

**“WITH MY CRUST OF BREAD AND LIBERTY”: FREEDOM AND SOCIAL
CONVENTIONS IN THOMAS HARDY'S *LIFE'S LITTLE IRONIES***

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Resumo: O objetivo deste artigo é analisar a associação entre liberdade e convenções sociais no livro de contos *Life's Little Ironies* [*Pequenas Ironias da Vida*] (1894), de Thomas Hardy. Os contos apresentam diversos aspectos relacionados à liberdade de consciência e de conduta moral, à liberdade de expressão, à liberdade do corpo e à liberdade dos desejos. Tais aspectos estão intimamente relacionados ao poder das convenções sociais em restringir o âmbito de liberdade dentro do qual as personagens lidam com suas escolhas e percebem suas possibilidades de ação. As convenções sociais são aqui representadas pela mobilidade social, ambição e por idealizações convencionais do amor e do casamento, todos os quais possuem uma natureza e importância arbitrária que são problematizadas por Hardy. Em seu questionamento dos limites estritos impostos à liberdade individual na sociedade vitoriana, Hardy, podemos dizer, se vale do trabalho de John Stuart Mill, cujo livro *On Liberty* [*Sobre a liberdade*] (1859) desenvolve as idéias centrais que circulavam no debate intelectual da época. Por trás da representação de Hardy do conflito entre liberdade e convenções sociais em *Life's Little Ironies*, podemos perceber a “tirania social”, nas palavras de Mill, agindo sobre as personagens que, ao fim, não conseguem superar as coerções da sociedade, o que acaba por levar-lhes a um fim trágico.

Palavras-chave: Thomas Hardy; contos; liberdade; convenções sociais; John Stuart Mill.

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyze the association between freedom and social conventions in the book of short stories *Life's Little Ironies* (1894), by Thomas Hardy. The stories encompass different aspects of liberty, such as freedom of moral conscience and conduct, freedom of expression, freedom of the body, and freedom of desires. These different aspects are closely related to the power of social conventions in terms of the way they impose limitations on the scope of freedom with which the characters deal with their choices and perceive their possibilities of action. Social conventions are here represented by social mobility, ambition, and conventional ideals of love and marriage, which arbitrary nature and importance is challenged by Hardy. In his questioning of the narrow scope of individual freedom in Victorian society, Hardy may be said to be drawing on the work of John Stuart Mill, whose *On Liberty* (1859) develops many ideas which were in the center of the intellectual debate of the day. Behind Hardy's rendering of the conflict between freedom and social conventions in *Life's Little Ironies*, we can see

“social tyranny”, as Mill puts it, acting upon the characters who cannot, in the end, overcome the social constraints, thus bringing upon them a tragic fate.

Key-words: Thomas Hardy; short stories; freedom; social conventions; John Stuart Mill.

Thomas Hardy’s short story collection *Life’s Little Ironies* offers a striking set of examples illustrating the strong association between freedom and social conventions in Victorian England. The stories encompass multiple aspects of freedom closely related to social mobility, ambition, and conventional ideals of love and marriage—issues imposing limits on the freedom and independence of Hardy’s characters, who, as one might well expect, suffer misfortunate consequences as a result of these restraints. In his varied representation of social conventions, Hardy challenges the arbitrary nature and importance of these conventions, showing how they painfully restrict human feelings and experiences, and at the same time, he questions the narrow scope of freedom in the society represented.

First published as a volume in 1894, *Life’s Little Ironies* (hereafter *LLI*)²³ took on its present form in 1912, when Hardy rearranged some of the stories in this book and also in *Wessex Tales*, his first collection of stories, making both books more cohesive in regard to their themes. *LLI* contains an initial section with seven stories and a second section entitled “A few crusted characters”, made up of nine “colloquial sketches”, as Hardy called them, the study of which is beyond the scope of this paper and therefore they will not be examined here. In relation to the first section, the stories were published individually in different magazines between 1888 and 1893, and they generally reflect an urban and *fin-de-siècle* society, in contrast to the rural background found in *Wessex Tales* or the remoteness of the eighteenth century legends depicted in *A Group of Noble Dames*, Hardy’s second collection of stories.

