal to
eat classifies under the header of self-murder (30), as suicide can be the result of either a
positive or a negative act. “Describing the ‘chronic’ suicide’s tendency to end his life, not by
a single stroke but by a series of deprivations, Wilhelm Stekel identifies a number of
symptoms, including refusal to eat, lack of appetite, and deliberate exposure to chills and
infections” (Giordano 95). Moreover, throughout the novel Henchard contemplates taking his
own life several times. Like many of Hardy’s characters, Henchard regrets the day he came
into the world, as he explains himself:

‘Well, one autumn when stopping there I felt quite ill, and in my illness I sank
into one of those gloomy fits I sometimes suffer from on account o’ the
loneliness of my domestic life, when the world seems to have the blackness of
hell, and, like Job, I could curse the day that gave me birth.’
(Hardy, Mayor 148)

After the realization that he has lost everything to Farfrae, Henchard thinks of drowning
himself in Ten Hatches Hole, as he felt that “[t]he whole land ahead of him was as darkness
itself; there was nothing to come, nothing to wait for” (Hardy, Mayor 371). He is prevented in
doing so twice, once by Elizabeth-Jane and once by Abel Whittle, but his zest for life lessens
rapidly:

Embittered as he was against society, this moody view of himself took deeper
and deeper hold of Henchard, till the daily necessity of facing mankind, and of
them particularly Elizabeth-Jane, became well-nigh more than he could endure.
He wished he could escape those who did not want him, and hide his head for ever. (Hardy, Mayor 384)

Cut off from all social ties, except for his faithful helper Abel Whittle, he makes up his mind and lets go of all enjoyment in life. This striking extract shows how his death can only be seen as a suicide, as in the end there is nothing he desires more than his own death:

> Very often, as his hay-knife crunched down among the sweet-smelling grassy stems, he would survey mankind and say to himself: ‘Here and everywhere be folk dying before their time like frosted leaves, though wanted by their families, the country, and the world; while I, an outcast, an encumberer of the ground, wanted by nobody, and despised by all, live on against my will!’

(Hardy, Mayor 395)

Conclusively, Giordano gives the final argument for interpreting Henchard’s death as a suicide, as he states that

> his last will and testament […] completes the task on which he spent his life: total annihilation of his being. In denying himself the usual rites of burial, he prescribes a funeral very much like the traditional burial of suicides: outside consecrated ground, without tolling bells, no ‘murners’ and no ‘flours’.

(Hardy, Mayor 409, qtd. in Giordano 96).

Apart from the striking circumstances, Henchard was probably doomed to be a sad case anyhow, as he carries in him about all of Durkheim’s characteristics of people prone to commit suicide. The mayor is introduced as a heavy alcoholic, devoid of all social ties and married too soon for his age. Giordano argues that Henchard is responsible for his own downfall: “Character is fate, the narrator of this novel tells us, and we watch Henchard create his fate from the very first lines in the book, establishing a pattern of divorce and separation that will ultimately isolate him” (80). Hence, even though “Michael Henchard is an agricultural labourer out of place in a country town” (Cox 433) or a primitive character in a modernized community, as I would put it, this “man of character” (Hardy, Mayor 66) would probably have found his painful destiny anyhow, anywhere, anytime.
From this day of his life onward for a considerable time Winterborne, though not absolutely out of his house as yet, retired into the background of human life and action thereabout – a feat not particularly difficult of performance anywhere when the doer has the assistance of a lost prestige.

(Hardy, Wood 137)
2.2.4. Outside the gates of the world: Giles Winterborne in The Woodlanders (1887)

Hardly a year after the publication of The Mayor of Casterbridge, Hardy issued his fourth novel The Woodlanders (Wood), which centers on a small and desolate woodland community. In it, we follow Giles Winterborne, a young apple-farmer and cider-merchant, in his unsuccessful attempt to woo Grace Melbury, his childhood sweetheart. Held back by unrelenting class differences, he loses the battle against his upper-class competitor Edred Fitzpiers and ultimately sacrifices his own life to preserve his love’s good name. In the following chapter I will demonstrate how the woodland community embraces all the characteristics of the primitive socius and accordingly leads Giles Winterborne into a final suicidal act.

2.2.4.a. Strong connection to the body of the Earth

As the title tells us, the setting for this novel is a small desolate woodland community, called Little Hintock. It is described from the start as an isolated locality: “one of those sequestered spots outside the gates of the world” (Hardy, Wood 39), but as David Lodge points out in his introduction to the novel, “the effect of the novel is rather to make us think of the world as being outside the leafy, rooted ‘gates’ of the woodland” (15). “As readers of the novel” he argues, “we are situated in the semi-wild heart of the woods, where human life corresponds more closely to the primitive, in the anthropological sense of the word, than perhaps anything else in Hardy (‘primitive’ is, indeed, a word used in the novel on certain important occasions)” (15). Indeed, Little Hintock is an archetype of a traditional rural community, as everything there revolves around “the fruitful, health-giving connection established between the woods and the people who live and work in them” (Lodge 24). The inhabitants of the place seem to blend in with the trees and plants of the woodland, and are entirely dependent on what nature provides them with. The prime example of this strong connection to the body of the Earth is the character of the protagonist himself, Giles Winterborne. As a cider-merchant and apple-farmer he never leaves the woods and seems to find more friendship in the trees that surround him, than in any living creature. Hardy describes the young woodlander as entirely amalgamating with his surroundings:

He looked and smelt like Autumn’s very brother, his face being sunburnt to wheat-colour, his eyes blue as corn-flowers, his sleeves and leggings dyed with fruit-stains, his hands clammy with the sweet juice of apples, his hat sprinkled with pips, and everywhere about him that atmosphere of cider which at its first
return each season has such an indescribable fascination for those who have been born and bred among the orchards. (Wood 225)

Hence, the narrative could be seen as containing a sort of “pastoral magic” (Tomalin 220). “Grace thinks of Giles as a fruit god or a tree god,” she explains, “‘cider-stained and starred with apple pips’, and he blends into the woodlands, carrying an emblematic apple tree in his arms, taller than himself” (220). But Giles does not only resemble the woodland’s countenance in looks; together with Marty South, the only one to come near him in his extraordinary bond with the natural world, he is said to “speak in a tongue that nobody else knew […] the tongue of the trees and fruits and flowers themselves” (Hardy, Wood 340). The whole community is described as intimately linked up with the woods and its surroundings, but Marty and Giles are said to be the only ones who actually speak and understand its language:

They had been possessed of its finer mysteries as of commonplace knowledge; had been able to read its hieroglyphs as ordinary writing; to them the sights and sounds of night, winter, wind, storm, amid those dense boughs […] were simple occurrences whose origin, continuance, and laws they foreknew. Together they had, with the run of the years, mentally collected those remoter signs and symbols which seen in few were of runic obscurity, but all together made an alphabet. (Hardy, Wood 340)

2.2.4.b. Tradition and superstition

As noted above, Little Hintock is an outstanding example of the traditional community. Geoffrey Harvey sees its population as a people “with […] intensity of feeling, inwardness, sense of tradition, and communal solidarity […]” (77). Several events recorded in the novel illustrate this primitive and long-established character of the community and its customs. Thus, the community knows no privacy and the inhabitants persistently share their opinions of past events. Barbara Hardy explains how the woodlanders bond during everyday activities through the act of storytelling: “[t]he sawyers and trimmers in Melbury’s timber yard in The Woodlanders talk while they work, with sufficient energy, breath and freedom to tell stories and listen” (24). Moreover, “no single narrator stands out in the talkative sawyers’ yard […],” she explains, “[as] storytelling [in Little Hintock must be seen as] a generative collaboration” (31). By discussing the community’s comings and goings and by digging up old family histories, in a collaborative way, the group emphasizes its communal beliefs and
notions and succeeds in connecting with each other through a shared past. Furthermore, the tales about the society’s long-lasting traditions function as a catalyst in the bonding process between old and new generations, as is illustrated for example in the following extract: “Marty prepared her a comfortable place and she sat down in the circle, and listened to Fitzpiers while he drew from her father and the bark-rippers sundry narratives of their fathers’, their grandfathers’, and their own adventures in these woods” (Hardy, Wood 161).

Next to the communal sharing of these traditional narratives, the people of Little Hintock show their primitive nature by their enthusiasm for local customs and celebrations. The celebration of Midsummer Eve, for instance, is initially started by the maidens of the community, but by and large the entire neighbourhood joins them in their proceedings, as the former’s “primary intention of keeping their expedition a secret had been quite defeated” (Hardy, Wood 168). This yearly festivity gathers “half the parish” (Hardy, Wood 169) in less than no time, and contributes to the upholding of the community, as it functions above all as a means of matchmaking. A second example out of the variety of local customs described in the novel is the fortunetelling that takes place at Giles’s Christmas party. Even Grace, the supposedly learned girl just returned from a worldly education abroad, readily consents to the provincial and unrefined practice: “A woman she did not know came and offered to tell her fortune with the abandoned cards. Grace assented to the proposal, and the woman told her tale unskillfully, for want of practice, as she declared” (Hardy, Wood 104). One last example of the rural and traditional character of Little Hintock, is the use of a man trap, the out-dated instrument of torture Timothy Tangs uses to harm Fitzpiers, after he discovers the latter to have seduced his bride-to-be.

