TEACHING SYMPATHY IN RURAL PLACES:
READERS’ MORAL EDUCATION
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH LITERATURE

DISSERTATION

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My dissertation explores nineteenth-century British authors’ views of the moral and educational function of literature, focusing specifically on how William Wordsworth, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy addressed in literary forms the issues of sympathy and reading raised in the eighteenth century. In addition to making a similar claim about sympathy and reading—a central function of literature is to extend the readers’ capacities for sympathy through reading experience—all these authors attach major importance to rural life as subject matter in their sympathetic education of readers. By considering these authors’ representations of sympathetic relations in rural settings in relation to eighteenth-century thoughts on sympathy and reading, this dissertation aims to reach a more balanced and productive understanding of their “didactic” attempts to teach strategies of sympathy to readers.

With the advent of liberalism and the emergence of the concept of a modern individual, the eighteenth century witnessed an enormous preoccupation with the issues of self-representation and sympathetic imagination, bringing up the idea that sympathy is not an immediate identification but only an imagined representation. The complicated epistemological and ethical questions about a sympathetic experience raised by eighteenth-century thinkers shed light on the approaches that Wordsworth, Eliot, and Hardy take to their sympathetic education of readers: by preventing their readers from indulging in superficial and painless feelings of sympathy, these authors seek to make
readers conscious of the problems of the improper use of sympathetic imagination. In order to illustrate the specific methods that Wordsworth, Eliot, and Hardy employ to expand readers’ sympathetic minds, I focus on how they problematize the commonly accepted notions of sympathy through their representations of rural life or rural people. As the individual chapters of my dissertation show, each author wrote in different historical contexts and had different amounts of faith in the possibility of restoring the foundations of morality upon which meaningful human relations can be built. Nevertheless, all three authors continued in their efforts to interrogate the moral and educational possibilities of literature.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I hate books. They only teach one to talk about what one does not know. (184)
—Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Emile, or on Education

Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language. (356-57)
—William Wordsworth

Preface to Lyrical Ballads

In his treatise Emile, or on Education (1762), Jean-Jacques Rousseau insists on a long delay in the introduction of books into Emile’s educational process. In his hatred of books, especially books of imaginative literature, Rousseau makes one exception for Robinson Crusoe, which he regards as “the most felicitous treatise on natural education” (184). Rousseau’s favorable view of Robinson Crusoe stems from the fact that the absence of any description of the state of social man in the novel protects Emile from exposure to “all notions of social relations which are not within his reach” (Emile 185). For Rousseau, Emile’s premature acquisition of knowledge of social relations is dangerous and unfit for his education because “the chain of knowledge forces you to show him the mutual dependence of men, instead of showing it to him from the moral side, turn all his attention at first toward industry and mechanical arts which make men
useful to one another” (185-86). Simply put, Rousseau is opposed to Emile’s reading of imaginative literature because he believes it promotes a misdirected understanding of human relationships, thereby presenting serious obstacles to Emile’s development of moral sensibility.

Although it is not exactly an account of the negative force of books, Rousseau’s analysis of the corrupting influence of theater in Letter to M. d’Alembert on the Theater (1758) provides a more elaborate explanation for how Emile’s contact with imaginative literature can be detrimental to his moral growth when he is not ready:

In giving our tears to these fictions, we have satisfied all the rights of humanity without having to give anything more of ourselves. . . . In the final accounting, when a man has gone to admire fine actions in stories[fables] and to cry for imaginary miseries, what more can be asked of him? Is he not satisfied with himself? . . . Has he not acquitted himself of all that he owes to virtue by the homage which he has just rendered it? What more could one want of him? That he practice it himself? He has no role to play; he is no actor. (25)

In this description of the negative effects of a theater viewing experience on one’s development of imaginative faculty, Rousseau is concerned especially about the influence of the theater on the ethical and sentimental education of audiences. As David Marshall aptly puts it in his essay “Rousseau and the State of Theater,” Rousseau finds audiences’ operation of sympathetic imagination in the playhouse deeply problematic because he believes that “the theater teaches us how to replace real sympathy with a painless representation or imitation of sympathy” (89). Rousseau’s conviction that sympathetic feelings for others in suffering experienced in the playhouse deprive us of an opportunity to develop genuine sympathy by making us feel “we have satisfied all the rights of humanity without having to give anything more of ourselves” is closely related
to his apprehension that imaginative literature might nourish in Emile’s mind a self-satisfying notion of social relations and sympathy, which does not lead to a sense of responsibility for thinking and action. For him, the most important goal of his pupil’s education is to “show him the mutual dependence of men . . . from the moral side” (my italics).

What particularly interests me in Rousseau’s discussion of the harmful influence of imaginative literature or plays is the connection he draws between one’s reading experience and one’s ability to sympathize with others. Despite his emphasis on the dangers of books, Rousseau does not completely deny their usefulness in Emile’s moral education—what he is worried about is untimely and unsupervised exposure to imaginative literature. Rousseau even presents reading as a vehicle for educating Emile in the sentiment of love, as implied by the fact that Book IV of Emile, which is immediately followed by the book on marriage, is about a theory of reading of poetry and of history. Linked to pity and sympathy by the notion of lack, insufficiency, and feeling vulnerable, love for Rousseau is an illusion, but a necessary one. Rousseau explains why he thinks of love as a necessary illusion despite all his warnings about the dangers of love in his view of civilization in Discourse on the Origin and the Foundation of Inequality among Men (1755); here he laments our present state where immediate, transparent communication among human beings is impossible. Though he repeatedly invokes the state of nature, Rousseau makes it clear that nature can be thought of only within society and culture and that for human beings in society, happiness is always found in social relations.¹

¹ Rousseau makes a similar statement about happiness in Emile: “It is man’s weakness which makes him sociable; it is our common miseries which turn our hearts to humanity . . . I do not conceive how someone
More importantly, because we rely upon others for our happiness, we are never free from the regard of others. This is why Rousseau lays such heavy emphasis on the wise exercise of imagination. It is only through imagination that we can sympathize with others, and considering that a desire for the approbation of others is the most fundamental need or passion, the misuse of imagination could only aggravate the situation of alienation: “The source of all the passions is the sensibility, but imagination determines the course they take. It is the errors of imagination that convert the passions into vices” (*Emile* 101). In this regard, Aubrey Rosenberg is right in pointing out “the perils of imagination” (20) as a major reason for Rousseau’s insistence on the delay of the introduction of books in Emile’s education. It is no wonder, then, that the whole educational project in *Emile* revolves around training Emile in developing and wisely exercising his imaginative mind.

Interestingly, Rousseau privileges imaginative literature or fiction over history in the training of Emile’s imaginative faculty, intimating that literature is more useful for refining Emile’s sensibility (or “taste” in his words) because of its charms. More specifically, literature presents illusions—that is, creates images that readers can identify with—and its effect is similar to that of love, making it a powerful agency for controlling and qualifying the individual’s sentiment of his or her being. As is evident from the aforementioned discussion of the dangerous side of a theater viewing experience in *Letter to M. d’Alembert on the Theater*, however, Rousseau is keenly aware that reading imaginative literature is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, by providing occasions

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who needs nothing can love anything. I do not conceive how someone who loves nothing can be happy” (221).

This is strongly reminiscent of Aristotle’s discussion of history and poetry in the *Poetics*. 4
for exercising sympathy, it can serve as a site for enlarging sympathetic abilities. On the other hand, without proper guidance or education in the use of the faculty of imagination, it generates the false sympathy and thereby further degenerates readers’ moral sensibility. This double-faced nature of reading presents serious concerns to Rousseau as a writer attempting to purify his readers’ taste: what does he do with already corrupted readers? Where and how does he begin? Furthermore, given his view of the human condition—all human beings are already in society and therefore alienated from the state of nature—another troubling question is raised as to the state of his own sensibility and his ability to educate his readers in the use of imagination. After all, he himself is not free from the morally depraving influence of civilization.

Though published a year earlier than *Emile*, Rousseau’s novel *Julie, or the New Eloise* (1761), one of the most seminal and widely read literary works of its day, provides interesting points of discussion regarding these puzzling questions about education through literature. In his attempt to explain Rousseau’s turn from discourses to novels, Christopher Kelly focuses on Rousseau’s ambivalent remark on the factual status of his novel in the Second Preface to *Julie*. Pointing out that Rousseau departed from the commonplace practice of presenting a novel as a factual account, Kelly interprets Rousseau’s “refusal to deny that his book is a novel” (96) as a “sort of test of the reader rather than of his own veracity” (96). Specifically, by letting readers decide whether the book is fiction or not, Rousseau turns their judgment of the fictional status of the novel
against them; if the readers “decide (correctly) that it must be fiction, that decision will show that they are too corrupt to believe in the possibilities shown in the novel” (Kelly 96).

Rousseau’s refusal to make any value claims about fiction can be thus understood as his effort to bring his readers’ attention to the state of their moral sensibility. More importantly, however, it enhances the readers’ critical consciousness of the way fiction operates on their sympathetic minds. Unlike Emile whose main character is not quite available for literary identification, Julie as a novel has characters with psychological, emotional dimensions that inevitably invoke sympathetic identification on the part of the readers, intensifying its “seductive” power, and the way Rousseau “dismisses” the issue of the fictional status of his novel in the Second Preface intimates his belief that his project of educating his readers through the seductive power of literature can begin only when its dangers are duly acknowledged. The object of education through Julie is not confined to its readers, however. With enormous emphasis on the transformative power of writing, Julie also makes a comment on an author’s relation to a text, and Rousseau’s preoccupation with making explicit his identification with his writing even in his fictional work demonstrates his consciousness of the state of his own sensibility, which consequently raises an issue of sincere and immediate communication in writing.

