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Green Hardy

Articles

Thomas Hardy and Ecosexuality

Thomas Hardy et l'écosexualité

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Abstracts

English Français

Building on past ecological readings of Hardy's exploration of the relationships between humans and the ecosystem, this paper takes further William Cohen's focus on affect and ecology in Hardy's works (2014) by examining the sensual or even sexual delight in nature suggested in various scenes of his fiction. The emergence of an "ecosexual" movement and its development into a field of study in the past twenty years point to a new conception of ecology resulting from a metaphorical shift from Earth as mother to Earth as lover, implying a more sustainable and reciprocal relationship. The ecosexuals' claim that the ecological crisis and the erotic crisis both arise from disconnection, and that therefore a healing relationship with the ecosystem requires a healing relationship with our bodies and sexuality, hearkens back to Hardy's preoccupations with the human-to-human and human-to-nonhuman physical connection. Was Hardy a precursor of this ecosexual awakening? To what extent do Hardy's novels illustrate and foreshadow the ecosexual movement's belief that "Eros holds the hope for the future of humankind"? (Anderlini-D'Onofrio & Hagamen)

Prenant appui sur les précédentes analyses qui ont pu être faites de l'exploration des relations entre humains et écosystème chez Hardy, cet article approfondit la question de l'affect et de l'écologie dans l'œuvre de Hardy étudiée par William Cohen (2014), en se penchant sur le plaisir sensuel voire sexuel que semble procurer la nature dans diverses scènes de ses romans. L'apparition d'un mouvement « écosexuel » et sa



l'intérêt de Hardy pour les liens physiques rattachant les humains aux humains et les humains aux non-humains. Hardy était-il un précurseur de l'éveil écosexuel ? Dans quelle mesure les romans de Hardy illustrent-ils et anticipent-ils l'opinion du mouvement écosexuel selon laquelle « Eros détient l'espoir de l'avenir de l'humanité » ? (Anderlini-D'Onofrio & Hagamen).

Index terms

Mots-clés : écosexualité, écologie, nature, écosystème, sensualité, interconnectivité, partenariats, éco-critique, environnement, études environnementales

Keywords: ecosexuality, ecology, nature, ecosystem, sensuality, interconnectedness, partnerships, green studies, ecocriticism

Works cited: Candour in English Fiction, Far from the Madding Crowd, Life's Little Ironies, Mayor of Casterbridge (The), Return of the Native (The), Tess of the d'Urbervilles, Woodlanders (The)

Full text

“The *ecological thought* is the thinking of interconnectedness”
Timothy Morton (Buell 96)

- 1 It is significant that the appeal of Hardy's pastoral stories is the same today as it was for his contemporary urban readers, dreaming of a green world remote from urban life. What has perhaps changed, or simply increased, in our twenty-first-century consciousness, is on the one hand our awareness of the ecosystem's fragility and of humans' responsibility in protecting it, and on the other hand the medical and social attention given to physical well-being and bodily contact with other human bodies and with non-human organisms. These two preoccupations, to my mind, account for readers' continued or renewed appreciation of Hardy's rural fiction, leading to the questions of his relevance to today's idea of writing about ecology and sexuality, and how the two mingle and bolster each other.
- 2 The emergence of an “ecosexual” movement in 2008, launched by the artists-activists Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle, and its development into a field of study point to a new conception of ecology resulting from a metaphorical shift from Earth as mother to Earth as lover, implying a more sustainable and reciprocal relationship. The ecosexuals' claim that the ecological crisis and the erotic crisis both arise from disconnection, and that therefore a healing relationship with the ecosystem entails a healing relationship with our bodies and sexuality, hearkens back to Hardy's preoccupations with human-to-human and human-to-nonhuman physical connections. Was Hardy a precursor of this ecosexual awakening? To what extent does his work foreshadow the ecosexual movement's belief that “Eros holds the hope for the future of humankind” (Anderlini-D'Onofrio & Hagamen 1)?
- 3 One ecosexual reading of Hardy harks back to many previous studies of his attempts to evade censure on the grounds of moral impropriety, by figuring female and male desire through a sexual connection with nature, using the natural world as a correlative device, and thus instrumentalising nature in human narratives (Huggan & Tiffin 215). Another reading may, on the

Hagamen 2), both human and nonhuman, based on affection and physical well-being?