The contemporaneity of the stories in *LLI* offered an opportune setting for Hardy to cast a critical eye on the profound effects of the modernization of English society, circumscribed to the “partly real, partly dream-country”²⁴ (2008c: 3) of Wessex. Although Hardy is not a standard social realist, his fiction does indicate a strong concern for social issues, in particular, according to Patricia Ingham, “the similar injustice in the conventional treatment of the working classes and of women”, which are explored through the common theme of “social mobility” (2003: 104). Here, Ingham refers to Hardy’s later novels, but the same assessment could easily apply to the stories of *LLI*. In “A Tragedy of Two Ambitions”, Joshua Halborough and his brother Cornelius, whose father is a drunken millwright, desperately strive for social acknowledgement by struggling to enter the Anglican Church—a path similarly attempted by Jude Fawley in

²³ All references to *Life’s Little Ironies* are from the Oxford World’s Classics Edition, 2008a, edited by Alan Manford. The original spelling is maintained in all quotations throughout this paper.

²⁴ Hardy’s 1902 Preface for *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

Hardy's eponymous last novel, published in 1895, a year after the first edition of *LLI*. The prospect of social ascendance and of a secure household, combined with some inertness of personality, lures a housemaid into marrying her master, again a parson of the Anglican Church, in "The Son's Veto". The problems of gender and class bias reveal themselves in Hardy's work when the characters attempt to move or act beyond their prescribed social roles, impelled by their assimilation of Victorian conventional ideals of ambition, love, marriage, and social and religious morality.

The yearnings for these conceptualized Victorian ideals originate a conflict between what is prescribed by social norms and what lies in the individual's instinct or, in other words, between conventions and spontaneity, or impulses. In relation to this conflict, it could be suggested that Hardy translates into literary narrative the precursory ideas developed by John Stuart Mill, whose famous essay *On Liberty* had a strong influence on Hardy²⁵. Though published in 1859, the claims of *On Liberty* were still part of current reality in the late nineteenth century, when Hardy wrote and published the stories in *LLI*. Many concepts elaborated by Mill can be perceived in Hardy's stories, in particular on the theme of limits between "individual independence and social control" (Mill, 1859: 8), and there is also the criticism about naturalization and acceptance of customs, and about morality as imposed by upper classes in conformation to self-interest. Central to Mill's thought is the concept of "tyranny of the majority", by which he meant that society collectively oppresses individuals by means other than the law, and he argues its effects can be even more damaging than the ones caused by the oppression exercised by public authority:

Society can and does execute its own mandates: and if it issues wrong mandates instead of right, or any mandates at all in things with which it ought not to meddle, it practises a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, though not usually upheld by such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself. (1859: 8)

For Mill, the damaging effects of the "tyranny of the majority" are worse because of the deceptive and arbitrary nature of social customs, which are taken for granted and not seen as the means society has to impose its opinion and influence the individual. Thus, "tyranny of the majority" is connected to the "tyranny of the prevailing opinion", which imposes "its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct" (Ibid), and it punishes

²⁵ In Hardy's restored autobiography *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy* (1984), there is an entry about Hardy's impression of Mill, who Hardy had seen giving a public speech: "The appearance of the author of the treatise, *On Liberty* (which we students of that date knew almost by heart) was so different from the look of persons who usually address crowds in the open air that it held the attention of people for whom such a gathering in itself had little interest." (Hardy, 1984: 355-356).

everyone who does not act according to its ways. The problem is that, as an opinion, this kind of tyranny is subjective and biased with the majority's interests or preferences, and it does not consider individuality even in cases in which a person's own ideas and feelings do not cause harm to others. It is in these cases, which do not concern or harmfully affect others, that according to Mill an individual's "independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign" (Ibid: 12), thus objecting to society's will to interfere in all aspects of individual life.

Through the use of irony of situation, Hardy depicts those damaging effects of social customs that thwart the characters' aspirations. In the stories of *LLI*, the characters' acceptance of norms restricts freedom of action and feeling, and by accepting these norms, the character involved is taken in an opposite direction to his or her personal expectations and desires. As in many of Hardy's novels, the characters sustain hope for something which stays persistently, and ultimately, unachieved. However, as Hardy stated in his 1895 preface to the fifth and later editions of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*: "a novel is an impression, not an argument" (2008b: 5), therefore we should read his fiction in general neither as an accurate rendering of Mill's thoughts, nor as a faithful reproduction of reality.