Arguing that Julie “not only precedes but anticipates [Rousseau’s] personal works” (18), R.J. Howells interprets Julie basically as an autobiography in the mode of fiction and

3 Numerous comments on the power of writing are found in Julie. For example, explaining why he has to keep writing to Julie, Saint-Preux says, “With what earnestness would I alter the past so that you might not have seen that fatal letter! No, for fear of offending you again, I would not even write this one, if I had not written the first. . . Ah! How unhappy I am doomed to be, for though I have been rash, I shall not be a liar nor a coward, and the crime that my heart committed my pen cannot disown” (29).
suggests that Rousseau’s preference for fiction as a mode of self-representation over a directly autobiographical mode signifies the shift from “the questions of literal truth, verisimilitude and moral truth” (20) to those of the truth of personal authenticity.

Rousseau was of course not the only one preoccupied with the issue of moral sensibility and sympathetic imagination in the eighteenth century. As a matter of fact, with the advent of liberalism and the emergence of the concept of a modern individual, eighteen-century Europe witnessed an enormous obsession with the need for self-definition and self-representation, which resulted in profuse theories about representation and sympathy. In his book *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling provides an account of the historical background that triggered interest in epistemological and ethical questions about self-representation and sympathetic relationships. Pointing out that “in the sixteenth century, it became more and more possible for people to leave the class into which they were born” (15), Trilling sees the increase in the rate of social mobility as an important factor that made one’s social position play a less important role in determining one’s identity. Another significant factor that promoted the consciousness of the indeterminacy of one’s identity is the diminishment of the authority of the Church along with the dissolution of the feudal order (Trilling 20). Consequently, the idea that one’s identity is only a role to play emerged, and being oneself and acting oneself began to be considered two different concepts, and the consciousness of the possible gap between one’s role and one’s “true” self accounts for the proliferation of the epistemological debate in the eighteenth century about how one can know and be known by an other. The concept of the “impartial spectator” posited by Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral*
Sentiment (1759)—the idea that we can view our own situations in a candid and impartial light when we view them with the eyes of the spectators—needs to be understood in this context. In emphasizing that even one’s perception of one self is mediated by imagination and the regard of others, Smith in turn defines sympathy as “an act of imagination in which we represent to ourselves an image of what we think the other person is feeling” (Marshall 104). He thus demonstrates eighteenth-century people’s awareness of the impossibility of escaping their own senses and consequently the inevitability of the theatricality in sympathetic relationships. The idea that sympathy is not an immediate identification but only an imagined representation brings us back to Rousseau’s emphasis on the importance of education in the proper use of imagination and his concern about how to make the best use of imaginative literature.

My project is an attempt to explore how such diverse authors of the nineteenth century as William Wordsworth, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy addressed in literary forms the complicated questions about sympathy and reading raised in the eighteenth century. The primary reason why I have chosen these authors is that all of them make the same claim about sympathy and reading: a central function of literature is to extend readers’ capacity for sympathy through reading experience. As one of the characteristics that display the influence of eighteenth-century theories about sympathy and reading, their faith in the educational and moral value of literature that assumes a close connection between one’s capacity for sympathy and one’s reading habit accounts for these authors’ conscious efforts to challenge their readers’ self-indulgent reading habits in their attempts to expand their readers’ sympathetic minds. Instead of providing readers with “easy”
texts that gratify their superficial emotions and thoughts, Wordsworth, Eliot, and Hardy deliberately complicate the reading process to make readers conscious of the problems with their ways of approaching texts. Sympathy constitutes an important theme also in Charles Dickens’s novels, but I have decided to focus on the texts by Wordsworth, Eliot, and Hardy because of another significant feature they have in common: writing at a time when proportionately fewer people were living in rural settings, they all emphasized the usefulness of rural life for their sympathetic education of readers.

That said, a question might be raised as to the effectiveness of the term “sympathy” in the discussion of these authors’ views of the pedagogical and ethical function of literature. As Audrey Jaffe points out in the introduction to *Scenes of Sympathy*, the term has often been used to describe “an individualistic, affective solution to the problem of class alienation” or “the attempt to ameliorate social differences with assurances of mutual feeling and universal humanity” (15). Considering the idea of fellow-feeling and common humanity implied by the term, there does not seem to be much room for active resistance to the social power-structure in this concept, making it seem fit to be an ideological instrument of bourgeois hegemony rather than a medium of moral education. As discussed above, however, sympathy was already considered inseparable from representation in the eighteenth century, and it does not need to be understood simply as emotional states or gestures; instead, sympathy represents a locus where fundamental issues in epistemology, moral philosophy, writing, and literary interpretation are addressed.
Jaffe’s analysis of representations of sympathy in Victorian fiction in *Scenes of Sympathy* also departs from the view that regards sympathy as an attempt to disguise social differences with the illusion of mutual feeling and a common humanity. Drawing on the eighteenth-century idea that sympathy is inseparable from representation, Jaffe investigates how sympathy serves as a mechanism of constructions of social, cultural identity in Victorian texts. Despite her insight into the role of sympathy in one’s perception and construction of identity, by emphasizing quasi-Freudian mechanisms such as “projection” and “displacement” in sympathetic experiences, Jaffe’s theory of sympathy focuses more on the unconscious effects of the rhetoric of authors and does not give much autonomy to a text. My proposition is that it is important to consider the conscious choices authors make in order to affect the ways their readers respond to their texts as well as their subconscious decisions. The articulation of authorial intention is especially important in discussing Wordsworth’s, Eliot’s, and Hardy’s texts because of their overtly “didactic” purpose of training their readers in the way they engage with texts—after all, the whole project of sympathetic education can work only when the readers have learned how not to keep their texts at a distance. Since my focus is primarily on how these authors’ awareness of the issues surrounding the discourse of sympathy affected their conscious choices of representational techniques, I will not attempt to examine in my dissertation how “free” these authors were from the ideological constraints of their time or whether they were successful in transforming their readers’ moral sensibility through their texts. My main attention is to the ways that they consciously try to teach strategies of sympathy to their readers.
In terms of methodology and thematic concerns, Amanda Anderson’s re-evaluation of the powers and limitations of detachment in Victorian texts in her book *The Powers of Distance* bears some significant similarities with my exploration of nineteenth-century authors’ perspectives on the educational and ethical potential of literature.

Positing an “ideal of critical distance” (4) as a distinctive feature of Victorian ethics and aesthetics, Anderson’s book focuses on Victorian authors who “explore in a sustained way what it means to cultivate a distanced relation toward one’s self, one’s community, or those objects that one chooses to study or represent” (4). By taking seriously individual Victorians’ attempts to cultivate a disinterested and impartial stance on social and cultural norms, her analyses consider not only the dangers but also the gains of detachment, and as she herself notes, her attempt to acknowledge the potential of detachment goes against the grain of recent criticism suspicious of any claim for a critical consciousness of one’s social determination. In paying attention to authors’ conscious constructions and practices of critical distance and disinterestedness, Anderson shares the basic premise of my dissertation which grants authors some degree of agency. In addition, Anderson’s treatment of the topic of detachment is quite relevant to my discussion of sympathy in that it grapples with complicated questions about relations, whether they are between humans and society, between individuals, or simply between one and oneself. Furthermore, just as many of the writers Anderson examines “conceived their ideals in terms of a dialectic between detachment and engagement” (6), my authors’ definitions of sympathy do not merely emphasize engagement and

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immersion but also encompass the concept of detachment—as suggested above, the awareness of the inevitable distance between the sympathetic spectator and the object of sympathy is an important starting point in their interrogation of the topic of sympathy. Most importantly, Anderson’s discussion of the moral dimensions and consequences of the treatment of detachment in Victorian texts shares my interest in nineteenth-century authors’ views of sympathy as the goal of moral education.

Despite this intimate connection between the theme of detachment and the theme of sympathy, for my purpose, I find the term “sympathy” more useful than “detachment” or “distance.” First of all, given the aforementioned preoccupation with the problems of self-definition and sympathy in eighteenth-century Europe, the term sympathy offers more effective ways of understanding the cultural and historical context of nineteenth-century authors’ concerns with the nature and effects of cultural practices of morality. The connection between reading and sympathy drawn by eighteenth-century thinkers helps to account for how Wordsworth, Eliot, and Hardy understood the relationship between readers and texts and what are the specific ways in which each of these authors applied his or her understanding to the project of challenging readers’ ways of engaging with texts. In addition, Anderson’s statement that as an attempt to transcend partiality and situatedness, the “cultivation of detachment . . . is an aspiration toward universality and objectivity” (33) suggests that using the term detachment has a tendency to lead to the focus on the operation of the rational side of the human mind rather than the emotional side, emotions being commonly associated with subjectivity. Wordsworth, Eliot, and
Hardy, however, deal importantly with both the intellectual and emotional effects of the reading experience, which is why I think sympathy is a more productive term for explaining their perspectives on the moral dimensions of literary practices.

Another important reason why the term sympathy is preferred in my examination of Wordsworth’s, Eliot’s, and Hardy’s moral education of readers is that though the emphasis is not so explicit in Hardy’s later works, they all attach major importance to sympathy as a literary topic. More specifically, there authors are aware of the double-sided nature of literature as a medium of moral education with which Rousseau struggled—reading literature can either improve or further aggravate one’s moral sensibility. They self-consciously employ various representational and narrative techniques to interrogate the educational function of literature, and one of them is to deal with the theme of sympathy directly in their texts. In other words, while these authors understand sympathy as a discursive site for the problems of representation and the reader-text relationship and thus posit revising their readers’ reading habits as an important part of their sympathetic education of readers, they also attempt to problematize their readers’ notions of sympathy through their own definitions of sympathy provided within the texts or through the depiction of sympathetic relationships among characters.