4

5 Critics like Rosemarie Morgan have emphatically underlined Hardy's determination to write about the body, sensual delight and erotic pleasure: "Hardy kept firmly to his practice of celebrating the life of the senses" (Morgan 12). The question is: why? Why was Hardy so determined to stage his characters' bodies and sexual appetites? Was it to purposefully defy Victorian moral ideals, or to uphold the principle that in his own "representations of the world, the passions ought to be proportioned as in the world itself", as he asserts in the essay "Candour in English Fiction" (Hardy 1966, 126)? Was he, as John Alcorn contends, part of an artistic movement of "nature novel" writers who "were attempting to re-establish contact with the physical earth and the physical body" and "to recapture this simple bodily delight" (Alcorn 21)?

6 We could read Alcorn's phrasing as associating Hardy and the "naturalist" movement with the twenty-first-century ecosexual movement, whose creed precisely brings together the physical earth and the physical human body: "It offers a new interpretation of love that aligns sexuality and ecology", Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Hagamen explain (2). In fact, a helpful guide to understanding the ecosexual movement's artistic as well as political beliefs and aims is Elizabeth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle's "Ecosex Manifesto" (2011), which Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Hagamen have included in their anthology of ecosexual works. I will be referring to the following precepts in my examination of Hardy's writing:

i. WE ARE THE ECOSEXUALS. [...] In order to create a more mutual and sustainable relationship with the Earth, we collaborate with nature.

ii. WE MAKE LOVE WITH THE EARTH. We are aquaphiles, teraphiles, pyrophiles and aerophiles. We shamelessly hug trees, massage the Earth with our feet, and talk erotically to plants. We are skinny dippers, sun worshippers, and stargazers. We caress rocks, are pleased by waterfalls, and admire the Earth's curves often. We make love with the Earth through our senses. [...]

iv. WE ARE ECOSEX ACTIVISTS. We will save the mountains, waters and skies by any means necessary, especially through love, joy, and our powers of seduction. We will stop the rape, abuse and the poisoning of the Earth. (Anderlini-D'Onofrio & Hagamen 78)

7 But is an ecosexual reading of Hardy relevant, as a plea for sexual as well as ecological understanding and experience, as a quest for "symbiotic partnerships" (Anderlini-D'Onofrio & Hagamen 2) and interdependent human-nonhuman relationships?

8

9 Through the work of animal studies, and with regards to Hardy's affinity with Darwin's *Origin of Species*, explicitly asserted in the *Life of Thomas Hardy* (Hardy 1984, 275 & 376), the ecocritical focus has been largely on human-animal relationships, and relatively less on human-vegetal or human-elemental relationships. This, Huggan and Tiffin explain, is probably due to the fact that "[f]or western writers, at least, it has been more difficult to anthropomorphise the environment which, far from having its own providential fortunes and narrative trajectories, has been regarded as a mere backdrop against which human lives are played out" (Huggan & Tiffin 16). The following analyses will therefore leave aside human relationships to animals, which have previously been thoroughly studied, for instance by Anna West, to centre instead on associations with other nonhuman entities, mainly plants, land and water.

their natural surroundings: Bathsheba Everdene, to some extent, Sergeant Troy and Eustacia Vye – who longs for a more vivid existence in urban settings yet finds a degree of sensual satisfaction in her physical connection with the heath. I will consider how Hardy poetically reconnects such characters with the environment, in spite of the alienated position at first given to them by the narrative plot, as if the novels illustrated the Ecosex Manifesto’s precept: “We make love with the Earth through our senses”.