Primitive in nature, Little Hintock is also shown to be suffused by superstitious beliefs. At various instances references are made to the gullibility of the population and the fear of the supernatural. The first account is that of Old South, Marty’s father, who suffers nerve attacks, as he feels his life is threatened by the old sapling outside his house. The man refuses to leave his bed and stares at the tree “that will be the death of [him]” (Hardy, Wood 119) all day through. Even though the plain explanation for Old South’s so-called disease is his age, he believes that he would be able to “bear up, […] if it were not for the tree” (Hardy, Wood 118), as he desperately states himself: “yes, the tree ‘tis that’s killing me. There he stands, threatening my life every minute that the wind do blow” (Hardy, Wood 118). When Fitzpiers visits the old man on his dying bed, Marty reveals to the doctor the profound fear her father has for the tree outside: “The shape of it seems to haunt him like an evil spirit. He says
that it is exactly his own age, that it has got human sense, and sprouted up when he was born
on purpose to rule him, and keep him as its slave. Others have been like it afore in Hintock”
(Hardy, Wood 129). This last sentence again reveals the remarkably frequent occurrence, in
the small woodland community, of these strong beliefs in the supernatural.

The celebration of Midsummer Eve brings us to the second allusion to the
superstitious nature of Little Hintock’s people. On this day the maidens of the town were
known to “attempt some spell or enchantment which would afford them a glimpse of their
future partners for life” (Hardy, Wood 168). Taking place in the darkest part of the woods,
this activity almost immediately rouses the young girls to fearful discussions on the evocation
of wicked powers:

‘Directly we see anything we’ll run home as fast as we can,’ said one, whose
courage had begun to fail her. […]
‘I wish we had not thought of trying this,’ said another, ‘but had contented
ourselves with the hole-digging to-morrow at twelve, and hearing our
husband’s trades. It is too much like having dealings with the evil one to try to
raise their forms.’ (Hardy, Wood 169)

Superstitious by nature, the folks that gathered round to take a closer look at the lasses’
doings, soon label the innocent match-making scene as a “form of black art [that] was once
connected with the sowing of hempseed, a handful of which was carried by each girl” (Hardy,
Wood 169). Not only the girls’ proceedings, though, but also the setting of their doings
arouses superstitious fears in the inhabitants’ hearts. On Midsummer Eve, the woodland’s
landscape is described as filled with “shadows and ghostly nooks of indistinctness” and
“[i]magination,” it is said, “could trace amid the trunks and boughs swarthy faces and funereal
figures” (Hardy, Wood 167). At various other instances as well, the woods seem to inspire
tremendous fears in the local population’s hearts, as for instance with Grace Melbury for
whom “the sights and sounds of night, winter, wind, storm, amid those dense boughs, [had] a
touch of the uncanny, and even of the supernatural […]” (Hardy, Wood 340). As David Lodge
puts it “there is a neurotic and superstitious side to the sympathy between [the] woodlanders
and [the] woods” (24), which is perhaps best illustrated in their act of storytelling:

Marty […] listened to the bark-rippers sundry narratives […] of the mysterious
sights they had seen – only to be accounted for by supernatural agency; of
white witches and black witches: and the standard story of the spirits of the
Two Brothers who had fought and fallen, and had haunted King’s Hintock Court a few miles off till they were exorcised by the priest, and compelled to retreat to a swamp, whence they were returning to their old quarters at the Court at the rate of a cock’s stride every New Year’s Day, Old Style; hence the local saying, ‘On new-year’s tide, a cock’s stride.’ (Hardy, Wood 161)

A last indication of the population’s superstitious mentality is Little Hintock’s opinion of the newly arrived doctor, Edred Fitzpiers, who moves into the small community, as one of Hardy’s typical characters of the outside world, bringing with him promising modern thoughts and medicine. When the neighbourhood discovers that the young man ordered “certain books on some mysterious black art […]” (Hardy, Wood 61), however, they rise to the conclusion that “there’s good reason for supposing he has sold his soul to the wicked one” (Hardy, Wood 61).

2.2.4.c. Solid kinship ties

As a striking example of the primitive socius, strong kinship ties form the basis of Hardy’s woodland community. Little Hintock can literally be seen as one big family, as the novel tells us: “As in most villages so secluded as this, intermarriages were of Hapsburgian frequency among the inhabitants, and there were hardly two houses in Little Hintock unrelated by some matrimonial tie or other” (Hardy, Wood 56). On the one hand, these bonds lie at the basis of the strength of the community, but on the other hand they are also responsible for many of the community’s disputes. Giles’s family, for instance, was once closely tied to Marty’s, together with the families’ properties. When the older generations passed away, though, the intensity of the bond diminished, which left Giles entirely dependent on the South family. After the death of Marty’s father, however, Giles’s house and belongings end up in the hands of the acquisitive Mrs. Charmond, who bereaves him of all he possesses. It is the strength of the community’s kinship ties that causes Giles to be entangled in a series of legal documents, as a result of which he loses all his property.

The main references to the worth attached to strong kinship ties are undoubtedly best exemplified in the character of John Melbury. The man’s main goal in life is to find the right match for his daughter, Grace, whom he had educated abroad so as to give her the life he never had. His immediate liking for Edred Fitzpiers as a possible son-in-law, he tells us, “was based less on [Edred’s] professional position, which was not much, than on the standing of his family in the county in bygone days” (Hardy, Wood 182). His unquestioning trust in the
social superiority of members of deep-rooted families shows from Melbury’s ruminations in the following extract: “His daughter’s suitor was descended from a line he had heard of in his grandfather’s time as being once among the greatest, a family which had conferred its name upon a neighbouring village; how then could anything be amiss in this betrothal?” (Hardy, Wood 182) Melbury feels that Giles, a man cut off from all family bonds, could never enrich his daughter Grace in the way Fitzpiers could, with his eminent ancestors. “That touching faith in members of long-established families as such, irrespective of their personal condition or character, which is still found among old-fashioned people in the rural districts,” the narrator explains, “reached its full perfection in Melbury” (Hardy, Wood 182). Indeed, Giles is, as so many of Hardy’s tragic characters, devoid of all family connections. He lives all by himself and the only family member he explicitly refers to is his late father. When matters turn against him, accordingly, he has no one to fall back on and thus affirms Durkheim’s supposition that isolation can be a deciding factor in the display of self-destructive behaviour. The community’s fixation on firm family bonds shows in all aspects of their daily lives: Giles, for instance, is continually exposed to stories of family relations and grand tales of ancestry, through the interaction with his co-workers:

Copse-work as it was called, being an occupation which the secondary intelligence of the hands and arms could carry on without the sovereign attention of the head, allowed the minds of its professors to wander considerably from the objects before them; hence the tales, chronicles, and ramifications of family history which were recounted here were of a very exhaustive kind. (Hardy, Wood 57)

The fact that he lives in a community based on solid kinship ties makes it all the worse for him to be turned down by his childhood sweetheart and thus to be bereaved of the hope to start his own family. The two seemed to be meant for each other, were it not for her father’s obsessive interest in her marriage plans. At first, Melbury planned for the marriage between his daughter and Giles to follow through, as he felt that he had wronged Giles’s father many years ago, as he had married the woman that “was first the promised of Winterborne’s father, who loved her tenderly, till he […] won her away from him by a trick, because he wanted to marry her himself” (Hardy, Wood 51). In Anti-Oedipus, “Deleuze and Guattari argue that the economy of the primitive territorial machine is governed not by equal exchange but by the principle of fundamental disequilibrium which corresponds to relations of debt and credit” (Patton 90) and Melbury feels he might alleviate the debt he owes to Giles for wronging his
father, by giving him his daughter in marriage: “‘Tis a pity to let such a girl throw herself away upon him – a thousand pities! . . . And yet ‘tis my duty, for his father’s sake’” (Hardy, Wood 64) Frustrated, however, by the fact that Grace’s expensive education abroad and her resulting refined and worldly manners would be lost to a “rough and homely” man like Giles (Hardy, Wood 184), he arranges for her to marry the new doctor Fitzpiers. The arranged marriage fairly soon results in a tremendous disaster, as Fitzpiers’ repeatedly cheats on his newlywed. When Grace flees to Giles in desperation, he does everything in his power to support the girl he has idolized for so many years. “Like the altruistic suicide, for whom death is a means of union with a deity or loved one,” Giordano explains, “[Giles] looks upon Grace as ‘some angel or other supernatural creature’” (158). In a final self-sacrificial act to preserve his beloved’s good name, he lends her his cottage and retires to an outside shed himself, after which he dies of starvation and cold. His death resembles that of Michael Henchard in The Mayor of Casterbridge, but where Henchard commits suicide to escape from a life he has come to find unbearable, Giles Winterborne sacrifices his own life to ameliorate that of Grace Melbury.

2.2.4.d. Conclusion

Throughout the entire narrative we see the lonesome apple-merchant Giles Winterborne craving for a connection with Grace Melbury, but held back by unrelenting class differences and the narrow-mindedness of the Melbury’s, he fails to win her over. Foremost John Melbury, but Grace herself just as well, refuses to see Giles as a worthy partner for the refined young girl. Their quiet disapproval of Giles’s uncultured behaviour at the Christmas party illustrates their haughtiness and results in Giles’s developing his own feelings of inferiority: “‘She would hardly have been happy with me,’ he said, in the dry, unimpassioned voice under which he hid his feelings. ‘I was not well enough educated: too rough in short. I couldn’t have surrounded her with the refinements she looked for, anyhow at all.’” (Hardy, Wood 245) When Grace’s forced romance with Edred Fitzpiers fails to live up to her expectations, though, she is finally able to appreciate Giles’s remarkable qualities, as the narrator points out: “The purity of his nature, his freedom from the grosser passions, his scrupulous delicacy, had never been fully understood by Grace till this strange self-sacrifice in lonely juxtaposition to her own person was revealed” (Hardy, Wood 325). But even though Grace would now readily accept him as her partner, she cannot possibly do so, as she is still legally married to the young doctor. The strong social control of the woodland community would outlaw their union and blemish her good reputation. In her final act of rebellion, Grace,
who is by then secretly living in Giles’s cottage, throws all social considerations overboard and asks her saviour to join her in the shed: “‘Don’t you want to come in? Are you not wet? Come to me, dearest! I don’t mind what they say or what they think of us any more.’” (Hardy, Wood 321) Her act of kindness comes too late, however, as “[Giles’s] refusal of food and shelter and his inability to sleep indicate how [by then] his instinct to cling to life has [considerably] declined” (Giordano 156).