Analyzing specific ways in which Wordsworth, Eliot, and Hardy treat sympathy as a literary topic is indeed crucial to understanding their perspectives on the possibilities of genuine sympathy and of educating readers in such faculty. Conscious of the impossibility of complete identification between the sympathetic observer and the object
of sympathy, none of these authors naively assumes that his or her didactic purpose of teaching readers about sympathy can be achieved simply by portraying a relationship in which a “real” exchange of emotions or thoughts occurs. Instead, when delineating sympathetic relations within their texts, these authors focus more on the obstacles to what they would define as “genuine sympathy,” which is not merely an imagined representation but something that actually concerns a relationship between one and another. Here again, Wordsworth’s, Eliot’s, and Hardy’s awareness of eighteenth-century theories of sympathy is noticeable. These authors begin by illustrating the theatricality of sympathetic relations through their depiction of the relationship between speakers and characters or the relationships among characters. They then show their readers the problems with their notions of sympathy that do not consider how they are trapped in their own senses. Finally, they invite the readers to think about whether there is such a thing as genuine sympathy and if there is, how it can be defined. Wordsworth, Eliot, and Hardy of course had different perspectives on the possibility of real sympathy, and even their own ideas about sympathy went through changes during their writing careers. Nevertheless, their treatment of the theme within their texts that purposefully draws readers’ attention to issues of sympathy and representation suggests that whether they are positive on the level of plot or characters about the possibility of real sympathy or not, they are all in search of the possibility of establishing a genuinely sympathetic relationship between readers and their texts.
In addition to dealing with sympathy directly as a topic, Wordsworth, Eliot, and Hardy show one more similarity in the methods they employ to examine the educational value of literature: they all draw on their representations of rural life in their attempts to enlarge their readers’ sympathetic minds. Given the class difference between their subjects and their readers who are mostly the urban middle class, their focus on rustic life or people can be interpreted as a strategy for raising their readers’ awareness of the complexities of a sympathetic experience. More specifically, by presenting objects of sympathy that most readers would have difficulty identifying with, these authors prevent their readers from indulging in easy and painless sympathetic feelings and thereby draw attention to the way their minds operate.

There is a more significant reason, however, for these authors’ decisions to portray sympathetic relationships in rural environments. Wordsworth’s explanation of the significance of rustic life as subject matter in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) sheds light on the connection he assumes between representations of rural life and readers’ sympathetic education: “Low and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language” (356-57). According to Wordsworth, rustic people retain vital passions of humanity, because their occupations keep them close to nature—that is, they are safer from the corrupting power of human civilization than residents of big cities. This assumption about the “naturalness” of rustic life is closely related to his belief in its educational

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5 According to Philip Davis, in the middle of the nineteenth century, “England was predominantly an urban nation, just over half its population living in the cities” (13), and it seems safe to say that most literate people lived in the cities.
value, as is illustrated in the statement that immediately follows the quotation above: “in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated” (357). Here, Wordsworth’s association of the co-existence of “our elementary feelings” with the accurate contemplation and the powerful communication of those feelings demonstrates his interest in the usefulness of representations of rustic life in the poet’s sympathetic communication with readers. Although Rousseau did not value rural life as important subject matter, Wordsworth’s commendation of the simplicity of rustic life and its significance in readers’ moral education illustrates Rousseau’s influence on Wordsworth in his understanding of the destructive effects of civilization on moral sentiments.6 Eliot and Hardy do not celebrate the educational and inspirational aspect of country life as strongly as Wordsworth does, but they both agree on its power to expand our understanding of humanity and the moral values of human society.

It then seems to make sense to align Wordsworth, Eliot, and Hardy with other nineteenth-century thinkers or writers who idealized nature and country life in order to offer a criticism of their current society, and many critics have actually interpreted Wordsworth’s, Eliot’s, and Hardy’s employment of the pastoral tradition7 in this regard. For example, explaining how the pastoral genre was used in the late eighteenth and early

6 Daniel E. Ritchie nicely sums up Rousseau’s view of education in terms of nature versus civilization: “For Rousseau, the primary purpose of education is to enable man’s nature to exfoliate, like a plant, according to its natural desires. Insofar as possible, man should get along without the ruinous effects of human art—literature, medicine, globes, and the range of artificial supplements attacked in Émile and La Nouvelle Héloïse” (133).

7 As many critics agree, the pastoral genre has undergone substantial changes throughout literary history, and the “terminology of the pastoral is complicated and confused” (Congleton 6). On this account, instead of attempting to give my own definition of the pastoral, I will use the term in its broadest sense: literature about country life.
nineteenth centuries, J. E. Congleton argues that “Rousseau, Gessner, Blair, Aikin, Wordsworth, and other Romanticists believed that pastoral poetry is of value largely because it portrays the primitivistic lives of its subjects and describes the beauty of external nature” (6). Congleton’s comment on Romanticists’ use of pastoral poetry as a vehicle for expressing ideals of “primitivistic lives” can be extended to the understanding of the popularity of the pastoral tradition in the Victorian era, if not necessarily to Eliot or Hardy’s use of the genre. As Hans Ulrich Seeber points out in his essay “The English Pastoral of the Nineteenth Century,” despite the assumption about the incompatibility of the pastoral genre with the needs of the industrialized age, the pastoral tradition continued throughout the nineteenth century. According to him, in the face of the historical processes of the nineteenth century that brought about radical changes in social structures, moral systems, and patterns of life, many writers and readers of the nineteenth-century were fascinated by the “pastoral values of simplicity, stability, friendship, a sense of beauty, artistic creativity and independence” (32), which served as “an outlet for their desire, whether for valid reasons or not, to withdraw to a simpler, more natural and presumably happier level of existence from an increasingly urban society” (27).

Understanding the nature of changes brought about by the historical processes of nineteenth-century England is indeed very significant in understanding the values Wordsworth, Eliot, and Hardy assigned to rural life and the ways they employed the pastoral tradition. In his discussion of the transformation of England in the middle of the nineteenth century, Philip Davis understands the shift from rural to urban as one of the
great changes that the Industrial Revolution brought about. According to him, the rise of industry and growing towns caused fundamental changes in all areas of society, such as classes, social systems, and institutional structures, making traditional beliefs and values represented by rural society things of a past. For example, as women and children were forced to offer their cheap labor in factories, the “very nature and configuration of the common family” (Davis 25) changed, with the status of the “head of the house” being considerably weakened. In addition to the disruption of familial ties, the system of industrial economy made “traditionally personal social relations, as between landowner and tenant, and visible direct causes, as between weather and harvest” (Davis 14) become increasingly obsolete. Most importantly, the very structures of thought went through a radical transformation, as senseless and purposeless labor and mechanical repetition caused “loss of human consciousness, feeling, and purposiveness” (Davis 32). It is not difficult to imagine how frustrating this whole situation was to Wordsworth, Eliot, and Hardy, who were deeply anxious to restore sympathetic abilities, and their investment in rural life as subject matter suggests that they basically share their contemporaries’ views of rustic life as an embodiment of moral attributes lost in the process of industrialization and that they use the pastoral tradition to comment on the moral conditions of their times.

It is important to note, however, that unlike most nineteenth-century thinkers or writers who often mythologized rural life and associated it with the idyllic past, Wordsworth, Eliot, and Hardy deliberately attempt to depart from this nostalgic view and are much more self-conscious in their employment of the pastoral genre. As a matter of fact, they all purposely try not to cater to readers’ expectations about pastoral literature as
a simple glorification of rural life or people. Wordsworth’s poetry, which has long suffered criticism for its romanticization of rustic people, in fact is a serious endeavor to confront the issues of human suffering and pain, and Wordsworth is careful not to make light of the reality of rural people’s sufferings. Eliot’s and Hardy’s representations of rural life are even more disillusioned. While Wordsworth believes in the sympathetic power of rural people, Eliot and Hardy focus more on how rural people have lost it and what are the causes and effects of their loss of sympathetic minds. On this account, although both Eliot and Hardy wrote novels that many critics label as “pastoral,” those novels also contain manifestly anti-pastoral elements.

In the chapters that follow, I examine the specific methods that Wordsworth, Eliot, and Hardy employ to expand readers’ sympathetic minds. Each chapter focuses on how they problematize the commonly accepted notions of sympathy through their representations of rural life or rural people. Chapters Two and Three examine Wordsworth’s revision of Rousseau’s theory of sympathy and reading by tracing the changes in his representations of rural people in different stages of his poetic career. Wordsworth’s apparent lack of concern about the socio-political dimension of the sufferings of his object of representation has led a number of critics to interpret his poems about the rural poor as a displacement of the social into the poetic. By considering Wordsworth’s responses to complex thoughts on sympathetic relationships developed in the eighteenth century, however, I aim to reach a more balanced reading of his representations of rural people and his project of educating his readers in sympathy. Given Wordsworth’s preoccupation with the relationship between the poet and his object
of representation, special attention is paid to his stance on the eighteenth-century theory about the inescapability of theatrical relations in sympathetic encounters with others, which I believe is important in comprehending the changes in his rendering of his speakers who usually play the role of spectators of sufferings.

Chapter Two analyzes various representational techniques Wordsworth employs in his early poetry to interrogate the possibility of teaching his readers how to distinguish false, superficial feelings of sympathy from genuine sympathy. Instead of describing rural people merely as objects of sympathy or pity, Wordsworth emphasizes their educational value and consequently the significance of the poet’s ability to “shew” the depth of their minds in his portrayal of the rustic poor in *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth’s lack of attention to the socio-political reality of these people’s sufferings needs to be understood in this context. Not wanting to confine his definition of sympathy to “material assistance,” Wordsworth tries to draw attention to the force of the suffering people’s minds rather than to the wretchedness of their conditions. His emphasis on the importance of distinguishing sympathy from self-satisfying acts of “charity” is carried on also in his later poem, “The Old Cumberland Beggar” (1800). Conscious of the impossibility of the sympathetic spectator’s complete understanding of the object of sympathy, however, Wordsworth confronts a difficult question of how a poet can represent others’ emotions and thoughts. The answer given in *Lyrical Ballads* is to allow his speakers to mediate the stories of rustic people by providing them with access to rustic people’s emotions and thoughts. In “Resolution and Independence” (1807), however, Wordsworth entirely forgoes his attempt to mediate his subjects’ minds,
focusing instead on representing the poet’s memories of “sympathetic” incidents. This shift of attention to the mental and emotional effects of sympathy on the sympathetic spectator manifested in “Resolution and Independence” signals significant changes in Wordsworth’s methods of training his readers’ moral sensibility through reading experience.