- 12 The short passage of Bathsheba’s sensual awakening as she sets out to meet Troy in the hollow amid the ferns is probably the best-known example of Hardy’s “ecosexual” writing:

The hill opposite Bathsheba’s dwelling extended, a mile off, into an uncultivated tract of land, dotted at this season with tall thickets of brake fern, plump and diaphanous from recent rapid growth, and radiant in hues of clear and untainted green. At eight o’ clock this midsummer evening, whilst the bristling ball of gold in the west still swept the tips of the ferns with its long, luxuriant rays, a soft brushing-by of garments might have been heard among them, and Bathsheba appeared in their midst, their soft, feathery arms caressing her up to her shoulders. (Hardy 1986, 142)

- 13 Besides the intimation of the heroine’s virginal purity, reflected in the environment (“uncultivated”, “diaphanous”, “untainted”), the central image of the brake fern persistently and compellingly conveys nascent, tender voluptuousness. In subsequent novels, the fern motif in scenes preceding amorous encounters correspondingly underlines the character’s growing sexual desire: Clym, for instance, waits for Eustacia to join him in a “nest of vivid green” (Hardy 2006, 174), highly reminiscent of its counterpart in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, where “the fresh young ferns were luxuriantly growing up” and “the air was warm with a vaporous warmth” replicated in the lover’s “warm excitement” (Hardy 2006, 175). But such descriptions may not be solely instrumental in representing desire: the poetic beauty of the language impresses me with the sense that Hardy could perceive the essential sensuousness of plants, quite apart from his narrative intents, and took care to sensitise his readership to it.

- 14 On this particular point, the two occurrences of Eustacia’s ecosexual pleasure, in *The Return of the Native*, continue to surprise me with their relative inconspicuousness and yet powerfully erotic significance. The first recalls Bathsheba’s first encounter with Troy, as her skirt becomes entangled in his spur, with the notable difference that in the later novel the meeting is human-vegetal instead of human female-male, and that Eustacia’s reaction to the entrapment is serene relish: “A bramble caught hold of her skirt, and checked her progress. Instead of putting it off and hastening along, she yielded herself up to the pull, and stood passively still” (Hardy 2006, 53). This example of the heroine’s delight in the caresses of nature may go by unnoticed, until it is emphasised by a second, more obvious manifestation of it: “If, in passing under one of the Egdon banks, any of [her hair’s] thick skeins were caught, as they sometimes were, by a prickly tuft of the large *Ulex Europaeus* – which will act as a sort of hair-brush – she would go back a few steps, and pass against it a second time” (61). Eustacia is shown to be actively seeking sensual pleasure here and what is more, the iterative “would” reveals how frequently she indulges in this sensation, which borders on erotic arousal.

- 15 Like Eustacia, whose tacit sensual delight in the proximity of nature plainly conflicts with her professed abhorrence of the heath, Troy, in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, is at times depicted relishing physical contact with the natural world, while the

denotes stillness and peace:

The broad steely sea, marked only by faint lines, which had the semblance of being etched thereon to a degree not deep enough to disturb its general evenness, stretched the whole width of his front and round to the right, where, near the town and port of Budmouth, the sun bristled down upon it, and banished all colour, to substitute in its place a clear oily polish. Nothing moved in sky, land, or sea, except a frill of milkwhite foam along the nearer angles of the shore, shreds of which licked the contiguous stones like tongues. (Hardy 1986, 247)

16 In the last sentence, however, stillness changes into sensual movement, supported by Hardy's repetitive use of consonant sounds, thus reviving Troy's sensuous temperament to the effect that "Troy's nature freshened within him; he thought he would rest and bathe here before going further" (Hardy 1986, 247). The location, "a small basin of sea enclosed by the cliffs", is another of Hardy's characteristically secluded spots, like the fir plantation and the hollow amid the ferns (247), inviting sensual enjoyment once again, along with Troy's usual urge to test his own limits in taking his pleasure, inspiring him "to get a little of the ocean swell" (247) and swim out to sea where an undercurrent then threatens his life.