At his death bed Grace wonders if it is really possible “that cruel propriety is killing the dearest heart that ever woman clasped to her own” (Hardy, Wood 324) and according to Giordano it certainly did, together with “Melbury’s social ambition and Mrs. Charmond’s thoughtless disregard for Giles’s moral right to his properties,” as he feels that “[a]ll of these social pressures, which set limits on individuality and subordinate one’s personal worth to false social values, activate Giles’s tendency to martyrdom and increase his vulnerability to self-destruction” (142). All along Giles only thought of doing the right thing, for others and for the community, but forgot to think of the consequences his acts would have, for his own life. In conclusion, I must say that I concur with Giordani’s assertion that Giles’s suicide is the direct result of the fact that

\[\text{[i]n the primitive world of the woodlands, the individual’s life is rigorously governed by custom and habit. [Here] everyone leads the same kind of life, the ideas, feelings, and occupations [are] common to nearly all the members [of the community and] create a powerful form of collective supervision over the individual, [which Giles could no longer endure]}\] (141).
Ever since the occurrence of the event which had cast such a shadow over Tess’s life the Durbeyfield family (whose descent was not credited) had been tacitly looked on as one which would have to go when their lease ended, if only in the interests of morality. It was, indeed, quite true that the household had not been shining examples either of temperance, soberness, or chastity. The father, and even the mother, had got drunk at times, the younger children seldom had gone to church, and the eldest daughter had made queer unions. By some means the village had to be kept pure. (Hardy, Tess 352)
2.2.5. A Pure Woman: Tess Durbeyfield in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891)

Hardy’s last but one Novel of Character and Environment, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (*Tess*), is also the last but one most provocative novel of the series. At the time of its publication, the book caused quite a stir, as it did not only “attack social hypocrisy, double standards, the Church, the law, and God,” as Michael Alexander points out, “but by its subtitle [, A Pure Woman,] it also seemed to condone adultery and murder” (302). The book literally divided people into two camps, as it was banned and burned by some, but at the same time praised and admired by others.

2.2.5.a. *Strong connection to the body of the Earth*

No longer confining the setting to one single location, Hardy’s last two novels, *Tess* and *Jude*, mark a clear distinction with the previous Wessex novels. This loss of unity of place goes hand in hand with the diminishing pastoral nature of the rural settings and characters in the novels, as Hardy felt the upcoming threat of modernity overwhelming the rustic environment of his dream country Wessex. However, even though Tess moves freely from one rural town to another, she remains unable to escape her country origins and feels just as imprisoned by her wanderings through the various Wessex towns, as for instance Eustacia does on the heath in *The Return*. The simple explanation for this is that the combination of these different rural communities just amounts to the creation of one rural setting, which works just as stifling as the more fixed, enclosed setting of the previous novels. I will go into this a bit further later on, but first I will demonstrate how all of the places Tess visits are still perfect, though perhaps less explicit, examples of the primitive socius, as even though all “[c]haracters revolve around Tess; yet the harmony of man and nature, the working community, still exists as strongly” in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* as in the previous novels (Enstice 145).

Wandering through Tess’s story, we encounter three distinctive landscapes: Blackmoor Vale, the Froom and Flintcomb Ash. In all three of them the people are shown to be entirely dependent on nature’s products and living in accordance with the seasonal rhythms. In *Landscapes of the Mind*, Andrew Enstice states that “[i]n the Blackmoor Vale, [where] the story commences, nature has a neutral aspect akin to that seen in other novels (*Under the Greenwood Tree, Far from the Madding Crowd*): [m]an and nature co-exist in a working harmony, of which Tess and her family are a part” (120). Here in Marlott, Tess’s hometown, the dependence on agricultural labour is for instance shown through the
devastation and near ruin of Tess’s family after the death of their single workhorse, Prince: “The higgling business, which had mainly depended on the horse, became disorganized forthwith. Distress, if not penury, loomed in the distance.” (Hardy, Tess 35) Besides that, the Marlott community’s bond with and reliance on nature is also illustrated through the communal harvesting of the fields and the various celebrations of nature’s wonders, such as the May-Pole dance “in honour of Ceres, the Roman goddess of agriculture” (Dolin 403). The second stop Tess makes on her wanderings through the Wessex landscape is Talbothays dairy, situated in the Vale of Var. This idyllic dairy functions as a sort of refuge for Tess after her disastrous encounter with Alec, and as a milkmaid, she enjoys the best years of her life here, together with Angel Clare. At Talbothays the people’s lives revolve around the natural processes and go by in accordance with nature’s rhythm: “Not a human being was out of doors at the dairy. The denizens were all enjoying the usual afternoon nap of an hour or so which the exceedingly early hours kept in summer-time rendered a necessity” (Hardy, Tess 168). Freed from her blemished reputation in Marlott, Tess lives anonymously at this idyllic dairy, where life seems to be one bed of roses:

Dairyman Crick’s household of maids and men lived on comfortably, placidly, even merrily. Their position was perhaps the happiest of all positions in the social scale, being above the line at which neediness ends, and below the line at which the convenances begin to cramp natural feeling, and the stress of threadbare modishness makes too little enough. (Hardy, Tess 128)

Her marriage to Angel and her subsequent confession of past sins lead to Tess leaving the dairy, and to her subsequent departure for the novel’s third location: Flintcomb-Ash. While her stay at her former residence induced the following remark: “Tess had never in her recent life been so happy as she was now, possibly never would be so happy again. She was, for one thing, physically and mentally suited among these new surroundings” (Hardy, Tess 129), her dwelling at Flintcomb-Ash, “a starve-acre place” (Hardy, Tess 284), brought about the exact opposite reaction. Engaged in reed-drawing, swede-hacking and trimming under the rule of a tyrannous farmer, “Tess felt that she could not have come to a much worse place” (Hardy, Tess 292). However, even though the exact opposite of Talbothays in atmosphere, Flintcomb-Ash did not differ much from the idyllic dairy in purpose, as the communal agricultural labour here went about just as incessantly as it did there:
The wide acreage of blank agricultural brownness, apparent where the swedes had been pulled, was beginning to be stripped in wales of darker brown, gradually broadening to ribands. Along the edge of each of these something crept upon ten legs, moving without haste and without rest up and down the whole length of the field; it was two horses and a man, the plough going between them, turning up the cleared ground for a spring sowing. For hours nothing relieved the joyless monotony of things. (Hardy, *Tess* 314)

Each one of these three communities is thus shown to be entirely engaged in a strong bond with nature through their inexorable dependence on it. However, “[i]t is in Tess’s *person* that we find the major embodiment of the harmony between man and nature that is the focus of the earlier novels” (Enstice 129, emphasis added). Hardy’s Wessex Eve (Chen) is not only shown to wander the landscape as a natural part of it: “On these lonely hills and dales her quiescent glide was of a piece with the element she moved in. Her flexuous and stealthy figure became an integral part of the scene. At times her whimsical fancy would intensify natural processes around her till they seemed a part of her own story” (Hardy, *Tess* 85), but also to adjust her own life pulse to the seasonal rhythms. Claire Tomalin elucidates this inextricable involvement between Tess and her surroundings by showing how Hardy places her in a sequence of settings, so that she appears at times an emblematic figure as she moves through the seasons of the year with their appropriate countryside activities […]. She is seen dancing on the green in her white dress in spring, then reaping in the fields with the villagers and sitting down to feed her baby among them; she is at the dairy in summer, where everything in nature is lush and the milkmaids abandon themselves to the open air of the meadows ‘as a swimmer to the wave’; then she is at winter work in colourless fields, with other labouring girls crawling over the surface like flies as they pick Swedes under a white sky. (226)

Angel sees her as “a genuine daughter of nature” (Hardy, *Tess* 120) and throughout the narrative she is repeatedly associated with elements of the natural world: “she is given a job whistling to bullfinches, then one milking cows; she is seen as a fly, then as a sparrow; […] she is herself ‘like a bird caught in a springe clap-net’; and as she dies, ‘her breathing now was quick and small, like that of a lesser creature than a woman’”(Alcorn 12). The painful
clash between Tess’s intricate bond with nature’s wonders and society’s ruthless rules runs through the narrative as a continuous thread.