For Tzvetan Todorov (2009: 77), an artist's point of view differs from that of a philosopher in that the latter's work is more of an abstract nature, with a tendency for formulating concepts and propositions, whereas literature tends to be more evasive and creative, providing multiple perspectives of interpretation. Also, with respect to the potentiality of literature in comparison to philosophy, Todorov says that "in giving shape to an object, an event or a character, the writer is not imposing a thesis, but inviting the reader to formulate it: instead of imposing, he is proposing, thus leaving the reader free and, at the same time, inviting him to become more active"²⁶ (2009: 78, my translation). That is to say, in literature, the reader must effectively and creatively engage with the work in order to form personal symbolic interpretation of the ideas contained therein, ideas triggering the mind of the reader by their suggestive nature.

The above invitation can be taken up in the case of the short stories in *LLI*, stories that move the reader towards an insightful comprehension of limitations imposed on human freedom, whether applied to voice, body, desire, or moral conscience being tamed by, what Hardy called, "social conventions and contrivances—the artificial forms of living" (1984: 222)²⁷. Consequently, in the following discussion of my reading of the stories, it is my aim to show a few different aspects of liberty present in *Life's Little*

²⁶ "Ao dar forma a um objeto, um acontecimento ou um caráter, o escritor não faz a imposição de uma tese, mas incita o leitor a formulá-la: em vez de impor, ele propõe, deixando, portanto, seu leitor livre ao mesmo tempo em que o incita a se tornar mais ativo".

²⁷ This expression comes from an entry mentioned just after a note regarding the magazine publication of "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions". Here is the full entry: "The literary productions of men of rigidly good family and rigidly correct education mostly treat social conventions and contrivances—the artificial forms of living—as if they were cardinal facts of life." (Hardy, 1984: 222).

Ironies, such as freedom of moral conscience and conduct, freedom of expression, freedom of the body, and freedom of desires. As the stories are centered in the characters' personal dilemmas or struggles, the focus lies on the question of individual freedom, which involves matters of choice as well as matters of possibilities and boundaries, both connected to the issue of social constraints.

Bearing in mind the above, I have arranged the stories into two different groups in order to better expose the many aspects of freedom involved. The first group encompasses the stories with social mobility and ambition as their most dominant theme, and is composed of "The Son's Veto", "For Conscience' Sake", "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions", and "To Please his Wife". The second group consists of stories focusing on the characters' intimate desires being subjected to conventional ideals, and contains "An Imaginative Woman", "On the Western Circuit", and "The Fiddler of the Reels". The two groups, however, are not rigid, separate categorizations of the stories, inasmuch as that in each core theme, 'ambition' and 'intimate desires' can overlap in the development of the narrative. So stories from both groups are all indeed connected to each other more than this division may suggest. In fact, the concept of desire is embraced by the very definition of ambition – "A strong or ardent desire of anything considered advantageous, honouring, or creditable" (OED, 2009), with the situations of social mobility in *LLI* motivated by some inner, strong desire to attain distinction in society. In the same way, the overpowering desire for a romantic relationship that we see in "An Imaginative Woman" and "On the Western Circuit" could be interpreted as ambition of being loved and admired in other ways than those established by institutional marriage.

Social mobility was a central issue to Victorian society, with major importance attributed to hierarchy, wherein the upper classes had a patronizing and belittling attitude towards those who were less wealthy. This hierarchy also dictated accepted social behavior in terms of manners, relationships, and language. This generally materialistic society had developed a close association between money and happiness, wealth and freedom. These perceptions encouraged ambition, which was synonymous with an aspiration to cross class borders. In this group of stories, the achievement of this ambition occurs either by marrying up the social scale or through formal education and entry to the Church. This ambition is also related to feelings of progress and success, meaning a necessary adherence to the ideals of development imposed by the urban, capitalistic way of life.

Each story in the first group features at least one character aspiring towards moving up the social scale through marriage. As already noted by Hardy scholars²⁸, cross-class marriage is a persistent motif in Hardy's fiction, and is also alluded to in the title of his unpublished and destroyed first novel, *The Poor Man and the Lady*. However, in this group, with the exception of "To Please his Wife", we see an inversion of this

²⁸ See, for example, Penny Boumelha (1982: 40; 1999) and Patricia Ingham (2003: 114-118).

theme, as the stories stage the movement of a poor woman marrying up²⁹. Consequently, the atmosphere of oppression in the stories is intensified by the double constraint of class and gender influencing women's perceptions of possibilities available to them in life.