17 The eroticism of bodily contact with plants and the natural elements, introduced in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and made more explicit in *The Return of the Native*, reaches a climax in *Tess*, in the uncultivated garden episode, beautifully analysed by Rosemarie Morgan (87–88), who scrutinises the complexity of Tess's response to the vibrant vegetation around her, and by Annie Ramel, who uses Lacan's concept of Other *jouissance* to suggest that the "exaltation" (Ramel 58) Tess experiences in the garden is a form of "surplus enjoyment which is 'more than' phallic *jouissance*", "the Other, unspeakable, feminine *jouissance*, the enjoyment which is 'Beyondsex,' 'beyond the phallus'" (57–58). Since Morgan, Ramel and other critics, notably Marjorie Garson, have already deciphered this scene in great detail to give us to understand how "[t]he heavy, sticky ripeness of the garden suggests the pressure on her of sheer sexuality" (Garson 146), I shall not dwell upon it but rather emphasise, firstly, the skill and confidence Hardy acquired in making use of nature to allude to his female characters' sexual appetite, and secondly, the origins of the ecosexual concept of finding erotic pleasure in physical contact with the vegetal world. This concept, albeit very marginally heralded in Hardy's fiction, was to be fully exploited by an avid reader of his novels, D. H. Lawrence, who like Hardy, progressively grew bolder and more explicit in his depictions of ecosexual relationships, notably in *Women in Love* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*¹.

18

19 Hardy's care in constructing wonderfully complex descriptions of remarkable landscapes brings to mind the phrase "[We] admire the Earth's curves often" in Stephens and Sprinkle's "Ecosex Manifesto". Besides Hardy's obvious artistic thrill in creating or recreating natural settings, it is certain that he imbued particular locations with ecosexuality to serve the erotic dimension of his plots, and it is most likely that he also took pleasure in depicting what he perceived as the sensuality of the environment.

20 Egdon Heath is the best example of this, of course, portrayed as it is as a living body, with a "face" and "complexion" (Hardy 2006, 8), on which the barrow is said to resemble "a wart on an Atlantean brow" (15). It has "rounds and hollows" (10), "hillocks, pits, ridges, acclivities", and a "bossy projection" (15), and I would agree with Rosemarie Morgan's interpretation of

precipitated it” (Hardy 2006, 8). Its sensuality is again hinted at several lines later – “Then Egdon was aroused to reciprocity; for the storm was its lover” (10) –, Hardy’s choice of words leaving no doubt as to his intention of creating a landscape whose physicality is palpable and invites humans to partake in its sexual appeal.

21 Although Eustacia’s thoughts and words regarding Egdon Heath make it clear that she does not feel any kinship with the place, Hardy’s descriptions of the heath and of the voluptuous heroine who appears upon it as early as the second chapter imply that the two are more closely associated than Eustacia’s later declarations suggest (“’Tis my cross, my shame, and will be my death!”; Hardy 2006, 78). When the reddleman discerns “the figure” on top of the barrow, Hardy heavily insists upon Eustacia’s incorporation into the heath, first from a historical angle as the imagined “person of one of the Celts who built the barrow” (15), then from an artistic perspective stressing the harmony of the arrangement she offers by standing alone on the barrow, through the use of the terms “perfect, delicate and necessary finish”, “homogeneous”, “unity” and “organic part” (15). Morgan also notes the Greek motif which unites the heath and the Olympian Eustacia: “Hardy names its uppermost reaches ‘Atlantean’ and places upon its peak the heroine, herself of Greek extraction” (Morgan 65). Eustacia’s physical attractiveness thus reflects upon the heath, and vice-versa. Various other instances of Eustacia’s movements on the heath similarly show her to be physically united with it, despite her proclaimed aversion.

22 Lovers have always used nature’s wild recesses to experience erotic love away from society’s judgemental gaze, inspiring writers from Hardy and Lawrence to John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* to compose beautifully sensual scenes of lovemaking in a green sanctuary, and Egdon is accordingly used for erotic nocturnal trysts, first between Eustacia and Wildeve, then Eustacia and Clym. The “mollusc” simile, applied to Eustacia and Wildeve, has already been given multiple readings, notably by Morgan who draws attention to “the sense of mutuality, reciprocity, and sexual equivalence which the hermaphrodite (mollusc) image introduces” (Morgan 60). Morgan thus demonstrates “sharpened appetites and sexual arousal in *both* his lovers” (60). I will insist not only on both lovers’ sexual desire but also on the crucial participation of the heath in their love-making: “Their black figures sank and disappeared from against the sky. They were as two horns which the sluggish heath had put forth from its crown, like a mollusc, and had now again drawn in” (Hardy 2006, 79). Eustacia and Wildeve are but two parts of the whole formed by the heath, which produces them and absorbs them, its sluggishness reminiscent of their own listless characters. If the image of a sluggish mollusc does not exactly elicit erotic appeal, the suggestion of a slow drawing in may point to intercourse, and the fact that the heath, as an earth-embracing slug, draws the lovers into itself, indicates that Hardy meant it to be as a third lover in this relationship that can be read as ecosexual.