2.2.5.b. Tradition and Superstition

One of the focus points of this novel, the significance of deep-rooted families, already signals the emphasis on tradition in the various Wessex towns Tess visits. As I will discuss these long-established family lines in the following section, I will here direct my focus on the general traditional nature of the rural communities. In *Studying Thomas Hardy*, Butler argues that “[t]he […] source of the power of Tess lies in its rich evocation of Wessex, its landscape and the old way of life there. The novel dwells on the Vale of Blackmoor and when we first see this stretch of country, with the attenuated May-day dance taking place, something of a pastoral idyll is presented to us” (47). This “May-Day dance […] or ‘club-walking’ as it was there called”, the narrator tells us, “[…] lived to uphold the local Cerealia. It had walked for hundreds of years, and it walked still” (Hardy, *Tess* 13). The long-established character of the region is, however, not only accentuated through the upholding of local customs such as the celebration of the goddess of the harvest, but also by its geographical history:

The district is historic, no less than of topographical interest. The Vale was known in former times as the Forest of White Hart, from a curious legend of King Henry III’s reign, in which the killing by a certain Thomas de la Lynd of a beautiful white hart which the king had run down and spared, was made the occasion of a heavy fine.

(Hardy, *Tess* 12)

Michael Alexander points out how Hardy “places human figures against a world which has been inhabited for immense periods of time” (302), to underline the insignificant role man plays in the history of the earth. In *Tess*, he even applies this method on the toponyms, as he repeatedly refers to Tess’s birthplace as either Blakemore or Blackmoor. It could be argued that Hardy, by distinguishing between the older and newer spelling, wanted to emphasize the historical nature of the place, since he already used this technique of confused terminology in the essential distinction between the family names Durbeyfield and D’Urberville (“Tess”).

This time-honoured character of the rural communities in *Tess* generates their subjection to superstitious beliefs and conduct, as the narrator points out: “Superstitions linger longest on these heavy soils. […] The harts that had been hunted here, the witches that had
been pricked and ducked, the green-spangled fairies that ‘whickered’ at you as you passed; – the place teemed with beliefs in them still, and they formed an impish multitude now” (Hardy, Tess 345). Again, it is chiefly Tess who holds these credulous views, as Enstice points out: “Tess herself exhibits, particularly in the early stages of the novel, the same familiarity with local traditions as her fellows; though possibly her more sensitive nature might be said actually to make her more prone than they to fear or belief […]” (146). When she pricks her chin on a rose, in the beginning of the tale, Tess immediately fears the hidden meaning behind the event: “Like all the cottagers of Blackmoor Vale, Tess was steeped in fancies and prefigurative superstitions; she thought this an ill omen – the first she had noticed that day” (Hardy, Tess 44). Later she feels utterly disconcerted after laying her hand on what Alec told her to be a Holy Cross, but turned out to be something of an entirely different nature, as one of the locals explains to her:

‘Cross – no; ‘twer not a cross! ‘Tis a thing of ill-omen, Miss. It was put up in wuld times by the relations of a malefactor who was tortured there by nailing his hand to a post, and afterwards hung. The bones lie underneath. They say he sold his soul to the devil, and that he walks at times.’

She felt the petite morte at this unexpectedly gruesome information, and left the solitary man behind. (Hardy, Tess 312)

Furthermore, Tess is shown to believe in the transcendental nature of man, as she tells the dairyfolk at Talbothays: “‘I don’t know about ghosts, […] but I do know that our souls can be made to go outside our bodies when we are alive’” (Hardy, Tess 120). However, Tess is not to the only one prone to these superstitious beliefs. Her mother, for example, “with her fast-perishing lumber of superstitions, folk-lore, dialect, and orally transmitted ballads” (Hardy, Tess 23) attempts to predict her daughter’s future through the use of a fortunetelling book, whose power she utterly fears:

“The Complete Fortune-Teller was an old thick volume, which lay on a table at her elbow, so worn by pocketing that the margins had reached the edge of the type. […] A curious fetishistic fear of this grimy volume on the part of her mother prevented her ever allowing it to stay in the house all night […]”

(Hardy, Tess 22-3)

But even outside “the engirdled and secluded region” of Blackmoor (Hardy, Tess 12), people are shown to be liable to displaying superstitious conduct. At Talbothays, Dairyman Crick and
his wife consider the “afternoon crow” an ill omen for the newlyweds Angel and Tess (Hardy, Tess 215), and search for irrational explanations when the milking of the cows does not pass as it should:

[...] ‘to my thinking, the cows don’t gie down their milk to-day as usual. Upon my life, if Winker do begin keeping back like this, she’ll not be worth going under by midsummer.

‘’Tis because there’s a new hand come among us,’ said Jonathan Kail. ‘I’ve noticed such things afore. 

‘To be sure. It may be so. I didn’t think o’t.’

‘I’ve been told that it goes up into their horns at such times,’ said a dairymaid.

‘Well, as to going up into their horns,’ replied Dairyman Crick dubiously, as though even witchcraft might be limited by anatomical possibilities, ‘I couldn’t say; I certainly could not. […]’ (Hardy, Tess 109)

At a later time, Dairyman Crick, the only slightly sceptical mind in the previous extract, is shown to be just as susceptible to believe in supernatural powers, as he plans to visit Conjuror Trendle’s son after a single bad churning process (Hardy, Tess 133). Hardy’s last to one Novel of Character and Environment sums up numerous examples of superstitious beliefs and traditional customs, but the one that overrides all the others and haunts Tess throughout the narrative, is the legend of the D’Urberville coach:

‘It is that this sound of a non-existent coach can only be heard by one of the D’Urberville blood, and it is held to be of ill-omen to the one who hears it. It has to do with murder, committed by one of the family, centuries ago. […] One of the family is said to have abducted some beautiful woman, who tried to escape from the coach in which he was carrying her off, and in the struggle he killed her – or she killed him – I forget which. Such is the tale. […]’ (Hardy, Tess 354)

2.2.5.c. Solid kinship ties

In Tess of the D’Urbervilles, the value of kinship ties is not only an essential element of the primitive socius, as is it is in the other novels, but also a vital constituent of the narrative sequence, as Tess’s life is turned entirely upside down after the unison between the Durbeyfield and D’Urberville family. From the start it is shown that the Durbeyfield family
set all hopes on the marriage arrangements of their oldest child Tess, “one who was [...] to do great things” (Hardy, *Tess* 51) to improve their social and financial situation, as the girl’s mother “had been discovering good matches for her daughter almost from the year of her birth” (Hardy, *Tess* 49). Merryn Williams underlines the fact that in these rural communities “marriage is most definitely linked with a rise or fall in the social scale” (173) and therein finds the explanation for Tess’s forced acquaintance with Alec D’Urberville: “‘He’ll marry her, most likely, and make a lady of her; and then she’ll be what her forefathers was’” (Hardy, *Tess* 47). However, the cruel irony of the tale is that Alec’s surname is a simple “work of imagination” (Hardy, *Tess* 39), as his father adopted it merely to replace his own commonplace family name, Stoke:

Parson Tringham had spoken truly when he said that our shambling John Durbeyfield was the only really lineal representative of the old D’Urberville family existing in the county, or near it; he might have added, what he knew very well, that the Stoke-D’Urbervilles were no more D’Urbervilles of the true tree than he was himself. (Hardy, *Tess* 39)

This historic confusion, however, tremendously affects Tess and her family, “who were naturally in ignorance” of this (Hardy, *Tess* 39), as their rural environment highly values these deep-rooted family lines. Angel Clare seems to be the only one to reject the praising of descendants of ancient families without looking at their present worth in society, but soon he as well succumbs to the social pressure and becomes a “slave to custom and conventionality” (Hardy, *Tess* 179) when Tess’s lineage seems to favour him in his purposes: “Society is hopelessly snobbish, and this fact of your extraction may make an appreciable difference to its acceptance of you as my wife, after I have made you the well-read woman that I mean to make you” (Hardy, *Tess* 189).

Talbothays dairy is subsequently the only place where Tess can temporarily hide this discovery of her ancestry, which only brought her trouble, and here she is fostered into the large dairy family. In the Froom Valley she finally finds a safe haven, as even her own family disregards her for failing to claim kin with the D’Urbervilles. When the young girl asks to send for a parson to baptize her child, her father declines straight away:

The moment happened to be one at which her father’s sense of the antique nobility of his family was highest, and his sensitiveness to the smudge which Tess had set upon that nobility most pronounced, for he had just returned from
his evening booze at Rolliver’s Inn. No parson should come inside his door, he declared, prying into his affairs just then, when, by her shame, it had become more necessary than ever to hide them. (Hardy, Tess 93)

Unlike Hardy’s other self-destructive characters, Tess comes from a large family and is one of the most liked girls of the community. Things change, however, when she flees back home, pregnant of an illegitimate child and is thus blamed for blemishing the name of her family and the community. When she accordingly tries to start her own family with Angel Clare, she is again held back: first by his family because of her social standing, and then by Angel himself, when he too discovers her secrets. Hardy portrays Clare as the typical Victorian man who employs the double standards in sexuality, as he blatantly confesses his own affairs while at the same time condemning Tess for her past, which he simply ascribes to a “want of firmness” (Hardy, Tess 232). Durkheim underlines the strength of family bonds to counter self-destructive behaviour, and unfortunately, Angel’s love was the one thing that kept Tess from despair and fits of despondency:

Her affection for him was now the breath and life of Tess’s being; it enveloped her as a photosphere, irradiated her into forgetfulness of her past sorrows, keeping back the gloomy specters that would persist in their attempts to touch her – doubt, fear, moodiness, care, shame. She knew that they were waiting like wolves just outside the circumscribing light, but she had long spells of power to keep them in hungry subjection here. (Hardy, Tess 195)

Immediately after Angel’s first condemnatory comments, Tess starts displaying sacrificial and suicidal tendencies: “‘I will obey you like your wretched slave, even if it is to lie down and die.’(Hardy, Tess 230), ‘I don’t know how I can help being the cause of much misery to you all your life. The river is down there. I can put an end to myself in it. I am not afraid.’” (Hardy, Tess 233) As Giordano argues, Tess, like Giles in The Woodlanders, does not try to escape life for her own sake. Instead, her suicidal thoughts are purely sacrificial:

‘But, Angel,’ she pleaded, enlarging her eyes in calm unconcern upon him, ‘it was thought of entirely on your account – to set you free without the scandal of the divorce that I thought you would have to get. I should never have dreamt of doing it on mine. However, to do it with my own hand is too good for me, after all. It is you, my ruined husband, who ought to strike the blow. I think I should love you more, if that were possible, if you could bring yourself to do it, since
there’s no other way of escape for ‘ee. I feel I am so utterly worthless! So very
greatly in the way!’ (Hardy, Tess 239)

Her altruistic nature reaches its climax in her final act of martyrdom at Stonehenge, “a
heliolatrous site where sacrifice is supposed to have been made” (Ukai 10), where Tess lays
down, knowing she will be arrested for the murder of Alec D’Urberville. By ridding itself of
Tess’s bad influence, the community is again ready to establish its moral and social norms,
through the unison of Angel and Tess’s sister Liza-Lu. The creation of social bonds and the
formation of a new family restore the community’s values of moral purity and underline their
emphasis on the value of solid kinship ties.