In the following chapter, I discuss Wordsworth’s representations of rustic people in *The Ruined Cottage* (1800) and in *The Prelude* (1805), which reflect his increasing preoccupation with the issue of the poet’s role in dealing with the reality of suffering and pain. The focus of my analysis of *The Ruined Cottage* falls on the presence of two different sympathetic observers of Margaret’s suffering—the Pedlar and the speaker. Countering the dominant reading of the poem that emphasizes Wordsworth’s evasion of the historical, political, and social reality of Margaret’s and her husband’s suffering, my interpretation of the sympathetic chains forged among Margaret, the Pedlar, and the speaker attempts to illuminate the nature of the sense of pleasure and comfort that the Pedlar feels and encourages the speaker to feel as well after his narration of Margaret’s story. As a poet figure who has had direct interaction with Margaret, the Pedlar teaches the speaker, the audience of his storytelling, the importance of turning his sympathy for Margaret into a greater understanding of the power of human minds to be affected by feelings and thoughts for others and the value of acknowledging the comforting power of sympathy to save us from the destructive force of grief and despondency. Through the speaker’s reaction to the Pedlar’s storytelling, Wordsworth presents the figure of an ideal reader, who accomplishes a growth in the capacity for sympathy by identifying with the
poet’s process of mind. Wordsworth’s educational ideal envisioned through the sympathetic chains among Margaret, the Pedlar, and the speaker raises an important question as to the viability of his project, however, for it does not explain how a poet can approach readers without the speaker’s refined sensibility and reading habits. Arguing that Wordsworth provides his answer in *The Prelude*, the rest of the chapter examines the autobiographical function of rural people in the poem. Presenting his own poetic growth as an exemplary model for his readers, Wordsworth is at the same time aware that it is not possible for the readers to exactly imitate the developmental process of his own sympathy because the process is essentially imperceptible. Wordsworth’s division of his mind into “two consciousnesses”—the mind observed and the mind observing—in *The Prelude* further complicates the issue of sympathy and representation by drawing a distinction between the text of the self and the writing of the text of the self. My hypothesis is that Wordsworth knows that readers cannot identify with his experience but that they can identify with the process of trying to figure experience out—with Wordsworth “observing,” rather than with Wordsworth “observed.”

Chapter Four investigates how George Eliot revises her readers’ notions of sympathy and their reading habits through her depiction of the failure of sympathetic relationships in rural communities in her early novels, *Adam Bede* (1859) and *The Mill on the Floss*. Both Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede* and Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* violate the ethical codes of their communities and suffer from their lack of sympathy, and the novels offer harsh criticism of the communities’ inability to sympathize with their individual members’ sufferings. Considering Eliot’s view of the symbolic significance of
rural life as the foundation of morality, her decision to expose the problematic nature of the ethical status of rural communities points to her awareness of the destructive force of historical processes of her time, such as industrialization and urbanization, that collapsed the most fundamental bond among people. The first half of the chapter considers Eliot’s problematization of both characters’ and readers’ ways of reading “Hetty Sorrel’s story” and its significance in Eliot’s sympathetic education of readers. After examining Eliot’s critique of the way the Hayslope community misreads and misremembers Hetty’s story, I discuss how Eliot links through the doubling of Hetty and Dinah the Hayslope community’s lack of sympathy to her readers’ assumed superficial feelings of sympathy for Hetty. The latter half of the chapter explores how Eliot complicates her readers’ concept of sympathy by positioning sympathy and human communities in opposition to each other in *The Mill on the Floss*, focusing on the problematics of the novel’s ending in which Maggie meets an unexpected death in a flood. What makes the novel’s conclusion perplexing is the fact that despite its emphasis on nature as a source of sympathy, nature serves as a medium of Maggie’s death, as if to endorse the St Ogg’s community’s moral disapproval of Maggie. Through the analysis of the town legend of St Ogg, the most significant hint at Maggie’s drowning in the novel, I maintain that the novel draws a connection between Maggie’s drowning and the St Ogg’s community’s failure to sympathize with her.

Chapter Five examines Hardy’s changing view of sympathy and its relation to his tragic vision through the investigation of his representations of rural communities in *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874) and in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886). Based upon
the idea of the mutual dependence of human beings, both novels posit sympathy as the most useful source of relief from the tragic condition of human life. Hardy’s depiction of human relationships in his later novels, however, points to the weakening of his faith in the possibility of genuine sympathy, complicating our understanding of his view of the sympathetic education of readers. By paying special attention to the changes in Hardy’s rendering of human relationships in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, this chapter attempts to trace Hardy’s growing sense of disillusionment and how it affects his artistic vision of expanding his readers’ moral sensibility through his novels. My analysis of *Far from the Madding Crowd* focuses on the contrast between Bathsheba and her rural community in their responses to the tragic incidents happening to their fellow beings. Unlike Bathsheba who realizes her dependence on others and develops into a sympathetic person through her complex reaction to the tragic events in her community, the Weatherbury community is incapable of responding to any kind of changes and fails to achieve sympathetic education.

Although Hardy’s view of the ethical potential of Weatherbury is fairly pessimistic, it is not as gloomy as his perspective on the moral status of Casterbridge in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, in which Michael Henchard, the protagonist of the novel, makes desperate efforts to enter a meaningful sympathetic relationship, only to fail miserably and die alone. In fact, no character in the novel succeeds in fully developing his or her sympathetic mind, and through the trope of drama and theater, the novel offers a very pessimistic look at the condition of human beings whose innate desire for sympathy cannot be gratified. In spite of the obvious pessimism about the possibility of
sympathy on the level of plot, the novel still invites readers to ask themselves whether life can be more than “a general drama of pain” (The Mayor of Casterbridge 411). I argue that this question is important in apprehending Hardy’s educational method—if he was not positive about his ability to enlarge his readers’ sympathetic minds through his texts, he at least believed in the significance of drawing his readers’ attention to the issues surrounding sympathy and making them see their importance.

In my conclusion, I discuss Virginia Woolf’s depiction of human relations in To the Lighthouse (1927) as a way of speculating on the continuities and discontinuities between nineteenth-century writers and Modernist writers, especially in terms of their stances on the educational function of literature. Woolf’s description of the ultimate inefficacy of Mrs. Ramsay’s sympathy for her husband demonstrates her understanding of the modern condition characterized by individual isolation and atomization. Mrs. Ramsay’s inability to say that she loves her husband is especially remarkable as an indication of her internal fragmentation, which is not only an important theme of Modernist writing but also closely related to the invention of Modernist literary techniques such as “stream of consciousness.” Despite the more strongly marked pessimism about personal relations in Modernist literature—Modernists even despair about the possibility of restoring the unity of the self—I argue that Modernist writing shares the commitment to the educational value of literature noticeable in the texts by Wordsworth, Eliot, and Hardy.
CHAPTER 2

WORDSWORTH’S POETICS OF SYMPATHY: PAIN, PLEASURE, AND PITY

Suggesting that not only the battle poetry of Homer and Virgil, but also the Christian epic of Milton is out of date, Wordsworth proposes a new theme for epic poetry in his autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*: one’s own soul. In the poem, Wordsworth emphasizes that he has been speaking “Not of outward things / Done visibly for other minds. . . but of my own heart” (III. 174-76) and exclaims “O heavens, how awful is the might of souls” (III. 178). Given his investment in the theme of sympathy manifested in his early poetry, this shift in his poetic interest—from poor and suffering people to his own self—seems to validate the interpretation of *The Prelude* as an ultimate sign of his withdrawal from, or denial of, history. *The Prelude*, however, includes accounts of his encounters with poor people, and they constitute an important part of the poem, suggesting the possibility that Wordsworth did not lose interest in rustic people as subject matter by the time he wrote the poem and that his poetic interest did not necessarily take an “egoistic” turn. Instead, he may have taken a different approach to representations of these figures. Wordsworth’s representations of rustic people in fact went through significant changes during his poetic growth. In this chapter and the following chapter, I investigate how those changes reflect his interrogation of the value of literature as a site
for educating readers in genuine sympathy. After analyzing the representational techniques employed in Wordsworth’s depiction of rustic people in some poems from *Lyrical Ballads*, “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” and “Resolution and Independence” in this chapter, I will examine Wordsworth’s poetics of sympathy in *The Ruined Cottage* and the autobiographical function of rustic people in *The Prelude* in the next chapter.