23

24 “Imagining the Earth as a lover we share initiates a journey toward a more reciprocal and regenerative relationship with one another and this living Earth” (Anderlini-D’Onofrio & Hagamen 23), the ecosexual movement provokingly claims, thus replacing the traditional cultural and literary metaphor of a bountiful, protective “Mother Nature” with the new representation of nature as a vulnerable partner in need of care. Indeed, when we consider Gabriel Oak’s relationship to nature, we should note that aside from his overtly-praised ability to live in harmony with “the Great Mother” (Hardy 1986, 188), Gabriel is portrayed reading the signs of nature and receiving the fruits of nature, but rarely giving back to nature: his attitude to “Mother Nature” is evidently that of a grateful son, but is it reciprocal?

Gabriel, as a shepherd, is also a nurturing figure, a kind of mother to his sheep; indeed we initially see him practising midwifery under the aegis of Lucina and getting up at night to feed the baby. He is on good terms with the 'Great Mother', Nature herself, whose reliable signs he alone reads. These female identifications give Gabriel's character stability and maturity; indeed, it is his solidarity with the Great Mother which is the basis of his own inner unity. (Garson 29)

26 On the other hand, Gabriel's motherly, nurturing, protective relationship with the environment is replicated in his relationship with Bathsheba, which appears as far from erotic: "the peculiar thing about the novel is that this final union [of Oak and Bathsheba] with the nurturing mother must be gained at the price of renouncing other kinds of gratification, especially the sexual", Steig comments (56). Gabriel's association with nature and with Bathsheba, respectful and thankful as he is, seems therefore more maternal and utilitarian than sexual and reciprocal, in that his handling of both enables him to reach social success and economic stability.

27 After the glorious image of the fruitful "Great Mother" in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, representations of a once benevolent Mother Nature give way to melancholy descriptions of nature as a barren female body, in the later novels, in a reversal of the historical "symbolic gendering of 'land' as female" (Buell 103). In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the "Great Mother" embodied by Egdon Heath is still depicted as a fertile entity whose "tumuli [...] jutted roundly into the sky from the uplands, as though they were the full breasts of Diana Multimammia supinely extended there" (Hardy 1974a, 350). But it no longer sustains the humans dwelling there, like Michael Henchard, who ends up wasting away in a cottage without eating (352).

28 *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* offers a still more distressing vision, in the reading Marjorie Garson provides, of nature as a seemingly fertile female body, almost identical to the description at the end of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, but for whom sexual opportunities are now exhausted:

The vision is that of a defaced or deformed or scattered body. The land around Flintcomb-Ash is imaged as an immense recumbent female, 'bosomed with semi-globular tumuli – as if Cybele the Many-breasted were supinely extended there' [Hardy 1993, 300]. Upon this gigantic but sterile mother lie scattered and relatively tiny fragments of the male body, the phallic stones which are mentioned in two different contexts by the narrator, and which Tess, characteristically, does not recognize [415]. (Garson 148)

29 As in the *The Woodlanders*, the fertility of nature as mother has turned to sterility and death, very literally for Giles of course, but also, here, in the disquieting occurrences of tree imagery listed by Garson, who concludes that "[t]he potentially positive image of the tree is exploded into a demonic emblem of the intuition Hardy will not openly voice: that the body of the Great Mother is, for males at least, the body of death" (Garson 92). Yet *The Woodlanders* also operates another potential shift from "Earth as Mother" or deadly anti-mother, to "Earth as lover" (Anderlini-D'Onofrio & Hagamen 23) with Giles's sensual relationship to the trees, which I will discuss further on, especially since, as Squires explains, "the hut in *The Woodlanders* is a chamber of sickness and death, a place of degeneration that encourages not sexual fulfilment but a full savoring by Grace and Marty of abortive, disappointed love" (Squires 170): where human love and sexuality fail, perhaps nonhuman partnerships may offer an alternative, a healing and comforting relationship, through which "we become more aware of Gaia's hospitality and more in touch with our own desire to reciprocate as loving tenders of Gaia's ecosystems" (Anderlini-D'Onofrio & Hagamen 23).

