
Grace Melbury betwixt and between, a liminal life

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Frontispiece. *The Woodlanders*. Henry Macbeth-Raeburn (1860-1947). 8.6 cm high by 12.6 cm wide, framed, in Hardy's 1887 Wessex novel *The Woodlanders*, volume seven of the Osgood, McIlvaine Complete Uniform Edition of the Wessex Novels, in seventeen volumes (1895-1897). SOURCE: The Victorian Web

The Woodlanders

Author: Thomas Hardy

First published: serial, 1886-1887; book, 1887

Genre: Novel

Locale: Rural England – fictional town of Little Hintock

Plot: Social realism

Time: Nineteenth century



Robin's pincushion, Dorset 2025 author's photo

THE MAIN CHARACTERS

Grace Melbury – young woman expensively educated, promised to Giles by her father, George Melbury-timber merchant with aspirations for his daughter.

Giles Winterborne – the woodsman to whom Mr Melbury had promised Grace in marriage, who is lowly and uncouth.

Edred Fitzpiers-a talented doctor, who marries Grace, but drifts into an affair with: Felice Charmond-a rich widow who takes up residence nearby.

Marty South-in love with Giles

Suke Damson-has a fling with Dr Fitzpiers

There are more characters, but they do not concern us in this analysis.

PLOT SYNOPSIS

PROMISE. In guilt for previous wrongdoing, George Melbury promises his daughter Grace to Giles Winterborne.

HERALDING CHANGE. Melbury sends Grace away to school in his aspiration to make her a lady.

TRIAD. Grace returns and is torn between her love for Giles and attraction to Dr Edred Fitzpiers. She is pushed to choose Fitzpiers by her father.

BETRAYAL. Edred has a fling with Suke Damson and an affair with Felice Charmond. Grace realises belatedly she loved Giles better all along.

TRAGEDY. Giles dies and is mourned by Grace and by Marty, who secretly adored him all along.

RESOLUTION. Grace and Edred are reconciled.



Themes

The power of nature

Rural life, living on and from the land

Social status and standing, social mobility

Fate

Love and betrayal

Heroism

The view from Hardy's study at MaxGate, Dorset, where he wrote the novel. Author's 12Hephoto

HARDY SAID OF THE NOVEL:

.....from time to time, dramas of a grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean are enacted in the real, by virtue of the concentrated passions and closely-knit interdependence of the lives therein (The Woodlanders, chapter 1.)

The novel has been described variously as a tragedy and a comedy, a farce and a melodrama. Hardy thought of the Woodlanders as quite ambitious and radical, exploring similar themes to those in Ibsen's work. (Millgate 1984, 321-2), though years later when revising a 1912 edition he said he liked it best as a story and because of a fondness for its setting.

A 'TRANSITIONAL' WORK

Hardy novels chronology

1. Desperate Remedies (1871)
2. Under the Greenwood Tree (1872)
3. A Pair of Blue Eyes (1873)
4. Far From the Madding Crowd (1874)
5. The Hand of Ethelberta (1876)
6. The Return of the Native (1878)
7. The Trumpet-Major (1880)
8. A Laodicean (1881)
9. Two on a Tower (1882)
10. The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886)
11. The Woodlanders (1887)
12. Tess of the D'Urbervilles (1891)
13. The Well-Beloved (1892)
14. Jude the Obscure (1895)

David Lodge (1974) has proposed that the novel is a transitional text, coming as it does between the earlier romantic, pastoral novels and the final darker, modern tragedies of Jude the Obscure and Tess of the Durbervilles.

Here I see the first suggestion of liminality, which is often positioned within transition, 'betwixt and between' one world and another.

LIMINALITY

....all rites of passage or "transition" are marked by three phases:

separation,

margin (or *limen*, signifying "threshold", in Latin),

and aggregation.