2.2.5.d. Conclusion

To us readers, it is abundantly clear that Tess is actually the victim of this tale, even
though nearly all characters – and most of the readers in Hardy’s time – shunt the blame on
her. In Landscapes of the Mind Andrew Enstice excludes Tess (and Jude) from his
classification of the Wessex’s settings in Hardy’s Novels of Character and Environment as
“enclosed landscapes” (xi), as Tess is shown to wander through various Wessex communities.
He argues that by “moving from community to community”, Tess grows, explores and
discovers (xi), but I see Tess’s pilgrimage more as a flight from her past, than as a journey of
self-discovery. Tess moves from Marlott under her parents’ pressure, to claim kin with the
D’Urbervilles and in that way raise their social standing. When she returns alone and
impregnated, she is looked askance at by her family and the community: “She knew what
their whispers were about, grew sick at heart, and felt that she could come to church no more”
(Hardy, Tess 85). The social pressure gets the better of her and Tess flees to Talbothays,
where she can enjoy an anonymous life and start over. However, once engaged to Angel, she
feels she can no longer keep her past hidden, as she believes she is committing a mortal sin by
letting him marry an improper woman. Angel, led by “custom and conventionality” (Hardy,
Tess 179) jilts her and Tess sets off to Flintcomb-Ash, as she does not dare to return to
Marlott nor Talbothays. At Flintcomb she nearly works herself to death, but is forced to return
to her hometown anyhow to attend to her sick mother and father. Still rejected by the
community, the entire family is now forced to give up their house: “[H]er mother was scolded
for ‘harbouring’ her; sharp words had ensued from Joan, who had independently offered to
leave at once; she had been taken at her word; and here was the result” (Hardy, Tess 353):
Ever since the occurrence of the event which had cast such a shadow over Tess’s life the Durbeyfield family (whose descent was not credited) had been tacitly looked on as one which would have to go when their lease ended, if only in the interests of morality. It was, indeed, quite true that the household had not been shining examples either of temperance, soberness, or chastity. The father, and even the mother, had got drunk at times, the younger children seldom had gone to church, and the eldest daughter had made queer unions. By some means the village had to be kept pure. (Hardy, Tess 352)

Tess is subsequently driven back into the hands of the evil perpetrator, Alec D’Urberville, to support her family. Here the story ends as it did in Far from the Madding Crowd, as Tess goes through the same pattern, described by Menninger, as Farmer Boldwood: first she repeatedly expresses her will to take her own life – but abstains from doing so for the sake of Angel’s reputation – (wish to die), then she kills Alec (wish to kill) to finally end by subjecting herself to the death penalty (wish to be killed). Giordano argues that “[b]y committing a capital crime and making herself subject to hanging, Tess is as much a suicide as Farmer Boldwood – as self-destructive as if she had turned he bloody knife upon herself. Tess not only realizes this, but welcomes her long-delayed death.” (181) Right from the start the young girl is indeed shown to be prone to suicidal thoughts: she tells Angel she is afraid of “life in general” (Hardy, Tess 123), she displays the typical Hardy death-drive: “I wish I had never been born – there or anywhere else!” (Hardy, Tess 76) and deplores “the plight of being alive” (Hardy, Tess 85). However, considering Durkheim’s findings, she would probably have managed with the support of a social safety net consisting of her family, friends and husband-to-be. But abandoned by everyone, Tess, tired of her wanderings as “a hunted creature” (Enstice 152), instead “ends her life as a ritual sacrifice to society’s values” (Tomalin 221).
‘It would be better to be out o’ the world than in it, wouldn’t it?’
‘It would almost, dear.’ (Hardy, Jude 406)

‘There is something external to us which says, “You shan’t!” First it said, “You shan’t learn!”
Then it said, “You shan’t labour!” Now it says, “You shan’t love!”’ (Hardy, Jude 407)
2.2.6. The coming universal wish not to live: Jude Fawley and Little Father Time in 
Jude the Obscure (1895)

With the publication of Jude the Obscure (Jude), probably his most discussed novel, Hardy’s career as a novelist came to an end. Immediately after its release, the book came under fire for its explicit attacks on class-differences, the church and the institution of marriage. Moreover, Hardy’s final version included the excruciating scene where Little Father Time kills the other children and subsequently hangs himself. In 1895, suicide was still a sensitive subject as such, but self-murder committed by children made the notion entirely unacceptable. However, it is not only the aptly named child Little Father Time who decides to take his own life in order to escape his unforgiving surroundings, but also the novel’s protagonist, Jude Fawley, ends his life by his own hands. These outspoken references to suicide and dysfunctional social systems signal a maturity in Hardy’s later novels that was definitely absent from his earlier work. It is therefore difficult to treat Jude in the same way as the previous novels, as a narrative so complex in references and underlying themes does not lend itself to a straightforward categorization. It was, however, never my intention to simply apply Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of the primitive socius on Hardy’s novels and to deliver a one-on-one conclusion. In my analysis of Jude, I therefore want to qualify my proposed association between the suicides in Hardy’s Novels of Character and Environment and the primitive socius, as this novel, so suffused by notions of the upcoming industrialized world, simply does not fit the picture. As already hinted at, Hardy’s evolution as a writer provides the simple explanation for this. What once drove Hardy to paint the idyllic Wessex town of Weatherbury in Far from the Madding Crowd seems to be entirely absent in Jude the Obscure, as C. H. Sisson points out: “Jude is a Wessex character, if ever Hardy drew one, but he is one whose eyes are fixed beyond the local scene and whose destiny is to be entangled in the notions of the modern industrialized world […]” (22). However, if this were entirely the case I would have to omit Jude from this dissertation, which I obviously did not. Instead, I would like to argue first of all that this novel does contain unmistakable traces of the primitive socius – even though they are less explicit than in the previous narratives – and secondly that the prime reason for Jude’s suicide can be traced back to his inability to detach himself from his country roots. I believe that Hardy was unable to entirely desert the Wessex from the previous novels and used Jude to express his grief about the growing influence of industrialization and modern city life on the rural world of his childhood. I deem this woe to be personified in the character of Little Father Time, whose suicide can only be interpreted as an act of self-murder caused by the strain of modern city life. This new type of suicide, clearly
different from the previous ones which I attributed to the narrow-mindedness of the communities belonging to the primitive socius, signals Hardy’s new views of life, which he would further develop in his poetic oeuvre.

As Jude is the odd one out of my dissertation, I will also handle its analysis in a slightly different way: I will not entirely follow the classification of the characteristics of the primitive socius as before, but instead primarily discuss the two opposing suicides of the narrative, Jude’s and Little Father Time’s, in view of their respective foundations: the effects of haunting country roots and the strain of modern consciousness.

2.2.6.a. Jude Fawley

As I believe that Jude’s suicide can be attributed to his inability to shake off his country roots, I will start by going through the three primitive categories: connection to the body of the earth, tradition and superstition, and kinship ties, and thus illustrate the presence of traces of the savage socius in Jude. Mind you, I emphasize the word traces, as it should be understood that the overall focus lies on the big city life in Christminster (and even Melchester), where there is no connection whatsoever with the natural world. However, these traces are exactly what haunt Jude in his failed attempt to assimilate in the city.

We must therefore situate the close connection to the body of the earth at the beginning of the narrative, which focuses on Jude’s hometown: Marygreen. As Kramer points out “[a] peasant mode of life goes on in Marygreen not greatly different from that in Far from the Madding Crowd or The Return of the Native, except in the amount of space given to its portrayal” (158). The “little village” or “hamlet” of Marygreen, which “was as old-fashioned as it was small” (Hardy, Jude 6), still displays the close connection with nature, which the other cities in Jude have already lost. It is here that we see Arabella working busily on her family’s pig farm, the young Jude working for Farmer Troutham on the fields, and Jude’s Aunt Drusilla furtively trying to save her bakery, dependent as she is on the corn harvest for her earnings. Jude’s connection to this natural world of Marygreen is, however, two-fold: on the one hand, his overly sensitive nature makes him feel for every living creature, such as the birds on Farmer Troutham’s land (Hardy, Jude 11) and the rabbit caught in a trap towards the end of the story (Hardy, Jude 256); but on the other hand, Jude feels no real connection to the idyllic natural scene as some of the characters in the other novels did. Instead, he longs for the big city life, and thus tries to deny his country roots. Once in the city, however, he fails to rise on the social ladder and ends up working as a stonemason, the craft he learned as a youth in
Marygreen. It is, moreover, this oversensitivity that forms the ruin for Jude (and Sue and the children) in the city, together with his inability to take on the city mode. When he meets Sue for the first time, Jude is reminded of this defect of character: “When he had despatched the note by a boy he regretted that in his hurry he should have suggested to her to meet him out of doors, when he might have said he would call upon her. It was, in fact, the country custom to meet thus, and nothing else had occurred to him” (Hardy, Jude 116).