A dominant trend in recent criticism of Wordsworth’s poetry has focused mainly on the question of whether or how he “appropriates” rural people for his own egotistical ends in different stages of his poetic career. I contend, however, that by putting his poetry in conversation with eighteenth-century thoughts on sympathy and reading, we can reach a more balanced and productive understanding of Wordsworth’s treatment of

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8 The most famous example must be Jerome McGann’s *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*, in which he criticizes Wordsworth’s “displacement” of attention from historical, economic determinants of poverty and pain with his poetry. According to McGann, the idea “that poetry, or even consciousness, can set one free of the ruins of history and culture” (91) underpins not only Wordsworth’s poetry, but also Romantic poetry in general. Most Wordsworth critics basically share McGann’s stance concerning the issue of Wordsworth’s decentering of the political theme of poverty and suffering. For example, though David Simpson differs from McGann in emphasizing the role of Wordsworth’s “historical unconscious” in the process of displacement, he agrees with McGann that Wordsworth’s representations of the poor offer a displaced consolation for empirical and historical issues by turning attention to aesthetic and spiritual matters. In his book, *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse*, in which he attempts to historicize the discursive power of English Romanticism, Clifford Siskin expresses a similar view that Romantic discourse, Wordsworth’s poetry of course being the most prominent example, rewrites “moral imperatives into aesthetic ones” (12). James H. Averill also believes that even though Wordsworth’s later poetry is a more self-conscious examination of moral and psychological issues of poverty and suffering, the “young Wordsworth . . . has few scruples about using people, such as the Female Beggar and the Chamois Hunter, to give energy to his work” (115). Marjorie Levinson’s analysis in *Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems* of the manner in which Wordsworth displaces ideological contradiction “to a context where resolution could be imagined and implemented with some success” (6) similarly problematizes the apolitical nature of Wordsworth’s poetry about nature and rural life. Although her argument does not directly concern Wordsworth’s representations of rustic people, as “a feminist reader of men and women” (223), Gayatri Spivak also unravels in her essay “Sex and History in *The Prelude* (1805): Books IX to XIII” Wordsworth’s ways of using poetry to cope with his personal and social issues. More recently, however, there have been some attempts to depart from the critical tendency that overly stresses Wordsworth’s displacement of socio-political issues. For example, Nicholas Roe’s *The Politics of Nature: William Wordsworth and Some Contemporaries* is based on the premise that “in the 1790s poetry was a means of social and political intervention rather than an aesthetic retreat or escape” (3). Gary Harrison’s historicization of the issue of poverty in *Wordsworth’s Vagrant Muse: Poetry, Poverty, and Power* is another significant endeavor to re-evaluate Wordsworth’s treatment of the political issues of his time.
rustic people and consequently of his project of teaching his readers through his poetry. Rousseau will therefore be especially significant when we try to understand Wordsworth’s increasing interest in the self as subject matter for poetry.

The affinities between Rousseau and Wordsworth in their notions of sympathy and its significance are obvious in many ways. First of all, their attempts to define the notion of sympathy, which is about the relationship between the self and others, begin with considering the question of whether or how it is possible to get at the truth about oneself. More specifically, just as Rousseau is preoccupied with the question of whether he can represent his “authentic” self in his examination of the issues surrounding the discourse of sympathy, Wordsworth’s interest in the theme of sympathy is inseparable from his need for self-definition. His autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, is the most obvious evidence of the interrelation between the theme of self-definition and sympathy.

Rousseau and Wordsworth also share thoughts on the educational value of their self-examinations. As suggested in the introduction, Rousseau makes deliberate attempts to challenge his readers’ notions of fiction, writing, and reading, which are an obvious indication of his instructional purpose. Wordsworth similarly believes that his poem about himself “is in truth heroic argument” (III. 182). The phrase “heroic argument” indicates that analyzing his soul is not his ultimate purpose; instead, Wordsworth believes that his poem about his personal life has a “public” function of instructing his readers, which is more explicitly stated toward the end of the poem: “Thus haply shall I teach, / Inspire, through unadulterated ears / Pour rapture, tenderness, and hope, my theme / No other than the very heart of man” (XIII. 237-40). Another important similarity is that
despite their belief in the transformative power of writing and reading, both are acutely conscious of the dangers of utilizing literature as a site for training readers in sympathetic minds. Rousseau’s investigation of the pedagogical power of literature begins from the understanding of literature as an embodiment of “the very principle of society, which is the individual’s abnegation of personal autonomy in order to win the forbearance and esteem of others” (Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* 60). Wordsworth’s constant obsession with the question of his identity and mission as a poet can be seen as his awareness of the immense difficulty of producing literature that is free from the corrupting power of civilization.

Granted, there are also significant differences between Rousseau and Wordsworth in their approaches to sympathetic education through literature, and one particular difference is quite useful for my discussion of Wordsworth’s poetics of sympathy because it is closely related to the aforementioned tendency in Wordsworth scholarship to interpret his poetry as a displacement of the social into the poetic. Unlike Rousseau, who does not directly concern himself with the issues regarding the rustic poor, Wordsworth puts a great emphasis on rural people as his subject matter. The most obvious reason for his emphasis on rustic people as subject matter seems to be related to his understanding of the human condition and his lifelong struggle with the issues of pain, suffering, and poverty. That is to say, writing at a time when rustic people were greatly suffering from “the costly American war, the decline of small farming and the cottage industry in

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9 As David G. Riede aptly points out in *Oracles and Hierophants: Constructions of Romantic Authority*, the shift from joy to dejection in the mood of the speaker in “Resolution and Independence” is a strong indication of Wordsworth’s fear of madness that might ensue from his failure to handle the overwhelming reality of human suffering.
England, [and] the system of impressments” (Swann 84), Wordsworth is very likely to have taken strong interest in the rustic poor as objects of sympathy in his investigation of human relationships and the possibility of sympathy.10

Rustic people are not simply presented in Wordsworth’s poetry as fellow human beings who demand and deserve sympathy, however. As discussed in the introduction, as an embodiment of essential feelings of the human heart, rustic people mean to Wordsworth much more than a mere object of sympathy—they teach him, although not on a conscious level, about sympathy. Wordsworth’s belief in the educational value of rustic figures is important in understanding his almost obsessive references to pleasure, joy, and happiness in his poems about suffering people. What makes his emphasis on pleasure so puzzling is that for Wordsworth, how to sympathize with others’ pleasure is not such an important question as how to sympathize with others’ suffering and pain, as illustrated by the fact that he focuses mainly on rustic people, who experience the reality of human suffering, pain, and grief most intensely, in his examination of sympathetic relationships among human beings. Ironically, Wordsworth’s speakers experience—or at least attempt to experience—feelings of comfort, joy and cheerfulness after their encounters with suffering people. As they sympathize with the sufferers, they do share their painful feelings, but in many poems, their sympathy and a greater understanding of humanity that they gain through their sympathetic experience eventually lead them to pleasure, suggesting that Wordsworth posits the ultimate effect of sympathy with pain as

10 Here lies an important difference between Wordsworth and Adam Smith, who articulates the most widely circulated view of sympathy in the eighteenth century in The Theory of Moral Sentiments. For Smith, how to sympathize with others’ pleasure is as important a question as how to sympathize with others’ pain. In contrast, Wordsworth’s poetry is invested mainly in the question of how one can understand or share others’ pain rather than pleasure or joy.
pleasure. The ending of The Ruined Cottage MS. D \(^{12}\) is a very pertinent example of Wordsworth’s emphasis on the importance of being able to feel a sense of pleasure after an intense experience of sorrowful feelings. Finishing the tragic and heartrending story of Margaret’s suffering, the Pedlar says, “I turned away / And walked along my road in happiness” (MS. D. 524-25). The Pedlar’s cheerful attitude has been viewed as problematic in recent criticism. In his New Historian reading of the poem, Alan Liu, for example, interprets the Pedlar as an oppressive figure who “indexes the sun as the blinding source of reality” (326). In Liu’s view, the Pedlar’s cheerful mood indicates his dismissal of the reality of Margaret’s suffering. Focusing on Wordsworth’s fear of despair and madness that might result from a direct confrontation with suffering, Riede explains why Wordsworth is so obsessed with pleasure: “Just as suffering is both cause and symptom of madness, so pleasure is both cause and symptom of sanity and wisdom” (141). According to David G. Riede, Wordsworth’s “principle of pleasure” (141) is troubling because it inevitably leads to his failure unflinchingly to confront the reality of suffering and pain. It is true that the Pedlar makes no efforts in any practical ways to alleviate Margaret’s pain, and his ability to feel pleasure despite her sorrow might be looked at as a lack of sincerity in his sympathy for Margaret. Notably, however, it is

\(^{11}\) In fact, in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth emphatically defines the poet’s duty as “giving immediate pleasure to a human Being possessed of that information which may be expected from him, not as a lawyer, a physician, a mariner, an astronomer or a natural philosopher, but as a Man” (361).

\(^{12}\) In his preface to The Ruined Cottage and the Pedlar, James Butler provides a succinct account of the complicated composition history of the poem: “Begun in 1797 as a stark story of Margaret’s decline and death, The Ruined Cottage in 1798 acquired a history of the Pedlar who narrates her tale, as well as a tranquil conclusion. Wordsworth separated the Pedlar’s history from the main poem in 1799, and his sister copied the surplus Pedlar passages as an addendum to The Ruined Cottage. In 1802 these overflow passages became a separate poem about the Pedlar’s mental development; in 1803-1804 this account of the Pedlar and the story of Margaret were combined” (xii). The two manuscripts that I will use are reading texts of MS. B and MS. D. The main differences between these two manuscripts are: 1) MS. B contains a lengthy account of the personal background of the Pedlar; 2) MS. D has the Pedlar’s moralizing of Margaret’s story of decline and decay. Except where noted, future references will be to MS. B.
after, not during, the encounters with people in pain that Wordsworth’s characters experience pleasure, and without a close examination of what exactly happens between the moment of sharing pain and the moment of feeling pleasure, it is hard to conclude that pleasure necessarily means a dismissal or denial of the actuality of pain. Moreover, rustic people in Wordsworth’s poetry do not simply elicit feelings of pity, which involves a more or less condescending attitude on the part of the observer because of its assumption that the observer is in a better situation than the observed,¹³ but also inspire and educate the observer. In this sense, for Wordsworth, pleasure does not merely mean the opposite of pain. Instead, he believes that it encompasses painful feelings that arise from sympathy for suffering people and thus takes the sympathetic observer to a deeper understanding of humanity—namely, the enduring power of human minds. The question, of course, is how such a powerful sense of pleasure can be developed.

