An Analysis of *The Woodlanders*

*The Woodlanders* was published in 1887. Thomas Hardy mentioned in the biography that he thought of writing about the woodlanders more than ten years ago. In fact it was after ten years when he could realize his idea. He himself estimated *The Woodlanders* as his best novel. Desmond Hawkins praised it “as the most professional example of the characteristic Hardy novel.”

*The Woodlanders* is one of the six masterpieces of Thomas Hardy’s Wessex novels. However, it is not so popular or attractive as the other novels. Why is this novel estimated so low among his Wessex novels?

One of the reasons is that *The Woodlanders* was written after *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. In *The Mayor* there is one dominant character whose life and death is tragic. Hardy would like to change a style of the novel. As a result, there are five main characters instead of one hero or heroine in the next novel. Although Grace Melbury is a center among five main characters, she is not a dominant character in the novel. Grace is not so strong or impressive as the other heroines.

Grace cannot find her place in her hometown and leaves with her unfaithful husband in the end. She is doomed to live an unhappy life. However, her story is not a tragedy like Henchard’s and Tess’s, because of her weak character.

Grace belongs to both woodlanders and outsiders. She is suffering from the conflict of the two worlds. Her father, a rich timber merchant, gives her a higher education and tries to raise her social rank. Her marriage is completely controlled by her ambitious father. Grace sometimes shows her hope to marry Giles Winterborne, a rustic man who has lost his cottages under the life-hold system.

She is after all persuaded by her father to marry Edred Fitzpriers, an intellectual dilettante and philanderer. Fitzpriers despises the villagers of Little Hintock and runs away to the continent with Mrs. Charmond, a rich landlady of the woodland. Grace’s position as a deserted wife is not secure in the village. Through suffering, Grace comes to know Giles’ true love for her, and hopes to remarry him. After Giles dies of the disease, Grace returns to her husband. Thus Grace is torned between Winterborne and Fitzpriers, but she finally chooses to live with Fitzpriers. Her
future life might be unhappy, but she chooses not to die but to live a life.

Giles Winterborne and Marty South are woodlanders, while Fitzpiers and Mrs. Charmond are outsiders. As the title shows, Giles and Marty plant trees and know the woods very well. They are the spirits of the trees. The trees in the woods as well as the villagers mourn for the death of Giles, which is just like a pastoral elegy. Marty's love for Giles is related like a poem in front of his grave, but Giles has never known her love. Giles and Marty are not rewarded at all. Their virtues are useless, while Oak and Venn are strong enough to regain their loves. When there is no possibility to marry Grace, Giles loses his will to live and gives up the battle for the survival. In this sense, his death is not a tragic one.

In *The Woodlanders* the background of the novel is not so hostile as Egdon Heath. The villagers do not play a role of Greek chorus for the first time in Hardy's main works. From the viewpoint of the death of Giles, this novel may be called a pastoral elegy, which is only in the latter part of the novel. Five main characters are not so distinctive. Above all, Grace Melbury is not so attractive. This is because the writer himself is lack of emotional involvement and sympathy with Grace, unlike Tess and Eustacia.