Jude passes through the same process (of denying his country roots but winding up as a complete confirmation of them) regarding his ideas on the importance of kinship ties, as he starts off rejecting the traditional values – which he associates with the dull life in Marygreen, but finally ends up craving for a stable connection with his beloved and what remains of his family. As a young boy, Jude is a typical Hardy character, cut off from all reliable social bonds: “Somebody might have come along that way who would have asked him his trouble […] But nobody did come, because nobody does: […]” (Hardy, Jude 31). After his mother’s suicide (!) and his father’s death short thereafter, Jude became an orphan and was placed with his aunt Drusilla Fawley. For her, the young boy is more a burden than a joy and the old woman never hesitates a moment to make him aware of his unwelcome presence: “‘It would ha’ been a blessing if Goddy-mighty had took thee too, [..], poor useless boy!’” (Hardy, Jude 8) Not surprisingly, after having to grow up without a loving support, the young Jude marries the first girl he meets: Arabella Donn. Yet, it is not only his “craving for [some] loving-kindness” (Hardy, Jude 115) that drives him into marrying the country girl, but chiefly his country habits and infinite sense of duty: “Yet, such being the custom of the rural districts among honourable young men who had drifted so far into intimacy with a woman as he unfortunately had done, he was ready to abide by what he had said, and take the consequences” (Hardy, Jude 65). When the aspiring scholar finds out that the sly Arabella has tricked him into marriage by faking pregnancy, Jude’s disgust for the traditional institution of marriage starts to take shape:

There seemed to him, vaguely and dimly, something wrong in a social ritual which made necessary a cancelling of well-formed schemes involving years of thought and labour […] because of a momentary surprise by a new and transitory instinct which had nothing in it of the nature of vice, and could be only at the most called weakness. He was inclined to inquire what he had done, or she lost, for that matter, that he deserved to be caught in a gin which would cripple him, if not her also, for the rest of a lifetime? (Hardy, Jude 70)
When Arabella leaves him shortly after their marriage, Jude finds his aunt’s warnings about the ineptness of the Fawleys to marry well, confirmed. However, when he meets his cousin Sue a bit later on, he is so enamoured by her apparition, that he instantly forgets all his ideas about the “life-long penalty” of marriage (Hardy, Jude 78) and longs for a matrimonial union with the girl. Sue, however, holds different thoughts on the subject of marriage, which go back to her childhood and very much resemble what Jude’s aunt used to tell him: “[…] it was always impressed upon me that I ought not to marry – that I belonged to an odd and peculiar family – the wrong breed for marriage” (Hardy, Jude 201). The two start a family and Jude tries to convince Sue several times to marry him. But by doing so, he only pushes her further away from him, as Sue firmly holds on to her unconventional ideas about the institution of marriage and feels that a matrimonial union would destroy their perfect bond as lovers. Jude eventually acquiesces to live as an unmarried couple with children, but unfortunately the neighbourhood does not:

The baker’s lad and the grocer’s boy, who at first had used to lift their hats gallantly to Sue when they came to execute their errands, in these days no longer took the trouble to render her that homage, and the neighbouring artisans’ wives looked straight along the pavement when they encountered her. (Hardy, Jude 360)

Moving from village to village, the two consequently start “a shifting, almost nomadic life” (Hardy, Jude 372) and try to find a place where no one knows or cares about their background or current situation. Even though they are resented by the outside world for their unconventional ways, this period where Jude, Sue and the children live as one family, is by far the happiest time for all of them. Durkheim’s idea of the supporting function of family bonds is perhaps best exemplified in the adoption of Arabella’s child Little Father Time into Jude and Sue’s family: “And when the unexpected apparition of Jude’s child in the house had shown itself to be no such disturbing event as it had looked, but one that brought into their lives a new and tender interest of an ennobling and unselfish kind, it rather helped than injured their happiness” (Hardy, Jude 348). Unfortunately the social pressure keeps rising and when at one point the two even struggle to find a place to sleep for the night, their oldest son takes action. After killing the other children, he hangs himself and leaves the heartrending suicide note: “Done because we are too menny” (Hardy, Jude 405). For the young couple, this is the last straw and the two separate shortly thereafter. Cut off from his beloved and deprived of his progeny, Jude slowly loses all zest for life. After having lost his aunt some time before,
Jude is now all alone and starts working as a stonemason again. “But it was also obvious that
to love” (Hardy, Jude 114) and so the lonely young man remarries Arabella, in a drunken
stupor. It is only when he gets sick and realizes his life is shortening, that Jude comes to see
that he was never cut out for the rational bonds of city life, but instead always needed the
strong social ties of the primitive sociusxiii. On his dying bed he reminisces about his aunt, his
late children and above all his cousin Sue, “the [only] thing uniting him to the emotions of the
living city” (Hardy, Jude 99).

However, Jude would probably not have done any better if he had stayed at the
countryside, as the people there are just as narrow-minded as they are in Hardy’s other
Wessex novels. From day one they regard Jude’s scholarly aspirations as a play (Hardy, Jude
35), they are shown to support the idea of the city’s social inequality: “‘Just what we thought!
Such places be not for such as you – only for them with plenty o’ money.’” (Hardy, Jude 133)
and look down on him when he returns to their town after his failed adventure in the big city:

He did nothing, however, for some long stagnant time to advance his new
desire, occupying himself with little local jobs in putting up and lettering
headstones about the neighbouring villages, and submitting to be regarded as a
social failure, a returned purchase, by the half-dozen or so of farmers and other
country-people who condescended to nod to him. (Hardy, Jude 154)

The settings in Jude are, however, quite unlike those in the other Wessex novels
regarding their level of tradition and superstition. As noted in the introduction, there are only
traces of the primitive socius to be found in Jude and this is no different for the intensity of
traditional and superstitious elements in the different towns Jude visits throughout the
narrative. Several countryside traditions, which very much resemble the ones in the other
novels, are referred to, but again it is the amount of space given to their description that
differs. Apropos of nothing the narrator talks about the Kennetbridge fair, the Great
Agricultural Show and the Remembrance Day Procession and Games (Hardy, Jude 373,
349,389, 488), but we never get the lengthy descriptions of these events as we did in the
previous novels. It seems that Hardy wanted to stress the fact that these traditions were mostly
dominated by the upcoming industrial, and above all, rational way of life, and that the ones
that had survived had definitely lost their fundamental traditional character: “It was the
spring fair at Kennetbridge, and, though this ancient trade-meeting had much dwindled from
its dimensions of former times, the long straight street of the borough presented a lively scene about midday” (Hardy, Jude 373). As in the previous novels, the element of tradition is, however, shown through the emphasis on the long-established character of the settings:

Every inch of ground had been the site, first or last, of energy, gaiety, horse-play, bickering, weariness. Groups of gleaners had squatted in the sun on every square yard. Love-matches that had populated the adjoining hamlet had been made up there between reaping and carrying. Under the hedge which divided the field from a distant plantation girls had given themselves to lovers who would not turn their heads to look at them by the next harvest; and in that ancient cornfield many a man had made love-promises to a woman at whose voice he had trembled by the next seed-time after fulfilling them in the church adjoining. (Hardy, Jude 10)

Yet again, immediately after this description the reader is shown that Jude, who dreams of a life in the city, distances himself entirely from this deep-rooted nature of his hometown: “But this neither Jude nor the rooks around him considered. For them it was a lonely place, possessing, in the one view, only the quality of a work-ground, and in the other that of a granary good to feed in” (Hardy, Jude 10). This dual relation between tradition and (a longing for) modernity is repeated throughout the novel, and especially comes into focus when Jude moves to the city, where tradition is shown to have become hollow and reserved for the higher classes: “Only a wall divided him from those happy young contemporaries of his with whom he shared a common mental life; men who had nothing to do from morning till night but to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest. Only a wall – but what a wall!” (Hardy, Jude 100)

The same is true for the element of superstition in Jude, as it is no longer the innocent and charming belief in the supernatural we saw in the earlier novels, but rather a hollowed out version of it. The clearest example of this is perhaps the unscrupulous physician Vilbert, who sells magic potions to the townspeople. Enstice states that “all superstition has gone from this man’s actions. He is a fraud, so callous of human misery to swindle an old woman of a large sum of money. He is not actively malicious, but he uses other people to his own ends” (173). However, there are still traces of the superstitious conduct typical of the primitive socius to be found in Jude, but these are all located in the closed off towns, and not in the big cities. We learn how Jude, returning home late at night, tries not to think too much of “giants, Herne the Hunter, Apollyan lying in wait for Christian, or of the captain with the bleeding hole in his
forehead and the corpses round him that remutinied every night on board the bewitched ship” (Hardy, Jude 20) and how the Widow Edlin recounts strange old tales to Sue: “‘They say that when the saints were upon the earth devils used to take husbands’ forms o’nights, and get poor women into all sorts of trouble. But I don’t know why that should come into my head, for it is only a tale…’” (Hardy, Jude 477). Yet, the most important example of the ongoing superstition in the country village of Marygreen is by far the family curse as recounted by Jude’s aunt Drusilla. The so-called curse, which goes back for generations, encompasses both Jude and Sue’s family and makes it impossible for any family member to marry happily:

‘Your father and mother couldn’t get on together, and they parted. […] It was the same with your father’s sister. Her husband offended her, and she so disliked living with him afterwards that she went away to London with her little maid. The Fawleys were not made for wedlock: it never seemed to sit well upon us. There’s sommat in our blood that won’t take kindly to the notion of being bound to do what we do readily enough if not bound. That’s why you ought to have hearkened to me, and not ha’ married.’ (Hardy, Jude 81)

Yet again, Jude distances himself from this country tale and marries a full three times. In his headstrong attempt to make it in the city, Jude tries to leave behind these country superstitions and traditions, just like he tried to deny his nature-loving spirit and need for strong social bonds. After realizing that it was the city with its narrow-minded and discriminating character, which denied him both his relationship with Sue and his chance to make it as a scholar, Jude feels he has had enough. In a final attempt to see the love of his life, Jude leaves his sickbed and crosses the heath in “a driving rain from the north-east [which] had been falling with more or less intermission all the morning, and looking from the window at the dripping spouts it seemed impossible to believe that any sick man would have ventured to almost certain death” (Hardy, Jude 468). When Arabella questions him about this suicidal journey of his, Jude makes no secret of his intensions:

‘You’ve done for yourself by this, young man,’ said she. ‘I don’t know whether you know it.’
‘Of course I do. I meant to do for myself.’
‘What – to commit suicide?’
‘Certainly.’
[...]

Vansteentbrugge 74
‘I have seen her for the last time, and I’ve finished myself – put an end to a feverish life which out never to have been begun!’ (Hardy, Jude 473)

This desperate attempt at self-murder did not rise from nothing, however, as the young man is shown from the start to be prone to self-annihilating behaviour. As a child he already feels he is “living in a world which did not want [him] (Hardy, Jude 11) and repeatedly wishes “that he had never been born” (Hardy, Jude 31). At the age of nineteen he undertakes his first suicide attempt, feeling that “he was not worth the trouble of being taken care of either by himself or others” (Hardy, Jude 214), but failing in that as well, his already low self-esteem reaches new depths: “He supposed he was not a sufficiently dignified person for suicide” (Hardy, Jude 82). Again his soft country character holds him back from fulfilling such a terrifying act as drowning himself as his mother once did. When the setbacks accumulate, however, Jude’s self-destructive nature develops more and more and in an attempt to “escape from intolerable misery of mind” (Hardy, Jude 231), Jude, like Henchard in The Mayor of Casterbridge, turns to other means:

What could he do of a lower kind than self-extermination; what was there less noble, more in keeping with his present degraded position? He could get drunk. Of course that was it; he had forgotten. Drinking was the regular, stereotyped resource of the despairing worthless. (Hardy, Jude 82)

In Man Against Himself Karl Menninger describes the excessive use of alcohol as chronic suicide, in which the “individual postpones death indefinitely, at a cost of suffering and impairment of function which is equivalent to a partial suicide – a ‘living death,’ it is true, but nevertheless living” (78). Jude is, however, very much aware of his actions and soon gives up drinking when his relationship with Sue begins. All these failed suicide attempts seem to illustrate what Jude himself calls his “weakness of character” (Hardy, Jude 13), but his final suicidal journey through the storm brings the proof to the contrary. Having lived a life in which all his dreams were crushed by others, his final act can be seen as the first powerful decision over his own life. When coming to the city he was denied his scholarly aspirations by the higher society because of his lower position on the social ladder and when trying to live his life with the woman he loved without marrying her, the narrow-mindedness of traditional society disapproved: “There is something external to us which says, “You shan’t!” First it said, “You shan’t learn!” Then it said, “You shan’t labour!” Now it says, “You shan’t love!” ’ (Hardy, Jude 407) Time and again Jude adapted his life plan to society’s wishes, disregarding
his own happiness, as Giordano explains: “So powerful are the collective forces of local customs, conventional morality, and a guilty social conscience that they undermine his life’s hope by compelling him to do the ‘honorable thing’” (119). As is the case for the felones de se in Hardy’s other Novels of Character and Environment, Jude’s suicide is not shown as a cowardly escape from life, but rather as an act of defiance. I concur with Giordano that we must “view his despair as a freely chosen act [and thus as] an act of self-assertion. Jude’s awareness that to continue living means to continue suffering leads him to choose no longer to live. Terrible though his choice is, it is thoroughly authentic” (132).

2.2.6.b. Little Father Time

The second, and probably most discussed, suicide in the novel is that of Little Father Time (Time). It is in no way comparable to that of Jude, or of any of the other characters I have discussed so far, as Little Father Time has no link whatsoever with the primitive socius of Hardy’s Wessex novels. Instead, he stands for the crushing power of modern consciousness, because while Time is definitely a typical emotional Hardy character, he is one dropped in the remorseless city against his own will. Even though their suicides and their respective motives may be at opposite ends of each other, as persons Little Father Time and Jude are very much alike.

Time is “Arabella’s boy” (Hardy, Jude 332), but taken in by Sue and Jude, when Arabella makes clear to Jude she wants nothing to do with “the child” (Hardy, Jude 329). In that, and many other ways, he resembles Jude as a young boy. He too is an unwanted child, very sensitive and ‘too old for his age’: “He was Age masquerading as Juvenility, and doing it so badly that his real self showed through crevices” (Hardy, Jude 332). From the start he is described as an odd and complex child:

[i]f Father Time is an unusual child because of his despondency and pessimism, he is also unusual because of his other-worldliness. He seems somehow to be detached from this world, to be more an observer and commentator on the unfolding panorama of life than an active participant in it. (Gordon 298)

He triggers the climax of the novel, namely the death of Jude and Sue’s children. Like Jude, his sense of duty is enormous and he executes the deed only to save his mother and father the trouble, as he puts it himself: “Because if I died in damnation, ‘twould save the
expense of a Christian funeral” (Hardy, Jude 337). Like Jude and Sue, but far more intense, Father Time is fully aware of his position: he knows he is an unwanted child “‘I ought not to be born, ought I?’ said the boy with misgiving” (Hardy, Jude 404) and feels absolutely lost in the world in which he finds himself. Jude describes his actions as follows:

It was in his nature to do it. The doctor says there are such boys springing up amongst us – boys of a sort unknown in the last generation – the outcome of new views of life. They seem to see all its terrors before they are old enough to have staying power to resist them. He says it is the beginning of the coming universal wish not to live. (Hardy, Jude 406)

In The Sane Society Erich Fromm describes this modern tendency to suicidal acts as follows: “A new question has arisen in modern man’s mind, the question, namely, whether ‘life is worth living’ and correspondingly, the feeling that one’s life ‘is a failure,’ or is ‘a success’. This idea is based on the concept of life as an enterprise which should show a profit” (149), which Fromm states is typical for modern, industrialized worlds. For Time, surrounded by railways and machinery, the connection to the body of the earth has transformed into a life embedded in the impersonal world of industrialization. He is, however, far too sensitive to function in this new world and clearly expresses his feelings of doubt on the worth of his own life: “It would be better to be out o’ the world than in it, wouldn’t it?” (Hardy, Jude 402)

Unlike his father in earlier days, Time does not hesitate a bit and decides to step out of life, “his face wearing the fixity of a thoughtful child’s who has felt the pricks of life somewhat before his time” (Hardy, Jude 5).
CONCLUSION

As mentioned in the introduction, Hardy is one of those authors who have been so thoroughly studied during the last decades that an immense array of material on his work is already at hand. As his oeuvre, especially his later and more mature work, abounds with references and symbolism, critics seem to be continually discovering new approaches to analyze his writings. It was my intention to shed new light on Hardy’s so-called fatalistic nature, by looking at the deaths of some of his most known characters. I subscribe to Giordano’s view that all these deaths can be seen as clear-cut suicidal acts, but unlike him, I allot them to the stifling nature of Hardy’s traditional communities.

It might seem awkward to write a dissertation about suicide, but it is exactly Hardy’s merit to provide insight in life by thoroughly analyzing it darkest sides. His ability to fathom man’s deepest psyche is astonishing, as he is not only able to place himself in the shoes of a person who sees death as the only option, but also to translate this desperate state of mind into words. Through a close analysis of his major novels, I tried to show the difference between Hardy’s non-judgemental attitude and the Victorian view on suicide, which was far more condemning. I found that Durkheim’s theory is still a very valid source for the study of self-murder, but also underlined its deficiencies. My main objection was, in line with Anderson, his assumption that the rise of suicide as a sociological phenomenon is naturally linked up with the rise of modernity. I came to the conclusion that in the Victorian Age most suicide statistics were incorrectly read, and found a good illustration of the opposite theory in Hardy’s novels, where all but one suicide takes place at the countryside, and not in the city.

In these novels, suicide is not described as a cowardly escape from a tough life, but rather as an act of defiance against a society that refused to accept one as one is. Hardy’s view of suicide as an act of self-assertion seems to coincide with Alvarez’s explanation of the suicidal process:

Suicide may be a declaration of bankruptcy which passes judgement on a life as one long history of failures. But it is a history which also amounts at least to this one decision which, by its very finality, is not wholly a failure. Some kind of minimal freedom – the freedom to die in one’s own way and in one’s own time – has been salvaged from the wreck of all those unwanted necessities.