Therefore, in my discussion of Wordsworth’s poetics of sympathy, the process through which his speakers arrive at pleasure will be given close attention. I will also focus on the relationship between the sympathetic spectator and the object of sympathy in Wordsworth’s poetry, which I believe is quite significant in reconsidering Wordsworthian “consolation” for and “displacement” of historical and social issues regarding the sufferings of the poor. Wordsworth’s rendering of the relationship between the sympathetic observer and the object of sympathy in his poetry—in many cases, the

¹³ The O.E.D. defines pity as (a) “The quality of being pitiful; the disposition to mercy or compassion; clemency, mercy, mildness, tenderness” and as (b) “A feeling or emotion of tenderness aroused by the suffering, distress, or misfortune of another, and prompting a desire for its relief.”
relationship between speakers and rustic characters—is indeed very crucial to understanding his notion of sympathy, which needs to be carefully distinguished from identification with objects of sympathy.

Focusing on Wordsworth’s consistent use of the term “spectacle” in his poetry, especially in *The Prelude*, Eric Gidal contends that “the spectacle is ultimately a failed mode of identification in its privileging of the symbolic figure over the individual subject as the primary site of constitutive mediation” (463). For Gidal, the poet’s state in the poem is merely that of “passive perception in which the personal identity of the poet can find no room for active growth and participation” (463). Gidal is right in pointing out the limitations in Wordsworth’s speakers’ ability to identify with their subjects. In fact, Wordsworth does not seem quite interested in offering realistic representations of rustic people. It still remains to be answered, however, whether his speakers’ inability to identify with rustic characters necessarily points to their inability to sympathize with them before we can conclude that Wordsworth’s representations of rural figures are a failed attempt at education of readers in sympathy because they are a “failed mode of identification.” Interestingly, although Wordsworth draws a careful distinction between sympathy and identification in his portrayal of sympathetic encounters between speakers and rustic characters, he does emphasize the reader’s identification with speakers or the author. On this account, this chapter and the following chapter will carefully follow the changes in Wordsworth’s rendering of his speakers along with the changes in his representations of rustic figures.
2.1. The Rural Poor in *Lyrical Ballads* and in “The Old Cumberland Beggar”

In his note to Charles James Fox, leader of the Whig opposition in Parliament, Wordsworth states that his purpose of writing “Michael: A Pastoral Poem” is to “shew that people who do not wear fine cloaths can feel deeply”—that is, common people have capacity for sublime emotions and ideas. This statement reveals two important principles of Wordsworth’s poetics of sympathy. First, the idea that “men who do not wear fine cloaths can feel deeply” manifests his belief in the value of the rural poor as subject matter, challenging the common assumption that rustic people are vulgar, uneducated beings unworthy of attention. Second, his use of the term “shew” illustrates his view of the poet’s role, which is to understand the depth of his subjects’ emotions and convey his understanding to his readers. Wordsworth’s notion of the poet’s mission accounts for his emphasis on the importance of the poet’s sympathetic relationship to his subject. In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth states that the wish of the poet is “to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes” (361). In order to be able to “shew” how deeply his subject feels, the poet should attempt to identify with his subject as much as possible.

Despite this stress on the poet’s capacity for sympathetic identification with his subject’s feelings, Wordsworth’s speakers rarely attempt to provide any relief from pain or distress that they witness, which raises questions as to the purpose (or the use) of the poet’s sympathy for his subject. “Michael” is especially an interesting case because it deals with historically specific conditions of proprietors of small estates. According to
Wordsworth’s note to Fox, these people “of respectable education who daily labour on their own little properties” were by the beginning of the nineteenth century “almost confined to the North of England,” and they were characterized by strong domestic affections and the love of landed property. As in Michael’s case—Michael loses both his son and his land—neither these people’s families nor their land were safe from the encroachments of history and society, and “Michael” presents a powerful picture of the plight of the owners of small estates at that time.\(^{14}\) Nonetheless, Wordsworth’s historical consciousness does not extend to unraveling the hidden ideological mechanisms of the social power-structure that produced Michael’s tragedy. Instead of focusing on the historical context of Michael’s tragedy, the poem turns its attention to a “comfort in the strength of love / ’Twill make a thing endurable, which else / Would break the heart” (ll. 457-59). In other words, the “comfort in the strength of love” is the only relief that the poem provides. In this sense, “Michael” is an apt example of the Romantic “displacement” of the socio-political reality, and obviously, sympathy in Wordsworth’s poetry does not have much “practical” value.

The speaker’s identity and his relation to Michael complicate the question of the “use” of the speaker’s sympathy for Michael even further. As is evident from the speaker’s explanation of his motive for narrating Michael’s story, the speaker is at a fairly removed distance from his subject:

\[
\begin{align*}
\ldots\text{ It was the first,} \\
\text{The earliest of those tales that spake to me} \\
\text{Of Shepherds, dwellers in the valleys, men}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{14}\) Regarding Wordsworth’s treatment of the historical conditions of the proprietors of small estates, Levinson states, “Wordsworth is oddly specific in his treatment of the commercial mechanism that eventually ruins the shepherd” (67).
Whom I already lov’d; not verily
For their own sakes, but for the fields and hills
Where was their occupation and abode. . . .
Therefore, although it be a history
Homely and rude, I will relate the same
For the delight of a few natural hearts,
And with yet fonder feeling, for the sake
Of youthful Poets, who among these Hills
Will be my second self when I am gone. (ll. 21-39)

Considering that the speaker refers to “youthful Poets” as his future “second self,” he is obviously presented as a poet figure, and as a poet of Michael’s tale, he ought to try to identify with Michael’s feelings as best as he can in order to “shew” the depth of Michael’s mind. There are clear limits, however, to his ability to identify with Michael.

First of all, in explaining how he has come to know Michael’s story and how he has developed interest in his story, the speaker reveals that though he might be of the same region as Michael, he is of a different social rank, intimating his distance from the reality of Michael’s sufferings. In addition, his statement that he loves the tales of “Shepherds, dwellers in the valleys . . . not verily / For their own sakes, but for the fields and hills / Where was their occupation and abode” implies that his affection for rustic people does not necessarily come from his intimate experience of these people. The speaker loves and appreciates rural people, but his emphasis on the significance of the rural area as a place of “their occupation and abode” suggests that he might not be so interested in them as individual beings. It is no wonder, then, that he does not know Michael personally but has merely “conversed with more than one who well / Remember
the old Man, and what he was” (ll. 451-52). Never having directly witnessed Michael’s suffering or experienced a similar kind of pain, the speaker is unable to completely identify with his subject.

The distance between the speaker and Michael in “Michael” is crucial to reevaluating Wordsworth’s treatment of the poor in *Lyrical Ballads* and also to understanding his concept of sympathy. Countering the dominant criticism of Wordsworth’s poetry that emphasizes his exploitation of the figures of poor people for his own ideological purposes, Harrison offers a new perspective on the relationship between the sympathetic spectator and the object of sympathy in Wordsworth’s poetry by historicizing the issue of poverty. Comparing Wordsworth’s representation of the peasants with William Cowper’s, Harrison argues that Wordsworth’s depiction of the laboring poor displaces “Cowper’s picturesque ‘long shot’ with a potentially disturbing ‘close up’ shot” (61), and this substitution of a “disturbing proximity” for the “panoramic distance” in Wordsworth’s poetry registers a significant change in perspective on the status of the poor: in a social system where the status of the subject could not be “guaranteed by birth, connections, talents or industry” (60), poverty was no more a spectacle to be observed from a safe distance. Harrison is quite right in pointing out that Wordsworth’s spectators do not have the “customary privilege of looking down at the rural poor” (60). Wordsworth’s spectators’ attitudes towards the poor are far from condescending; rather, they are impressed and inspired by these figures. That is, Wordsworth makes careful efforts not to define the relationship between the observer and the observed as that of pity—for him, the distinction between pity and sympathy is
significant. The concept of reversal or “the transference of power between spectator and spectacle” (Harrison 73), however, does not provide an adequate explanation for the complex relationship between spectator and spectacle in Wordsworth’s poetry. It is true that Wordsworth’s spectators are not safely distanced from the spectacle of poverty, but it does not automatically mean that they are under threat of becoming poor like their “spectacular” objects. As a matter of fact, Wordsworth is intensely conscious of the unbridgeable distance between spectator and spectacle. My contention is that Wordsworth’s view of the relationship between spectator and spectacle is the legacy of eighteenth-century people’s awareness of the impossibility of escaping their senses and consequently the inevitability of theatrical acts and relations in sympathetic encounters with others.15

At the same time, Wordsworth does not believe that the speaker’s inability to identify with Michael’s emotions necessarily leads to his inability to sympathize with him. It might be impossible for the speaker to share or “experience” Michael’s feelings of pain because of the distance between them, but it does not mean that he is incapable of responding to them and being affected by them. This distinction that Wordsworth draws between identification and sympathy brings us back to the question of what is the “use” of the speaker’s sympathy for Michael, which is not necessarily based on his intimate interaction with Michael. Given the pitiable nature of Michael’s situation—his hope and

15 Critics have pointed out the importance of understanding Wordsworth’s view of distance in the context of eighteenth-century thought. For example, in his discussion of Wordsworth’s use of distance in The Prelude, John T. Ogden states that “Distance restricts the observer to the appearance of an object, allowing room for the object to be transformed by both the natural atmosphere and the observer’s imagination” (254). Though Ogden makes a persuasive argument about the positive effects of distance, he does not relate it to Wordsworth’s revision of eighteenth-century theories about sympathy.
“forward-looking thoughts” that the birth of his son brought to him are ruined when he loses his estate and sends his son to the city, where his son succumbs to the corruptive power of city life—most readers might assume that the tragic facts of the downfall of his family are what calls for their sympathy for Michael. Yet the speaker makes it clear that the main purpose of the poem is not simply to report on the distressing facts of Michael’s life.\textsuperscript{16} If it is, the “sympathetic” feelings that the poem evokes in readers’ minds would serve mainly to raise a political and historical awareness of “the conditions that detached [men like Michael] from their products and their material life” (Levinson 77). As stated earlier, however, the speaker’s sympathy for Michael does not lead him to contemplate what could be done to alleviate Michael’s sufferings—again, his sympathy does not have much value in practical matters. Instead, the speaker seeks to illustrate why he finds Michael worthy of his attention and sympathy. Immediately after mentioning how Luke succumbed to “the dissolute city” (l. 453) and brought “ignominy and shame” (l. 454), the speaker says, “There is a comfort in the strength of love; / ’Twill make a thing endurable, which else / Would break the heart:—Old Michael found it so” (ll. 457-59), intimating that what really invites our sympathy for Michael is his strength of mind, not the sadness of his situation.\textsuperscript{17} Although the speaker learns about how Michael endures the

\textsuperscript{16} In this sense, Averill’s contention that in “Michael,” “Wordsworth is primarily interested in telling the story, in giving the facts without exploring matters of response” (233) needs some revision. Although it is true that “matters of response” get more intensive attention in Wordsworth’s later poetry, “Michael” does engage in the question of what is the proper response to other people’s suffering by challenging readers’ assumption about the origin of their sympathetic reaction to the poem.