This is most evident in "The Son's Veto", in which circumstances push Sophy, a parlourmaid, previously uninterested in marriage except as a way of securing her future, into marrying a widowed vicar for whom she works. His rank in society provides the hoped for security beyond the level she, as an invalid working-class girl, could have imagined, and his respectability as an educated, religious, and financially superior man gives her no option other than to accept him as her husband: "Even if she had wished to get away from him she hardly dared refuse a personage so reverend and august in her eyes, and she assented forthwith to be his wife." (37). Though apparently an advantageous opportunity for Sophy, for Mr Twycott, the vicar, this marriage is "social suicide" (38). But it is also somewhat 'suicidal' to Sophy herself, in that she has to cut ties with her birthplace, as the couple moves to London, where they will be "under less observation from without than they would have had put up with in any country parish" (38), and in that she has to conform her manners and her language to fit her new life. As happens in all the stories, when individuals move upwards in the social scale, society serves to "compel all characters to fashion themselves upon the model of its own" (Mill: 8), as it did to Sophy. The artificiality of the social contrivances that Sophy has to accept is paralleled by the transitory nature of her ingenious, artistic weaving of her hair, which is done and undone every day, and is called by the narrator a "successful fabrication" (33) just as how we may also consider the social conventions.

The setting of Sophy's hair could also stand as a symbol of the deceptive nature that social conventions, with their extreme regard for appearances, can assume. The narrator's description of her hair comes from the point of view of an inside observer looking at her back, and though her back suggests "good beauty in front" (33), the narrator concludes that "she was not so handsome" (34) as supposed from behind. The deceptive nature of appearances runs throughout the story as it progresses from the relationship of Sophy as a married woman to Sophy as a widowed 'lady', who cannot marry under her rank for the sake of appearances in the name of her highbrow son Randolph, an Oxford undergraduate and prospective parson.

The constant reiteration of artificialities in Sophy's life leads to the inevitable conclusion that these contrivances circumscribe her range of possibilities of choice, reinforcing the image of the very limited scope of freedom that society allowed to lower-class women. But, irrespective of Sophy's marital or social status, she remains unable to

²⁹ In "For Conscience' Sake", both Leonora and Frances marry men who have a higher social standing, and this is also a central concern for the Halborough brothers of "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions" who give their sister the most refined education so she can make a good match. In "To Please his Wife", the lower marriage made by Joanna Phippard contrasts with the higher marriage made by Emily Hanning.

obtain independence, as we see in the narrator's commentary on her state of affairs after her husband's death: "She was left with *no* control over *anything* that had been her husband's beyond her modest personal income." (39, emphasis added). The language in this passage is emphatic, with its double negative, about the point it wishes to convey: that though her husband is dead, her situation remains the same—she is not free to do as she pleases. And from the social and religious moral point of view, Randolph will make sure she acts accordingly to the expected rules of conduct. This amounts to an interesting portrait of how the power of social conventions, embodied in the character of male domination, could overcome even the power of ascendance of a mother over her son.

Addressed from different perspectives, questions of ambition, social improvement, moral conscience, and freedom are also examined in "For Conscience' Sake", "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions", and "To please his wife". In the first story, freedom is looked at through the ambivalence that exists in one's sense of moral duty, and in the latter two stories, freedom is explored in close proximity to the issue of ambition.

"For Conscience' Sake" shows the relationship between freedom and moral conscience through an exploration of the latter's ambiguities, which are complicated by contradictions in the entanglement of morality, intuition, and self-centeredness. Twenty years after leaving his former sweetheart, the working-class girl Leonora, alone and pregnant, Millborne broods over the possibility of reparation for his wrongdoing. The reasons for his uneasy state of mind are completely egotistic, as some of his own words stress, such as when he opens his heart to his doctor: feelings of "loneliness", "dissatisfaction", "discomfort" (50) are provoked by his "recollection of an unfulfilled promise" (50), a "retrospective trouble" that will destroy his "sense of self-respect" (51).

At the same time, his intuition and self-awareness demonstrate that fulfilling the broken promise means going against his nature, as he says emphatically "I am a bachelor by nature, and instinct, and habit, and everything" (52). The characteristics of his bachelorhood are also hinted at in the beginning of the story in the description of his daily routine and lodgings. Additionally, he is neither fond of the idea of marriage nor does he still entertain any love for Leonora. In the ultimate expression of this contradictory entanglement, Millborne concludes that he would marry her only "to recover [his] sense of being a man of honour" (52), making explicit his self-centered motives, which are traversed by moral issues such as honorableness, a quality that is also very egotistic in that a person's value is measured in terms of how it appears to others. This preoccupation with appearances exposes the role of the "tyranny of the prevailing opinion" in deciding the standards by which we should measure something as abstract as honor. But if Millborne is worried about his honor, Leonora's past and present situations are not seriously considered by him as possible reasons for reparation.