(107)
This is very much so for Hardy’s self-destructive characters, as they all live a life dominated by others and finally find salvation in their choice to step out of life. This is not only the case for the positive acts of Eustacia, Tess and Boldwood, who actively decide to take their own lives, but also for the negative acts of Jude, Giles and Henchard, who put an end to themselves through passive behaviour. Both groups share the feeling of liberation, and even content, once they have made their final decision, as illustrated in the heartrending character of Tess Durbeyfield:

‘What is it, Angel?’ she said, starting up. ‘Have they come for me?’
‘Yes, dearest,’ he said. ‘They have come.’
‘It is as it should be,’ she murmured. ‘Angel, I am almost glad – yes, glad! This happiness could not have lasted. It was too much. I have had enough […]
She stood up, shook herself, and went forward, neither of the men having moved.
‘I am ready,’ she said quietly. (Hardy, Tess 396)

For all these characters death seems the only escape from the stifling environment they find themselves in. I tried to show in this dissertation how it is especially the community in which these personages live that drives them to their final act of desperation. I found that all Hardy’s settings fit the profile of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the primitive socius, as they display the four main characteristics: a strong connection to the earth, a remarkable presence of traditional and superstitious elements, solid kinship ties, and a subsequent culture of narrow-mindedness. Hardy’s characters are either unconventional types who try to break out of the traditional community – like Eustacia, Tess and Jude, or model inhabitants of the primitive socius who struggle with the modernization of their environment – like Henchard and Giles. Both types suffer from the stifling influence of their environment, but find no other way out than death. I underlined the fact that Hardy’s Wessex towns have the “qualities of a microcosm” (Kramer, Tragedy 23) in which [many] characters struggle blindly against the sheer dead weight of the human landscape by which they are inevitably trapped” (Enstice 180). These “stories of entrapment” (Alcorn 73) are most pronounced in the early novels, as the primitive socius is strongest then, while in the later novels – when Hardy’s belief in the traditional character of his Wessex region had already lessened, the characters are more mentally haunted by the narrow country spirit than pressured by their physical environment. I wanted to emphasize this evolution in Hardy’s Novels of Character and Environment and thus
nuance my thesis about the link between Deleuze and Guattari’s theory and the Wessex novels.

I hope that I was able to show in this dissertation that the study of Hardy’s work is certainly not exhausted as yet and that by applying new theories on his writings interesting insights can arise. I would like to end with a passage from Giordano’s study on Hardy’s self-destructive characters, as I feel that his words serve best as a conclusion for my dissertation:

In his diagnosis of his culture’s maladies, Hardy searches the human heart of darkness that our eyes are too weak or reluctant to probe, and his “obstinate questionings” and “blank misgivings” are often deeply disturbing. Yet, with Matthew Arnold, Hardy is one of the “saving remnant”; and even in the frightening murk of human self-destructiveness, his eyes strained to see the “way to the Better.” His courageous sincerity permitted, even required, Hardy to portray man’s vulnerability to self-destruction. But, as do all the greatest artists, Hardy teaches us not only that we must die (often by our own hand); he passionately reminds us how to live. (187)
ii In Gray’s “Elegy” the lines run as follows: “Far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife / Their sober wishes never learned to stray; / Along the cool sequestered vale of life / They kept the noiseless tenor of their way” (Gray, qtd. in Norton 2868).

iii Among others, Henry Charles Duffin, Phillip V. Allingham and Charles Whibley have assigned the deaths in Hardy’s novels to crass fate.

iv For Hardy the term modernity especially referred to the eradication of tradition, as Richard Hooker’s definition of the word explains: “The ‘crisis of modernity’ is the sense that modernity is a problem, that traditional ways of life have been replaced with uncontrollable change and unmanageable alternatives”. Several of Hardy’s characters are unable to deal with this new way of life and accordingly lose all zest for life.

v A. Alvarez notes that there was a real rise of suicide literature in the nineteenth century, but one that was primarily dominated by French, German and Italian writers. During that period “only three book-length English studies of suicide were published, all of them by medical men: Forbes Winslow’s The Anatomy of Suicide (1840), W. Wynn Westcott’s Suicide: Its History, Literature, Jurisprudence, Causation and Prevention (1885) and S.A.K. Strahan’s Suicide and Insanity: A Psychological and Sociological Study (1893)”. (12)

vi Hardy’s suicides are never described as cowardly deeds, but rather as acts of self-assertion. The character in question feels to be making his own life decisions for the first time, after living a life dominated by other people’s will. The final suicidal act is therefore never a struggle, but rather the ultimate discovery of happiness and liberation. J. Hillis Miller points out that “[the] odd serenity, in which a man is sure of disaster and yet calmly by that certainty into a mild, resigned happiness, is characteristic of the mood in which Hardy’s people go to meet death” (219). For further explanation, see my discussion of Jude.

vii Superstitious beliefs are not only characteristic of the primitive socius, however, but also of the Victorian attitude towards suicide: “Suicides had been buried at cross-roads because these were signs of the cross; because steady traffic over the suicide's grave could help keep the person's ghost down; and because ancient sacrificial victims had been slain at such sites. Since they were considered the ultimate sinners, suicides had been staked to prevent their restless wanderings as lost souls.” (Gates)
As noted earlier, I am very much aware of the fact that there can be no one-on-one relation between Deleuze and Guattari’s theory and Hardy’s novels. The society theory of Deleuze and Guattari is much broader a subject than it appears here and I confess only to have used the elements relevant for my study. The primitive socius is for instance also often typified by the use of “savage coding” (Holland 71), that is inscriptions or rituals used to show the membership of a community: “[i]n the primitive territorial machine, [it is customary to] mark bodies, which are the earth’s products . . . [by] tattooing, excising, incising [...] and initiating” (Stivale). This coding, and several other elements, are, however, not present in Hardy’s traditional communities – as they are obviously not fully primitive cultures, and therefore I will not elaborate on them.

Giordano explains how “[…] some critics, crediting Diggory Venn’s guess that Eustacia fell into the weir, insist that she died accidentally, while others, convinced by Clym, Captain Vye, and Charley that she wanted to end her existence, assert that Eustacia chose to drown herself” (55)

Alvarez’s assertion that “[t]he world of suicide is superstitious, full of omens” (144) seems to be especially true for Henchard. Alvarez further states that “[o]nce a man decides to take his own life he enters a shut-off, impregnable but wholly convincing world where every detail fits and each incident reinforces his decision. An argument with a stranger in a bar, an expected letter which doesn’t arrive, the wrong voice on the telephone, the wrong knock at the door, even a change in the weather – all seem charged with special meaning; they all contribute.” (144) For Henchard this is overtly so, as towards the end of his life, he searches for meaning in every action and gesture, from the weather prophet’s prediction to his mirrored image in the water.

In Man Against Himself, Karl Menninger describes alcoholics as chronic suicides (77). Henchard’s character answers perfectly to Menninger’s description of the alcoholic type: “‘Alcoholics’ are almost invariably jolly, sociable, talkative fellows who make themselves very popular, who indeed seem obliged to make themselves liked and are very skilful at doing so. It takes very little penetration to discover, however, that this inordinate wish to be loved which compels them to be at such pains to be charming and to win popularity in one circle or
another bespeaks a great underlying feeling of insecurity, a feeling which must constantly be denied, compensated for, or anesthetized.” (148)

xii Melbury’s obsession with finding the right partner for his daughter is a typical feature of the primitive socius, as Eugene W. Holland explains in his work Deleuze and Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus: Introduction to Schizoanalysis: “Marriage functions not merely as a pairing of two individuals, based on personal predilection and undertaken primarily for the purpose of bearing and raising children, but as a fully social event implicated in and governed by the entire social order, undertaken so as to consolidate and/or ameliorate the positions of entire families and lineages within the savage community.” (69)

xiii Dale Kramer points out that “Jude […] spends his whole life unsuccessfully searching for a community to which he can commit himself” (Cambridge 28) and thus feels he must be “an outsider to the end of [his] days!” (Hardy, Jude 396).

xiv In his introduction to Durkheim’s On Suicide, Richard Sennett notes that “[m]odern society is, […] in Durkheim’s view, deeply suspicious of ritual; the capitalist economy in particular stresses formal, operational rules and slights the psychology of participation” (xxiii).

xv In his seminal essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” Georg Simmel states that one cannot survive in the city without an intellectual screen which protects against an excess of emotional stimuli. Little Father Time clearly lacks this “intellectuality” or “reserve” as Simmel calls it (qtd. in Versluys 32), and takes on all the suffering around him. At the Great Wessex Agricultural Show for instance, he is shown to be unable to enjoy the simplest pleasure such as a beautiful flowergarden: “‘I am very, very sorry, father and mother,’ he said. ‘But please don’t mind! – I can’t help it. I should like the flowers very very much, if I didn’t keep on thinking they’d be all withered in a few days!’” (Hardy, Jude 358)

xvi It is the combination of all these elements that contributes to a climate of narrow-mindedness in the traditional society. As there exists a clear distinction between inside and outside in these communities, every element of a person’s conduct is judged by the entire group.

xvii I excluded Boldwood and Little Father Time from this categorization, as they do not belong either to the primitive socius as such, nor do they function as overtly non-conventional
characters. Little Father Time is out of category, as mentioned in my analysis of Jude, and Boldwood is non-conventional in the sense that he refuses to adapt to the community’s standards of marriage, but he never actively tries to oppose the rules of society.
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