\textsuperscript{17} This corresponds with the idea that, for Wordsworth, rural people do not simply call for sympathy but also are a great source of sympathy.
“heavy news” (l. 462) about Luke only by conversing “with more than one who well / Remember the Old Man” (ll. 460-61), his indirect knowledge does not prevent him from feeling sympathy for Michael.

It is important to note here that the speaker’s emphasis on Michael’s enduring mind does not need to be interpreted as a dismissal of the reality of Michael’s sufferings or a mystification of his attitude toward life. Instead, it suggests that our sympathy for Michael does not need to be based only on the consideration of the changes in his material conditions, even though they are a major factor in the tragedy of his life. In order to be able to sympathize fully with Michael, a more comprehensive understanding of the source of his pain is needed, and in this regard, the conversation that Michael has with Luke before he sends him away is illuminating:

“. . . Lay now the corner-stone,  
As I requested, and hereafter, Luke,  
When thou art gone away, should evil men  
Be thy companions, let this sheep-fold be  
Thy anchor and thy shield; amid all fear  
And all temptation, let it be to thee  
An emblem of the life thy Fathers liv’d.” (ll. 417-20)

In requesting Luke to lay the corner-stone, Michael hopes that as an “emblem of the life [his] Fathers liv’d,” the stone of the sheep-fold will protect Luke from “all fear / and all temptation.” Michael’s request thus reveals what Luke means to him: for him, Luke is the heir to everything that he cherishes, including his property and family values. As a proprietor of small estates, Michael retains a close relationship with nature and engages in “unalienated labor” (Levinson 64), and considering the pleasure and interest he takes in his property, it is true that the seriousness of his material loss cannot be
underestimated. The symbolic meaning that Michael attaches to the act of laying the corner-stone, however, suggests that for him, his land cannot be thought of separately from his affection for his son, the inheritor of his world. In this sense, the loss of his land itself is not the real source of his pain—it is the loss of his son and the hope attached to him that really makes Michael suffer. The speaker’s focus on Michael’s “strength of love” rather than on the question of how to provide Michael with material help, then, does not have to be read as his failure to sympathize with Michael or the limitations of his sympathy for Michael.

The speaker’s justification of relating “a history / Homely and rude” (ll. 34-35) provides another enlightening perspective on Wordsworth’s notion of sympathy:

And hence this Tale, while I was yet a boy
Careless of books, yet having felt the power
Of nature, by the gentle agency
Of natural objects, led me on to feel
For passions that were not my own, and think
At random and imperfectly indeed
On man; the heart of man, and human life. (ll. 27-33)

Introducing Michael’s tale, the speaker explains what his “Homely and rude” story has done to him and why he believes that relating this story will be beneficial to his readers, especially to “youthful Poets, who . . . / Will be [his] second self when [he is] gone” (ll. 38-39). According to the speaker, Michael’s tale has served two functions for him: first, it “led [him] on to feel / For passions that were not [his] own”; second, it led him to think “On man; the heart of man and human life.” As discussed earlier, there are social and class differences between the speaker and Michael that make it difficult for the speaker to identify with Michael’s feelings and thoughts. Yet Michael’s tale, with its “power / Of
nature,” led the speaker to “feel / For” someone else’s passions. In other words, Michael’s story helped the speaker learn to sympathize with others, if not to identify with them, and the speaker hopes that his readers can have a similar experience through his storytelling. The speaker’s account of the second function of Michael’s tale explains why he deems such experience of sympathetic feelings significant: it led him to think about and take seriously “the heart of man and human life,” although “At random and imperfectly.” Along with the speaker’s attention to Michael’s “strength of love,” this belief in the power of sympathetic experiences to deepen our understanding of the human mind and humanity reinforces the idea that sympathy is not synonymous with poor relief or material assistance.

Other examples of poems based on this notion of sympathy abound in Lyrical Ballads, “Simon Lee, The Old Huntsman” being one of them. In this poem about an old huntsman who has only “Few months of life . . . in store” (l. 65), the speaker records his sympathetic encounter with the man. As compared with Michael, the outward facts of Simon Lee’s life are even worse, and in fact, the speaker devotes two thirds of the poem to describing Simon’s pitiful situation. Beginning with Simon’s curved back and old age, the speaker enumerates all the external conditions that contribute to making him look pathetic. Specifically, Simon is extremely old with only “one eye left” (l. 15), and though “The weakest in the village” (l. 40), “he’s forced to work” to survive, which explains why he and his wife are “poorest of the poor” (l. 60). To make things worse, unlike Michael, he does not even have a child to lose—he only has an aged wife who is even weaker than

18 Though the speaker does not explicitly use the term “sympathy” here, he at the same time does not claim that the story made him feel exactly what Michael felt, and thus “feel[ing] / For passions that were not my own” can be understood as sympathy rather than as identification.
he. Considering the intensity of Simon’s sufferings that all these details reveal, one might assume that they are given to stimulate readers’ sympathetic minds. However, by the time the description of Simon’s sufferings reaches its height—“For still, the more he works, the more / His poor old ancles swell” (ll. 67-68)—the speaker suddenly changes his tone and expresses his concern that he cannot meet his readers’ expectation about his poem. Intimating that the real story of Simon that he is about to tell now is different from ordinary tales of suffering and sympathy, the speaker invites his readers to rethink their concept of “tale”:

O reader! had you in your mind
Such stores as silent thought can bring,
O gentle reader! you would find
A tale in every thing.
What more I have to say is short,
I hope you’ll kindly take it;
It is no tale; but should you think,
Perhaps a tale you’ll make it. (ll. 73-80)

Here, the speaker deliberately provokes his readers to “think” and try to make a tale of his poem by saying that those with “Such stores as silent thought can bring” can “find / A tale in every thing” worth paying attention to. The tale that the speaker tells in the rest of the poem is quite simple: one summer day, the speaker happened to witness Simon struggling with an effort to sever the root of an old tree, and when he offered help, Simon expressed deep gratitude that left a huge impression on the speaker’s mind. Although the story itself is simple, its implications for the understanding of sympathy are not so simple. By asserting that what makes Simon’s tale worthy of our attention is not the wretchedness of his condition but his force of mind that brings “the tears into his eyes” (l. 97) and fills his heart with “thanks and praises” (l. 98) for a small act of kindness, the
speaker challenges the common tendency to identify sympathy with material help or simple kindness to the needy. Just like the speaker of “Michael,” the speaker of “Simon Lee” learns to expand his understanding of the human mind through his sympathetic encounter with the rural poor.

Though not included in *Lyrical Ballads*, “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” which explicitly deals with the theme of private charity or almsgiving, supplies another important perspective on a Wordsworthian vision of sympathy. The old beggar’s situation is as hopeless as Michael’s or Simon’s: he is old, weak, and companionless. Unlike Michael or Simon, however, the beggar in the poem does not display the nobility of mind, and the sympathetic exchanges occur between the old beggar and his villagers, not between the speaker and the beggar. “So helpless in appearance” (l. 25), the beggar appeals to the Cumberland villagers’ sympathetic minds and sustains himself on their almsgiving.

Situating the poem in the material context of the public debate on the administration of poor relief or Poor Law reform, Robin Jarvis interprets the positive portrayal of the villagers’ acts of charity as the reflection of Wordsworth’s belief in the usefulness of charity. Jarvis finds Wordsworth’s defense of private charity in the poem problematic because it is done “at the expense of the self-respecting humanity of the recipient” (210). Similarly, reading the poem within the context of the contemporary political debate about poor relief, Mark Koch argues that “Wordsworth’s primary concern is the preservation of almsgiving and the beggar’s usefulness—not his freedom” (25). As is evident from his stress on Wordsworth’s “indifference” to the question of the beggar’s
freedom, Koch also criticizes Wordsworth’s “treatment of the beggar as an object of utility” (26), which he believes is closely related to the speaker’s “impersonal perspective of the beggar” (23). I do not wish to engage here in the argument about the “a-political” or “reactionary” nature of Wordsworth’s position on the issue of almsgiving. However, I believe Jarvis’ and Koch’s interpretation of Wordsworth’s perspective on the value or utility of the beggar needs some serious revision.