In the representation of these contradictions in Millborne's conscience, Hardy challenges the limits given to this faculty of the mind: to which moral goodness does the conscience relate? Is it to our own goodness or to that of the other? Or is it the perceived goodness of society? Which one should we follow in our choices and actions? The ambiguities suggested by these questions pervade the narrative and lead us to consider the range of freedom one has according to the boundaries set by these markers. Furthermore, Hardy increases the level of complexity of this issue by exposing the irony of life in Millborne's two main actions: when common sense would expect Millborne to have caused harm to Leonora by not marrying her the first time around, we see that, in fact, she has successfully overcome any difficulty she could possibly have had. But whilst Millborne's actions in relation to the tardy marriage are consciously expected to be good for Leonora and her daughter—it in fact ends up as a source of unhappiness for all involved, as their marriage fails, threatens to harm the daughter's prospective marriage, and does not offer Millborne his much hoped for peace of mind.

Moral conscience and ambition for social improvement are intertwined in both "A Tragedy of Two Ambitions" and "To Please his Wife". In the first story, the "fevered youthful ambitions" (69) of the Halborough brothers, Joshua and Cornelius, lead them to deliberately withhold themselves from rescuing their father from drowning in a weir, as the parent's extravagant and alcoholic behavior could become a serious hindrance to their social aspiration. At the crucial, drowning scene, Cornelius, the less ambitious one of the two, cries out to his older brother: "We'll go—we *must* save him. O Joshua!/' Yes, yes; we must!/' Still they did not move, but waited, holding each other, each thinking the same thought. Weights of lead seemed to be affixed to their feet, which would no longer obey their wills." (87, emphasis in the original). Their cruel action, or inaction, to be more precise, is symbolized in the image of the 'weights of lead' that associates their strong resolution of not helping their father with the coldness and hardness of their attitude, since both characteristics are our primary associations when we think of metals. But 'lead' can also symbolize an oppressive burden³⁰, which, in this case, could be the pressure of social conventions on the brothers, leading them to treat their father as a burden that has to be put down. In this way, those 'weights of lead' that ground them to the earth will ground their father to the bottom of the weir. Also, in Christian symbolism, 'lead' is related to a "man charged with sins" (LEXICON, 2007: 56), which becomes an additional irony as the brothers are supposed to be exemplary Christians as their occupation as parsons would ideally command³¹.

³⁰ See *Dicionário de Símbolos Herder Lexicon*, 7 ed. São Paulo: Cultrix, 2007. p. 55-56.

³¹ This irony between the ideal characteristics of a parson and the real ones is verbalized by Joshua when he says to Cornelius that, "To succeed in the Church, people must believe in you, first of all, as a gentleman, secondly as a man of means, thirdly as a scholar, fourthly as a preacher, fifthly, perhaps, as a Christian,—but always first as a gentleman, with all their heart and soul and strength." (75-76). In his criticism of the Church, Hardy once more shows the importance given to appearances in all institutions of Victorian society.

The symbolism of a metal element is equally present when Cornelius hints to Joshua his difficulty in keeping their father's death secret from their sister: "Do you think human hearts are iron-cased safes, that you suppose we can keep this secret for ever?"/ 'Yes—I think they are, sometimes,' said Joshua." (91). Here, the inflexibility of the iron is not only associated with their capacity for holding a secret, but also to their impassiveness, cold-heartedness and lack of pity when they hear their father agonizing in the stream. Thus, by the end of the story, the heaviness of the brothers' 'feet of lead' and 'hearts of iron' has surpassed their avid ambition in the representation of the shackles restraining their freedom and happiness.