even though the occurrences of potentially sexual relationships with nature are few, they explore the possibility of finding physical as well as emotional comfort in nonhuman entities. In this sense Hardy's novels correspond perfectly to what Buell calls "ecocritical interest in the idea of some sort of inherent affective if not also spiritual bond between individual humans and the nonhuman world" (Buell 90). One aspect of the affective or spiritual bond with nature which Hardy creates applies to his suffering characters and offers them a substitute for insufficient human affection. The example of Eustacia Vye illustrates David Ellis's observation that "when erotic satisfaction is denied by other human beings it can be discovered, or at least sought, in the natural world" (Ellis 116). Indeed, the sensual enjoyment Eustacia derives from the caresses of brambles and brush-like bushes comments on the sexual inadequacy of her human lovers, Wildeve and Yeobright, and establishes the heath as a surrogate lover.

31 Conversely, the nonhuman world may provide consoling unsexual relationships when human sexual relationships have failed to bring fulfilment. This can be seen in the second hollow-amid-the-ferns passage of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, which acts as a negative image of the first in Chapter 28, after Bathsheba has recognised "the Τετεια of her union with Troy" (Hardy 1986, 231). Following the hints that Bathsheba is ready to recover from her delirium of the night before – "it was with a *freshened* existence and a *cooler* brain that, a long time afterwards, she became *conscious* of some interesting proceedings which were going on in the trees above her head and around" (232; italics mine) – a series of onomatopoeias emulating bird song gives evidence both of Bathsheba's pleasure in concentrating on identifying birds and thus being distracted from other thoughts, and of Hardy's pleasure in recreating the sounds in script:

Next: 'Chee-weeze-weeze-weeze!' from another retreat.
It was a finch.
Third: 'Tink-tink-tink-tink-a-chink!' from the hedge.
It was a robin.
'Chuck-chuck-chuck!' overhead.
A squirrel. (Hardy 1986, 232)

32 The joys of watching her horses drinking and playing in the pool of water, of making the colourful leaves whirl around her, of admiring the beauty of the light effects at dawn, all testify to the sensuous though unsexual delight Bathsheba experiences, renewing her physical bond with the nonhuman world. The presence of "the beautiful yellowing ferns with their feathery arms" (Hardy 1986, 232) hearkens back to the ferns of Chapter 28, but the change in colour points to the change in Bathsheba, while the evocation of their softness suggests that regardless of the change in Bathsheba's human relationships, sensual delight in nature is still possible. The description of the place ends with the horror of the swamp "in the immediate neighbourhood of comfort and health" (233), which stresses by contrast the comfort she can find in other nonhuman entities.

33 Hardy's texts brim with similar scenes of visual or tactile delight in the nonhuman, whether in rural or urban settings, and are sometimes explicitly expressive of the solace Nature affords the distressed character. In the story "The Son's Veto", for instance, the unhappy heroine regularly watches the procession of horses and carts going to market in London: "Wrapped in a cloak, it was soothing to watch and sympathize with them when depression and nervousness hindered sleep, and to see how the fresh green-stuff brightened to life as it came opposite the lamp, and how the sweating animals steamed and shone with their miles of travel" (Hardy 1968, 44). George Levine has provided a compelling argument about Hardy's skill at writing about the nonhuman

birdsong” (38), so palpable in the passages quoted earlier. What such attentiveness to and delight in the beauty of the nonhuman world achieves is the revelation of “a loving, ethically charged relationship with the whole range of nature, organic and inorganic” (29), as I shall now examine in *The Woodlanders* more particularly.