Turner (1969) p.120

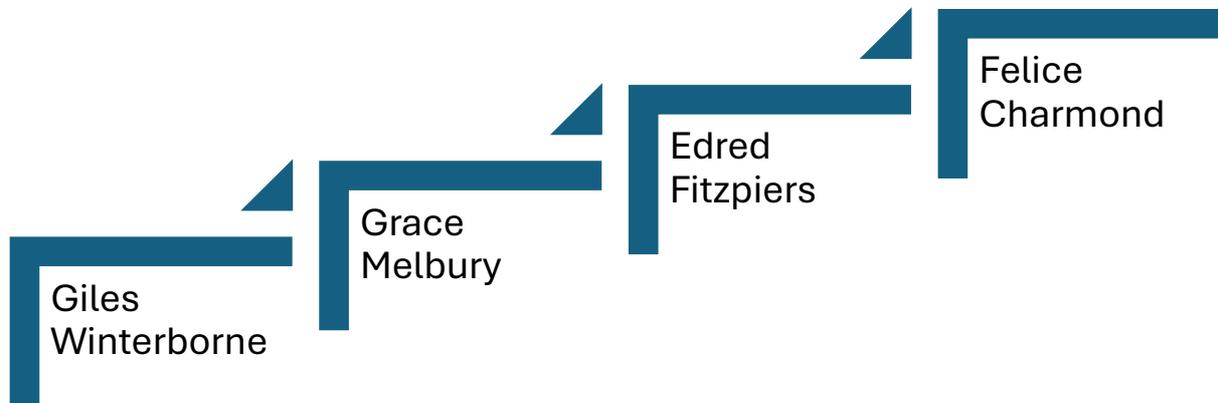
The concept of liminality was introduced in 1909 with the publication of *Les Rites de Passage*, van Gennep. This empirical work reported the ritual behaviour and the dynamics of individual and collective life. He introduced the concept of liminality when referring to a transition from one social state to another – for example, in the ritual initiation of an adolescent to adulthood or in rituals following seasonal changes. Van Gennep's work was not translated into English until 1960 and started to receive more attention when picked up by Turner in 1969.

I discovered Turner's work in 2015 when preparing a paper for the summer conference of the A/B group. The idea of liminality resonated immediately with my experience of lacking social capital and struggling with social mobility.

In conclusion I referred to myself as liminal, neither working class nor middle class, always in between.

SOCIAL MOBILITY

Survival of the fittest – a concept introduced by Herbert Spencer, who Hardy admired. Hardy believed not that the best come through, more that the survivors are those who fit best with their environment. He placed these key characters in a hierarchy of class consciousness.



MARTY

Chapter 2 introduces Marty South, working late by firelight, making spars for thatching, using hazel branches. It is rough work that requires skill and strength. Her hands are calloused and blistered.

In only the second paragraph we are shown that Marty and her father have fallen in social standing, so Marty has to do her father's work when he is ill and is forced to cut off and sell her lovely hair.

Her gorgeous hair is her only capital

We see in her room

A round table formed of an old coffin stool with deal nailed on top and a brass candlestick standing on that, and

The social position of the household in the past was almost as definitively shown by the presence of this article as that of an esquire or nobleman by his old helmets or shields.

Custom had been for any well-to-do villager to keep these stools for use in their own funeral rites, but over time the custom changed and they were put to other uses.

SIGNIFIER OF STATUS

The next day we see the wood coming to life as morning breaks, affording us a full view of Melbury's house.

Near the four large waggon sheds stands Giles, who is connected to the Melbury family in various ways.

His father had been his mother's first lover, before she was snatched/seduced away by Melbury (the sin for which Melbury felt he should pay)

Then his aunt had married and emigrated with Melbury's brother, which connects Giles sufficiently to be on intimate terms with Melbury, despite his lower standing.

Melbury's residence is described as
...respectable, roomy, almost dignified

THE CHIEF MAN OF BUSINESS HEREBOUT

Marty leads us through the wood to the home of George Melbury, her father's employer, and overhears him talking to his wife.

Melbury is conflicted between honouring his vow and at the same time permitting a love match on both sides vs ensuring that Grace marries into wealth and standing. At first he gives way to his conscience and encourages Giles to meet Grace from the carriage at Sherton market.

Melbury is worried that he has not put enough money aside for Grace to save her from poverty. She will not marry well. It is the plan for her to marry Giles Winterborne.

But since I have educated her so well, and so long, and so far above the level of daughters hereabout, it is wasting her to give her to a man of no higher standing than he.

HIGH INDIFFERENCE AND HUMBLE EMOTION

Giles gets on his way and Melbury ruminates to the men left behind.

Thank God I've been able to keep her at school at a figure of near a hundred a year

Let 'em laugh now if they can: Mrs Charmond herself is not better informed than my girl Grace.

Then, in what is key to this reading of the novel, he gives this heartfelt speech:

When I was a boy, another boy - the pa'son's son - along with a lot of others, asked me "Who dragged Whom around What?" and I said, "Sam Barrett, who dragged his wife in a chair round the tower when she went to be churched." They laughed at me so much that I went home and couldn't sleep for shame; and I cried that night till my pillow was wet, till I thought to myself - "They may laugh at me for my ignorance, but that was father's fault, and none o' my making, and I must bear it, but they shall never laugh at my children, if I have any; I'll starve first."

GRACE IN SEPARATION

Giles meets Grace who looks 'glorified and refined to much above her former level' according to Marty's appraisal, while Giles 'though well-attired and well-mannered for a yoeman, looked rough beside her.'

As they drive home, Giles is seeing John-apples and farm buildings whereas Grace's mind goes to broad lawns in a fashionable estate, where she had amused herself with other girls. Girls to whose parents Giles would have doffed his cap in deference.