In other words, the brothers' anxiety about their future (represented by their strong feeling of ambition) leads them to try to wipe out their past, represented as the figure of their father. But when they materially accomplish it, the anxiety about the future turns itself into burden of the past. For Sophie Gilmartin and Rod Mengham, this situation is central to the stories in *LLI*, for whom the book "seems obsessed with the failure of nineteenth-century men and women to negotiate a creative and meaningful relationship with both the past and the future" (2007: 93). By the end of the story, when Joshua realizes his and his brother's efforts to advance in the Church have come to nothing, his remorse makes him question his choices in life:

'But here are you doing journeywork, Cornelius, and likely to continue at it till the end of the day, as far as I can see. I, too, with my petty living—what am I after all? . . . To tell the truth, the Church is a poor forlorn hope for people without influence, particularly when their enthusiasm begins to flag. A social regenerator has a better chance outside, where he is unhampered by dogma and tradition. As for me, I would rather have gone on mending mills, with my crust of bread and liberty.' (91)³²

Here we see not only Hardy's criticism of the Church as an institution with its own agenda and interests, which have nothing to do with spiritual kindness and fraternity, but we also see Joshua coming to terms with his own feelings of ambition, once fueled by

³² The final expression in this passage—"with my crust of bread and liberty"—, which also stands in this paper's title, is an allusion to a line in a poem by Alexander Pope, "The town mouse and the country mouse", from the book *Imitations of Horace*. Pope based his poem on Horace's retelling of an Aesop's fable, which is also a poem collected in *Satires*, Book II, 6. In this famous tale, the country mouse goes to the city to visit his mouse friend, who had lured the country mouse into going there by talking about the city's rich supply of food. But when they are having their banquet, the two mice are scared away by dogs. In the end of Pope's poem, the country mouse says to the town mouse: "'But, please your honour,' said the peasant,/ 'This same dessert is not so pleasant:/ Give me again my hollow tree,/ A crust of bread, and liberty!'". The story's moral ending is clear about condemning vain ambition and about exalting country life. Pope's poem can be read at <<http://www.readbookonline.net/readOnLine/25160/>> and Horace's English translation at : <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/HoraceSatiresBkIISatVI.htm#_Toc98155109>, 29 Apr. 2011.

Victorian and capitalistic ideas of progress. Joshua finally realizes what Clym Yeobright has stated in Hardy's *The Return of the Native*: "But the more I see of life the more do I perceive that there is nothing particularly great in its greatest walks, and therefore nothing particularly small in mine of furze-cutting." (2006: 214), a passage in which Clym concludes his arguments on his lack of ambition in comparison to his wife Eustacia's desire for a fanciful life in Paris. From their past experience, both Joshua and Clym apprehend that it is better to be free in any way possible³³ than to be constrained by conventions socially constructed and imposed by a group acting in self-interest to secure "the tyranny of the prevailing opinion".

By contrast, in "To Please his Wife", Joanna Phippard stays attached to her ideals of ambition and social mobility, despite her final acknowledgement of her faults. In the story, a strong desire for social improvement, together with extreme feelings of envy, blinds the character of Joanna Phippard to the dangers to which she subjects her family. As the narrator comments, Joanna's "ambition checked her instincts" (128) and she thus agrees to send her husband and two sons to sea in an attempt to accumulate a fortune that would allow the boys to have a better education and become gentlemen, in addition to giving a feeling of superiority over the eyes of her now wealthier friend Emily. But the husband and the boys never return from the sea, and the grief Joanna has to endure for their loss and the realization that it was all her fault end up being "her purgation for the sin of making them the slaves of her ambition" (134). Here too, freedom is subjected to social conventions masqueraded as ambition for social status. For Joanna, happiness would lie on the side of material possessions and high social standing, as she says to Emily "*You are all success, and I am all the other way!*" (133, emphasis in the original). A few lines later, she confesses to her friend she knows the extent of her actions:

'Nothing will repay me for the grief of their absence!
 'Then why did you let them go? You were doing fairly well.'
 'I *made* them go!' she said, turning vehemently upon Emily. 'And I'll tell you why! I could not bear that we should be only muddling on, and you so rich and thriving! Now I have told you, and you may hate me if you will!
 'I shall never hate you, Joanna'. (133-134, emphasis in the original)

In this passage we see that even though Joanna admits her guilt and her wrong reasons she is not able to devise a different kind of living for herself, and neither can she perceive she was actually "doing fairly well". As in the story of the Halborough brothers, Joanna's freedom is curtailed from the outset by her ambition and envy, and she suffers a similar transformation, from an ambitious young woman to a "bereaved crone" (135).

³³ A way which is not necessarily a bad one, as both Joshua and Clym realize the advantages in becoming a millwright and a furze-cutter, respectively, despite society's belittling view on those professions.