34

For critics like Michael Squires and William Cohen, *The Woodlanders*’ Marty South and Giles Winterborne appear to have renounced the possibility of sexual relationships with humans, and their partnership with nature is accordingly unerotic: “the link between them, as we have seen, is not so much sexual as arboreal: they share a common bond to the trees and, through that, to each other, to the extent that they are not wholly separate from the woodland landscape” (Cohen 22). Marty and Giles’ relationship to each other is thus created by their affective or spiritual partnership with the woodland ecosystem, pointing once again to the interconnectedness advocated by the ecosexual movement, whereby a caring partnership with nature bolsters caring partnerships between humans, which in turn ensure sustainable management of the ecosystem, as performed by the two characters.

36 Interestingly, Squires writes:

The knowledge, understanding, and sympathy with which Giles and Marty are able to approach nature allows them to form a unique, asexual alliance with nature: a marriage. Both renounce human sexuality: Giles is free from gross passion and at the hut observes a severe propriety; at the moonlit close, Marty ‘looked almost like a being who had rejected with indifference the attribute of sex’ [Hardy 1974, 344]. (Squires 156)

37 Here Squires emphasises the idea of “a marriage” with nature, which ecosexuals posit as one of the partnerships “that better enable us to steward our ecological life-support systems” (Anderlini-D’Onofrio & Hagamen 84). Since 2008, Beth Stephens and Annie Sprinkle, the authors of the “Ecosex Manifesto”, have staged and participated in ecosexual wedding ceremonies, beginning with their own “Wedding to the Earth” in May 2008. In those ecologically-minded happenings, two humans marry each other before pledging themselves to a nonhuman entity, in effect “wedding” a third partner: the earth, the sky, the sea, the moon, the mountains, etc.² Anderlini-D’Onofrio explains the ecocentric purpose of this pledge: “In wedded union, they care for the body of the beloved, tend to the soils, the trees, and the waters with their own hands” (84), although, of course, the media attention the events receive also serves to advertise their political views on ecology and homosexual rights.

38

39 Such tender care for the soils and trees is exactly the responsibility which Giles has taken on, beyond the merely economic pursuit of forestry, since Hardy deliberately explains that “Winterborne found delight in the work even when, as at present, he contracted to do it on portions of the woodland in which he had no personal interest” (Hardy 1974b, 60). Moreover, his loving relationship with trees takes on a sensual dimension in the oft-quoted passage “Winterborne’s fingers were endowed with a gentle conjuror’s touch in spreading the roots of each little tree, resulting in a sort of caress under which the delicate fibres all laid themselves out in their proper directions for growth” (61). Most critics stress the “sympathetic identification” (Garson 82) or compassionate interdependence between Giles and the trees he plants, without considering the sensuous picture created by the terms “spreading”, “caress”, “delicate” and “laid themselves out”. Although John Heaney comes close to a sensual

who assists him in the planting.

40 Michael Squires and Marjorie Garson interpret Giles's relationship to nature not as that of a lover or spouse but a son of nature and child of the earth (Squires 136) or else, quoting the text itself, "Autumn's very brother" (Hardy 1974b, 194), "tied by sympathy with trees into the ongoing organic life of nature" (Garson 83). What these interpretations elicit is rather a sense of inherited *knowledge* – which most studies of *The Woodlanders* focus on – and platonic kinship, than of a dedicated partnership with an ecological intent. However, aside from the particular instance of human-vegetal sensuality quoted above, I have to agree with Garson, Cohen and Heaney that *The Woodlanders* draws more attention to the companionship the woods offer the human characters, than to any ecosexual relationship.

41 Yet the ecosexual notion of interdependent loving care for humans and nonhumans is consistently present in the novel: Cohen's remark that "one way of reading the novel is to regard the trees as people and the people as trees" (Cohen 10) rejoins Heaney's later study of the ontological continuity between human characters and the vegetal environment (Heaney 528). Both underscore the ecological dimension of *The Woodlanders* as a novel representing the "symbiotic partnerships" (Anderlini-D'Onofrio & Hagamen 2) between humans and trees, or humans and the environment more generally, advocated by the ecosexual movement. Even the largely problematic instance of John South's relationship with the tree outside his bedroom may tentatively be read in an ecosexual perspective: while his relationship with the tree is not perceived as symbiotic by the character, he does identify with it and ultimately the tree's death induces his own. Though the event is finally tragic, it nevertheless underlines the ideas of human-vegetal interconnectedness and of environmental responsibility, albeit through a sombre and distorting lens.