Grace sighed, 'Shall I tell you all about Bath or Cheltenham, or places on the Continent that I visited last summer?'

When she had done she said gaily 'Now do you tell me in return what has happened in Hintock since I have been away.'

SEPARATION SOLIDIFIED

Mrs Charmond notices that Grace looks a cut above the other village girls and invites her up to the big house, as Melbury proudly reports to Giles. Grace is elated.

'T'was wonderful how she took to Grace in a few minutes ; that freemasonry of education made 'em close at once.....At last it led on to Miss'ess Grace being asked to the House. So she's busy hunting up her frills and furbelows to go in.'

IN THE MARGIN, BETWIXT AND BETWEEN

Giles is looking through the trees at Grace, he notices another man similarly admiring her, it is the new young doctor, Edred Fitzpiers.

Giles approaches Grace, who tells him excitedly that Mrs Charmond is 'so nice!'

Giles is doubtful.

Mrs Charmond has hinted that she would like Grace to accompany her on a trip to Europe. 'Indeed, what for?' asks Giles, which evokes from Grace that she will help Mrs Charmond record her experiences like Alexandre Dumas, and Mery.

Giles starts to doubt Grace, he is torn, she is an honest good-hearted but if she can be so enamoured of someone like Mrs Charmond, how can she ever settle for a yoeman like him

'Indeed!' said Winterborne, sighing. 'Suppose you talk over my head a little longer, Miss Grace Melbury.'

'Oh I didn't mean it.....I hate French books. And I love dear old Hintock, and the people in it, fifty times better than all the Continent! But.....'

GILES: IT SHALL BE DONE

.....suppose you know a person, and want to bring that person to a good understanding with you, do you think a Christmas party of some sort is a warming up thing, and likely to be useful in hastening the matter?

Giles enquires of Marty, who naturally agrees and is resolved to go ahead and organise his Christmas party. Before starting any preparations he goes to the Melbury home and invites Mr, Mrs and Grace.

He had planned a high tea for six o'clock or thereabouts, and a roaring good supper to come on about eleven.

Giles is too shy to mention a specific time, so the Melburies choose their own and arrive early in the afternoon. Giles and his employee Creedle are in a frenzy of last-minute cooking and arranging. Melbury saunters in wearing his second best suit. There follows a comedy of errors. Giles trying not to show how flustered and taken by surprise he is,

Melbury indignant that he hadn't been properly appraised that it was to be a real party, with hot food and musicians. Grace offers to help finish some tarts, but her father will not hear of it., so Mrs Melbury steps in.

The chairs have been oiled by a boy, but he failed to rub it in as he thought the sheen would look better. However it stains Grace's silk dress. More minor mishaps occur throughout the evening and when the dancing begins, Grace finds she has forgotten the steps and sits it out.

...he felt the fates were against him.

'TIS A PITY, A THOUSAND PITIES

Next morning Melbury really does not want Grace to marry Giles. He asks her how she enjoyed her visit to Mrs Charmond and explicitly contrasts that lady's home to Giles's humble dwelling.

Mrs Charmond however is fickle and she does not follow the visit with a note, nothing is heard from her. Later they hear she has decided to travel abroad. Grace is left with no prospect and her father continually criticises Giles and tells Grace she is meant for higher things.

A THOUSAND PITIES could also apply to Giles' situation in which, by a convoluted set of circumstances he has a very limited time to secure his tenure on the lease he inherited from his father. But once Mrs Charmond has left for the continent he has lost his chance. Melbury says

'I'll do all I can for him as a friend; but as a pretender to the position of my son-in-law, that can never be thought of more.

Meanwhie Grace has decided

'I have made up my mind that I should like my engagement to Giles to continue.'

Too late, her father will not hear of it

.....the frail barque of of fidelity that she had thus timidly launched was stranded and lost

Melbury seizes the chance:

Then the seal is set. Grace will not marry Giles.

HOW FAR IS A YARD?

Dr Fitzpiers is appraising the local girls, when he spots one who looks different from the others. *She walked as delicately as if she had been bred in town*

He uses an opportunity to ask Giles who she is, absently quoting lines from Shelley They spot Grace at her bedroom window. The doctor is shocked that she is the daughter of the timber merchant

Giles retorts that money can do anything, even for a Little Hintock girl, if she has the brains and the promise. Fitzpiers seems a little put out at her origins, but says she is charming nonetheless.

They eventually meet when Grace visits him for a professional opinion.

Her face, upturned from the microscope, was so sweet, sincere, and self-forgetful in its aspect that the susceptible Fitzpiers more than wished to annihilate the lineal yard which separated it from his own.