The recognition of their failed actions and of their deceptive feelings is realized by all the central characters in these four stories: Sophy Twycott, Leonora and Millborne, Joshua and Cornelius, and Joanna. Each of them comes to question, at some point in their respective stories, the customs imposed on them, and they realize the artificiality and fabricated nature of conventions, as they persistently and ultimately lead them to misery. Though the characters question the “universal illusion” and “the magical influence of custom” (Mill, 1859: 9), they are not able to overcome these issues by finding different places as markers for their own kind of freedom—on the contrary, we see that social customs overpower their ability to adapt circumstances into their favor.

As mentioned above, the second group of stories, “An Imaginative Woman”, “On the Western Circuit”, and “The Fiddler of the Reels”, share a similar narrative focus in relation to the inner life of the female characters. From this starting point, these stories develop the question of freedom of expression, freedom of desires, and also freedom of the body, all of which are somehow related to romantic or sexual idealization, and to the constraints imposed by institutional marriage.

In *LLI*, the question of freedom of expression is most prominent in a story from the first group, “The Son’s Veto”, in which Sophy Twycott’s manner of speaking is reproached by her son because she does not speak according to Standard English. Language is therefore the only exterior thing that betrays her humble origins, even after years of education. “An imaginative woman” and “On the Western Circuit” also touch on this subject, but from the point of view of two bourgeois married women, Ella Marchmill and Edith Harnham respectively, who do not agreeably conform to the roles prescribed to them by marriage, thus they search in poetry (Ella) and in love letters (Edith) for a way to let go their emotions.

In both stories, social conventions play an important role in coercing the women into accepting marriage as an inevitable movement in life. To Ella, marriage means: “the necessity of getting life-leased at all cost, a cardinal virtue which all good mothers teach” (8), and Edith marries in conformation to “the belief of the British parent that a bad marriage with its aversions is better than free womanhood with its interests, dignity, and leisure” (107). So the two women find themselves trapped in marriages that do not fulfill their intellectual and romantic expectations, which are then eventually projected onto another person.

As a woman of “very living ardours” (15) and an aspiring poet herself, Ella ends up finding in the figure of the poet Robert Trewe an escape to let go her literary voice and her romantic and sexual desires. As the story develops, those two forms of expression begin to intertwine until the latter supersedes the first: “The personal element in the magnetic attraction exercised by this circumambient, unapproachable master of hers was so much stronger than the intellectual and abstract that she could

not understand it." (14). This comment of the narrator on Ella's feeling is made just after she unsuccessfully tries to emulate Trewe's poems, and there are two other instances in which Ella figuratively tries to usurp his place, as when she tries on his coat, which Hardy alludes to the mantle of Elijah which, in the Bible story, is passed to his next disciple³⁴, and when she is lying on the poet's bed, wondering at his scraps on the wall, and reconstitutes the position of his arm, as if merging herself into him: "now her hair was dragging where his arm had lain when he secured the fugitive fancies; she was sleeping on a poet's lips, immersed in the very essence of him, permeated by his spirit as by an ether." (20). Here, in Ella's reverie, questions of freedom of expression, and of sexual and romantic desires become mixed together in her quasi-embodiment or spiritual conjunction with her idealization of Trewe. But Ella perceives her dreams, which embody her desires, as situations that will eventually come true, and as this does not happen, her freedom remains only on the level of her imagination.

Similarly, Edith Harnham projects her eagerness for romance onto the life of her illiterate maid Anna, who, after having a short affair with Charles Raye, a London barrister, continues the romance through letters written for her by her mistress. The content of the letters are much improved by Edith's suggestions and handwriting, and these factors end up being decisive in conquering Raye's affection. As with Ella's imaginative fusion with the poet, Edith also comes to imagine herself in Anna's place, and she does so with such strength that her imagination comes to stand for reality, and indeed overpowers it, as when the narrator describes Edith's feelings: "she secretly cherished a predilection, subtle and imaginative truly, but strong and absorbing. She opened each letter, read it as if intended for herself, and replied from the promptings of her own heart and no other." (110).

In both cases, Ella and Edith can only find a way for expressing their desires and voices in the embodiment of another person who would be less likely to be subjected by social conventions: Robert Trewe, who, being a man, can write, publish, and choose his own course of living with less subjection to marriage conventions; and Anna, a poor rural maiden, the typical victim in the role of a fallen woman, whose innocence and natural cheerfulness, in addition to her poor status and the absence of parents, would not attract much attention from society in relation to her moral conduct. Thus, it is significant that for the characters of Ella and Edith the meaning of freedom is related to crossing class borders or changing gender status, and attention should be drawn to the subverted, unexpected case of Edith who, instead of moving up, has to move down in the social scale to gain her freedom. But even the supplanted characters, Trewe and Anna, are not actually as free in their real lives as the two imaginative women expect them to be. Trewe's loneliness and sensitivity to the criticism of his poems leads him to kill

³⁴ 1 Kings 19.

himself, and Anna faces a stern and loveless marriage, maybe similar to that of Sophy Twycott in “The Son’s Veto”.