42 Finally, what sets Marty and Giles apart from all the other characters in the story is their ability to "identify with rather than exploit other creatures" (Garson 82), a determining sign of moral worth in Hardy characters, and also one which, by contrast, denounces characters who exploit nature selfishly, almost in the shape of an ecological appeal to "stop the rape, abuse and the poisoning of the Earth," as formulated by the "Ecosex Manifesto."

43 Conversely, I would add to Garson's assertion that "[t]hose characters whose failure to respond to the spirit of [Egdon] heath is expressed by their willingness to exploit its bits and pieces are in the end undone" (Garson 67), the observation that the same characters typically and, it seems, concurrently, exploit humans as unconcernedly as nonhumans in order to achieve their aims. Wildeve, who "sends the moth to its death in the candle and uses the glow-worms as light to gamble by" (67) uses Thomasin and Eustacia in exactly the same carefree manner, to suit his economic or sexual needs. Eustacia herself "appropriates and distorts nature's language" (67) by manipulating little Johnny Nunsuch in his ignorance of the habits of frogs, to serve her romantic purposes, just as she will later manipulate Clym, albeit unsuccessfully. Clym too misuses Eustacia of course, insensitive to her almost physical desire to be transplanted into a more urban, active setting than Egdon Heath, as he had previously misused "the moon's eclipse as a lover's clock" (67). The characters who do not acknowledge "nature as a living whole from which it is dangerous to appropriate parts at will" (67) not only "come to no good" (67) individually but endanger, by not caring for it, the ecosystem on which their lives depend: Sergeant Troy's mistreatment of the caterpillar, of Poppet the horse, Fanny Robin and Bathsheba is repeated in his reckless intention to "exploit the rural world for the income it can provide" (Squires 136), and his

- 45 Hardy's exquisite mastery of the natural "objective correlative" is widely agreed upon, but it would be taking a narrow view of his creative powers to consider the sexual treatment of the nonhuman as a mere tool to avoid Victorian censure. Just how far such sexual treatment of the natural world extends is difficult to delineate, precisely because Hardy was a master of literary disguise.
- 46 Setting him up against the ecosexual movement's precepts of ecology through sexuality allows an approach which has shown that Hardy partly anticipates ecosexual principles: firstly, because he suggests the reality of an ecological crisis, visible in the depletion of the natural environment by human actions; and secondly, because his subtext also implies an erotic crisis, since his characters, both female and male, are seized by sexual impulses which the narrative then punishes or stifles.
- 47 Although it would be excessive to assert that Hardy's novels connect the two crises in the way the ecosexual movement does, they do repeatedly highlight the awareness of the intrinsic sensuality of nature and of the sensual experience human bodies can have with nature. It can thus be argued that Hardy was indeed a precursor of the ecosexual movement insofar as he later inspired D. H. Lawrence to explicitly develop the idea of a regenerating sexual experience of nature.
- 48 Moreover, Hardy's novels, short stories and poems promote a sustainable and reciprocal partnership with the ecosystem, evidenced by the successes and failures of human-to-human and human-to-nonhuman relationships. However, the ecosexual belief in the salvation of humanity and the ecosystem by means of physical love seems rather too idealistic and unconventional for Hardy. His texts adhere to the *cautionary* category of green writing, in my opinion, as they issue a warning against the neglect or ill-treatment of the natural environment. In that sense, Hardy's work rejoins Huggan and Tiffin's argument that "the mediating function of social and environmental *advocacy* [...] might turn imaginative literature into a catalyst for social action" (Huggan & Tiffin 12). Indeed, if we consider the Ecosex Manifesto's fourth precept "WE ARE ECOSEX ACTIVISTS. We will save the mountains, waters and skies by any means necessary, especially through love, joy, and our powers of seduction", the strength of Hardy's literary powers of seduction lies in his ability to kindle joy in and love for nature, inducing his readers today to take steps towards saving the ecosystem.

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2 To read more about the Ecosex Wedding Happenings: Ecosex Weddings | Sprinkle Stephens (ucsc.edu)

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