'Anything like matrimonial intentions towards her, charming as she is, would be absurd. Yet He allowed himself to be carried forward on the wave of his desire

AT LAST

Melbury visits the doctor for advice on Grace's health, only for Fitzpiers to ask to become better acquainted with her.

Melbury is delighted, Grace is ambivalent – still thinking of Giles and not feeling she is in love with the doctor.

'Why you scamp, what's this you've been doing? Not home here more than six months, yet instead of confining yourself to your father's rank, making havoc in the upper classes!'

His daughter's suitor was descended from a line he had heard of in his grandfather's time as being once among the greatest.

DOUBT ON BOTH SIDES

Over and above the genuine emotion which she raised in his heart there hung the sense that he was casting a die by impulse which he might not have thrown by judgement.

The intoxication that Fitzpiers had as usual, produced in Grace's brain during the visit passed off somewhat with his withdrawal.

Fitzpiers had a misgiving. When Grace was present he was sufficiently intoxicated by her beauty and cultivated tastes, but when she was absent he felt all the doubts associated with their difference in family status and these doubts were amplified by being in Melbury's company. She similarly felt doubt when she was away from Fitzpiers, but such was his attention to her that in his presence she was intoxicated. One might say seduced.

But Grace had been socialised to desire a cultivated and refined life and she knew that marriage to Fitzpiers would enable that.

A CRACK APPEARS

Fitzpiers wants to be married quickly and in a registry office.

He plans to move to a practice about twenty miles away and makes it clear that he doesn't want any word of her lowly origins to follow them there.

'My inclination is not to be married at the horrid little church here, with all the yokels staring around us, and a droning parson reading.'

'How can I be married except at church, and with my dear friends round me!'

...she was indefinably depressed as they walked homeward.

THE CRACK DEEPENS

They return to Little Hintock after the honeymoon, spying some labourers and Giles who is cider making.

'I do honestly confess to you that I feel as if I belonged to a different species from the people who are working in that yard.'

'And from me, too, then. For my blood is no better than theirs.'

He looked at her with a droll sort of awakening. It was, indeed, a startling anomaly that this woman of the tribe without should be standing there as his wife.

Later Fitzpiers chats to his old landlady who reports that Mrs Charmond has said of his marriage that he ought to have done better and has spoiled his chances.

BETRAYAL

Melbury discovers that Fitzpiers is in the throes of a wild affair with Mrs Charmond and is heartbroken for Grace.

What could he and Grace do to countervail the passions of those two sophisticated beings?the homely timber-dealer felt as inferior as a savage...."

Melbury saw his daughter,as it were in mid-air between two storeys of society

REGRET AND REALISATION

Melbury wants Grace to go to talk and plead with Mrs Charmond, he still thinks it is worth her saving the marriage.

Grace declines.

'I wish you never, never thought of educating me.... I hate the genteel life....'

'Because cultivation has only brought me inconveniences and troubles.'

Later, Fitzpiers, who is injured and incoherent is jabbering away to a stranger, who he does not realise is Melbury.

'I stooped to mate beneath me; and now I rue it.'

FALSE HOPE

For a short period, first Melbury, then Grace and then Giles all come to believe that it has become much easier for a woman to obtain a divorce.

To hear those two Arcadian innocents talk of Imperial law would have made a humane person weep who should have known what a dangerous structure they were building up on their supposed knowledge.

They are all convinced of it and Grace meets Giles to talk. He sends her to an inn for a hearty meal that he has arranged. After the refinement she has become used to she finds it rough.

The tastes she had acquired from Fitzpiers had been imbibed so subtly that she hardly knew she had them until presented with this contrast.

THE END

During a long separation from her husband, Grace nurses Giles, who is desperately ill, night and day. Fitzpiers finally returns to Little Hintock following the death of his lover Mrs Charmond. When Giles dies from the fever, Fitzpiers, who by now is desperate for Grace's forgiveness, bides his time. On St Valentine's day he sends Grace a note, ending:

Believe me, in spite of all you may do or feel, your lover always (once your husband).
They eventually are reconciled

CONFLICT

To return to Turner on liminality and communitas

Most definitions contain the notion of an arrangement of positions or statuses. Most involve the institutionalization and perdurance of groups and relationships. The concept of "conflict" has come to be connected with the concept of "social structure." since the differentiation of parts becomes opposition between parts, and scarce status becomes the object of struggles between persons and groups who lay claim to it.

Turner (1969) p.126

UNPRECEDENTED POTENCY

Communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or "holy," possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency.

Turner (1969) p.128

FOREVER IN THE MARGIN

Forever in the margin, Grace must live out her life with a husband who is not worthy of her, while the memory of the true love she lost will stay with her.



Max Gate, where the novel was written, author's own photo, 2025

Note:

I used this Wordsworth Classic paperback version, first published in 1996, with an introduction by Phillip Mallett, University of St Andrew.