Freedom of desires and freedom of the body are interlaced in the story of Car’line Aspent in “The Fiddler of the Reels”. The story is centered, among other narrative strands, on the response of Car’line’s body to the music of Mop Ollamoor, the fiddler of the title. Mop and his music have a power over children and young women that has “a touch of the weird and wizardly in it” (138), capable of throwing them into emotional and physical raptures that neither science nor magic can explain, situating this story in the limbo between realism and fantasy that appertains to uncanny narratives. From the outset, the story explores in Mop’s art the connection between the violin’s sound and the human body, since the sound is described in comparison to human voice, having “a certain lingual character” (138) and “the wild and agonizing sweetness of a living voice” (151). This association anticipates and stresses the sensual effect that the music exercises on the person of Car’line, and especially on her body. This emphasis is shown by Hardy through using terms for body movements as subjects of the actions, almost as if the body had a will of its own. This happens in Car’line’s first hearing of Mop’s fiddling. As he is on her way, she has to walk past him: “But when closer her *step* grew timid, her *tread* convulsed itself more and more accordantly with the time of the melody, till she very nearly danced along” (140, emphasis added) and further ahead in the same paragraph, “her gait” is also the commanding force that cannot stop dancing. What these examples reveal is that her body, with its independency over her will, ‘speaks’ for her spontaneity, her unconscious and intimate desires, which would be usually suppressed by social conventions and morality. In transforming Car’line’s body in an entity, Hardy finds a way to surpass the constraints imposed on women’s sexuality.

But if her body is acting according to some deep unconscious impulse, Car’line also has a will of her own, as she openly refuses to marry her down-to-earth fiancé, Ned Hipcroft. And, on her final encounter with Mop, in contrast to the first one, there is a clear sustainment of Car’line as the subject of the actions as she makes the choices which end up being responsible for her ultimately tragic outburst in the dancing, even though this outburst is controlled by “the gimlet-like gaze of her fascinator’s open eye” (152).

This combination of independency and subjection in Car’line’s body response to Mop’s fiddling reflects the struggle for freedom that is scattered throughout *LLI*. At the same time, her dancing is a choice, an impulsive desire, and a subjection to Mop’s enchantment. These apparently contrastive elements suggest an ambivalent representation of freedom in the story, which, in taking Car’line’s body as a symbol, illustrate defiance of social conventions, via the character’s “wild desire to glide airily in the mazes of an infinite dance” (140). Nevertheless, whether the relation of her body to the music can, or cannot, be explained by sexual desires, magic or science, in the world in which Car’line lives there is no place for such eccentricities to exist without restraints.

In the end, like Ella and Edith from the other two stories in this group, she is forced to conform to an ordinary, probably unhappy, married life.

As I hope to have shown, in *LLI* there is a strong interdependency between freedom and social conventions—a relation that is challenged by Hardy, as the characters in the first group of stories question these accepted customs, or the women characters in the second group who search for a way to express their emotions and desires. Thus, going beyond the treatment of social inequality alone, Hardy draws attention to humans' inner feelings and perceptions. In the stories, characters are subjected to the idealization of class status, love and marriage, to the acceptance of customs, and to various kinds of restraint exercised on one's ability to spontaneously express oneself. All these subjections contribute negatively to the coercion of individual freedom, in direct relation to the characters' unrest of mind exposed throughout the stories.

Ultimately, behind all the different aspects of freedom represented in this collection, we can see "social tyranny", as Mill puts it, acting upon the characters who cannot overcome their constraints, though they do eventually become aware of the arbitrary nature and importance attributed to social conventions. As Hardy does not offer easy resolutions for his characters' struggles, and neither does he suggest a possible solution for conflict between social conventions and individual independence, the stories may appear to give a pessimistic outlook on freedom. But it is exactly this quality of exposing rather than explaining and resolving the conflicts that gives strength to the stories in *LLI*. Human inadequacies, represented through language, affection, and desires, for example, bewilder not only these nineteenth century characters, but also today's reader, who is likely to be astonished by the pungent contemporaneity of these stories in their treatment of social control and the question of freedom.

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