Wordsworth’s view of the utility of the beggar is well formulated in the following passage, in which the speaker directly challenges those who consider the beggar “useless”:

But deem not this Man useless.—Statesmen! ye
Who are so restless in your wisdom, ye
Who have a broom still ready in your hands
To rid the world of nuisances; ye proud,
Heart-swelln, while in your pride ye contemplate
Your talents, power, or wisdom, deem him not
A burden of the earth! ’Tis Nature's law
That none, the meanest of created things,
Of forms created the most vile and brute,
The dullest or most noxious, should exist
Divorced from good—a spirit and pulse of good,
A life and soul, to every mode of being
Inseparably linked... (ll. 67-79)

In claiming the “usefulness” of the beggar, the speaker attacks above all the pride of those who deem the beggar “useless” and “A burden of the earth.” The speaker’s rationale is that the sense of superiority that arises from these people’s pride in their “talents, power, or wisdom” blinds their eyes to the true value of the beggar, which is to remind them of how all creatures, whether low or high, are “Inseparably linked” to one another. This notion of common humanity also calls into question Jarvis’ and Koch’s
readings of the utility of the beggar. Arguing that Wordsworth articulates his message about poor relief “under the umbrella of [the] traditional Christian conception of charity” (203) that emphasizes spiritual rewards for good deeds, Jarvis holds that the villagers practice private charity ultimately to promote their “own self-image or self-regarding humanity” (214). In the similar vein, focusing on the sense of pleasure that the act of relieving suffering people produces, Koch asserts that “there is ultimately a selfish motive involved in the expenditure of alms” (28) and that for the villagers, the beggar is merely a means through which they accumulate wealth in heaven. The poem itself, however, suggests that what really matters is not so much the villagers’ motive for their almsgiving as the “utility” of their charitable acts. No matter how selfish their motive might be, once their “acts of love” (l. 100) become a habit, they find in the end themselves “insensibility disposed / To virtue and true goodness” (ll. 104-05). In this sense, the beggar’s utility lies not simply in making the villagers feel good about themselves but in making them actually good. The speaker’s remark that “Still let him prompt the unlettered villagers / To tender offices and pensive thoughts” (ll. 170-71) needs to be understood in this context. By compelling the villagers to “tender offices,” the beggar gives them an opportunity to engage in “pensive thoughts.” These are not unrelated to “Such stores as silent thought can bring” (l. 74) in “Simon Lee,” the most important material for the development of capacity for sympathy. It does not matter, then, that the old beggar does not exhibit any sign of strength of mind, for regardless of that, those who sympathize with him can still benefit from their sympathetic experiences in the sense that they can enlarge their understanding of humanity.
Before moving on to discuss how Wordsworth defines sympathy in his later poems, I would like to draw attention to one significant representational technique used in *Lyrical Ballads*, which I think is crucial to tracing the changes in the ways Wordsworth use rustic figures in readers’ sympathetic education. Earlier, I pointed out that the main purpose of “Michael” is to “shew that men who do not wear fine cloaths can feel deeply.” Similarly, “Simon Lee” aims to illustrate the power of the old huntsman’s heart, which brings out boundless feelings of gratitude. This preoccupation with “showing” the power of rural people’s minds presents the poet with a challenging question of how to “to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes” (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* 361), especially given his view of the spectators’ lack of ability to fully comprehend their “spectacles.”

Although Wordsworth denies that the inability to identify with rustic people automatically means a failure to establish a sympathetic relationship with them, demonstrating the depth of rural people’s minds and challenging the common understanding of them as vulgar beings are still an important part of his sympathetic education of readers in *Lyrical Ballads*. One answer to the question of what representational techniques Wordsworth employs in *Lyrical Ballads* to meet this purpose is found in the ways speakers mediate their rural figures’ narratives. One thing noticeable about Wordsworth’s poems about rural people in *Lyrical Ballads* is that they are usually dominated by a strong narrative impulse. The speakers’ role in these poems is to relate

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19 The speaker of “The Old Cumberland Beggar” is not interested in showing the beggar’s depth of mind, but the poem is not included in *Lyrical Ballads*, and my discussion of the representational technique here is limited to the poems in *Lyrical Ballads*. 

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rustic figures’ stories, which naturally gives the speakers narrative authority. Their narrative authority allows them more freely to exert their imaginative power in making poems out of the actual events.

In “Michael,” for example, despite his distance from Michael in terms of class and personal association, the speaker has free access to the knowledge of the thoughts and feelings of Michael and his family and conveys it to readers with authority. Even though there are a few comments about how the speaker collected the information about Michael and his family in the poem—the speaker’s statement that he has “convers’d with more than one who well / Remember the Old Man” (ll. 460-61) is a good example—in reality, the speaker functions almost like an omniscient narrator, even quoting dialogues to which Michael’s neighbours or friends could not have access. The following passage efficiently illustrates how much access the speaker has to his subjects’ thoughts and feelings:

“. . . If here he stay, 
What can be done? Where every one is poor 
What can be gained?” At this the old Man paus’d, 
And Isabel sate silent, for her mind 
Was busy, looking back into past times. 
There’s Richard Bateman, thought she to herself . . . . (ll. 263-68)

Here, the speaker not only reports the conversation between Michael and his wife Isabel word for word but also reveals the private thoughts that Isabel has upon hearing Michael’s suggestion that they send their son Luke to their rich relative in the city. In remembering Richard Bateman, a parish-boy who made a fortune by going up to London, Isabel is thinking “to herself”—that is, she is not sharing her thoughts with Michael. As the narrator of Michael’s tale, the speaker knows exactly what goes on in her mind and
can convey it to readers. In the same vein, the speaker in “Simon Lee,” who interacts with Simon only once when he helps him sever the tangled root of the old tree, knows Simon’s life story better than anyone else—except Simon Lee, who would have more “authority,” but cannot write poetry about himself—and consequently narrates it with authority.20

The main function of the narrative authority that these speakers assume is to reveal the real nature of their subjects’ sufferings so that readers can be prevented from gaining superficial knowledge about rural people’s hardships and their enduring minds. In other words, through their unlimited access to their subjects’ feelings and thoughts, these speakers help their readers understand in what sense these people are worthy of attention and sympathy. In “Michael,” without the narrative authority that allows him to access Michael’s conversations with his wife and son, it would not be so easy for the speaker to help his readers understand the true meaning of Michael’s loss of his land, which is so crucial to comprehending the comfort Michael takes in the fact that “the strength of love; ’Twill make a thing endurable, which else / Would break the heart” (ll. 458-60). Along the same line, the speaker’s intimate knowledge of the intensity of Simon’s sufferings gained through his narrative authority is important in showing the significance of his gesture of gratitude for the speaker’s “proffer’d aid,” for it demonstrates that despite the hardships of his life, Simon’s dignity of mind remains intact.

20 In comparison with the speakers of “Michael” and “Simon Lee,” the speaker of “The Thorn,” whom Wordsworth says explicitly should not be confused with the author, presents an interesting case. As a “credulous and talkative” non-local figure, the speaker of the poem builds his narrative of Martha Ray and her baby upon local gossip and his own presumptions. The speaker does show sympathy for Martha Ray, but his curiosity seems a stronger impulse for telling her story.
As convenient as it is in delivering a powerful message of the depth of rural people’s minds, however, the narrative authority that the speakers of these poems assume complicates the notion of sympathy put forth in the poems, contradicting the idea that there is the inevitable distance between the sympathetic observer and the object of sympathy. This contradiction that the unlimited use of narrative authority causes might account for the changes in the representational techniques Wordsworth employs to represent rustic people’s emotions and thoughts in “Resolution and Independence,” which was published in *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807).

2.2. “Resolution and Independence”: A Study of Poetic Sympathy

The basic plot of “Resolution and Independence” is not very different from those of the poems discussed above: a speaker meets or witnesses some rustic figure whose tale both grieves and inspires him, and through the encounter, he achieves a deeper understanding of sympathy and of humanity. More specifically, “Resolution and Independence” presents a speaker who comes across a leech gatherer who seems “not all alive nor dead / Nor all asleep—in his extreme old age” (ll. 64-65). Before his meeting with the leech gatherer, the speaker is on the verge of “despondency and madness” at the thought of “Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty” (l. 35). Upon finding “In that decrepit Man so firm a mind,” however, the speaker, who is initially troubled by the leech gatherer’s situation, is comforted and regains strength. Despite this similarity in the plot, the poem is different from the poems in *Lyrical Ballads* in the way the speaker perceives his object of observation and sympathy. Unlike the speakers in “Michael” and “Simon
Lee,” who render the stories of Michael and Simon in specific details with authority, the speaker of “Resolution and Independence” is interested less in the leech gatherer’s feelings or thoughts than in his own perception and memories of him:

   The old Man still stood talking by my side;  
   But now his voice to me was like a stream  
   Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide;  
   And the whole body of the Man did seem  
   Like one whom I had met with in a dream;  
   Or like a man from some far region sent,  
   To give me human strength, by apt admonishment. (ll. 107-12)

In these lines that immediately follow the leech gatherer’s answer to the speaker’s question, “What occupation do you there pursue?” (l. 88), the speaker is not paying attention to any of the actual words that the leech gatherer is using. Instead of taking interest in the specifics of the leech gatherer’s life of “many hardships” (l. 102), the speaker focuses on the impression that the old man has left in his mind, as is evident from the way he describes his voice. He not only turns the man’s voice into “a stream / Scarce heard,” but also is unable to divide “word from word.” Then, “the whole body of the Man” begins to lose its individuality, and the man transforms into a symbolic figure, giving the speaker “human strength, by apt admonishment” and restoring the speaker’s peace of mind.

The speaker’s description of the leech gatherer offers a stark contrast with that of Dorothy Wordsworth, who carefully recorded in her journal “accurate” facts about the leech gatherer. Besides providing detailed information about his family background, his occupation, and his current situation that is missing in her brother’s poem, her journal even records the specific numbers of leeches that the leech gatherer mentions and their
fluctuating market prices: “Leeches were formerly 2/6 [per] 100; they are now 30/” (479).
It is not that William Wordsworth completely neglects to provide any details about the
leech gatherer as an individual from the beginning. He actually gives a fairly detailed and
powerful description of the leech gatherer earlier in the poem: “His body was bent
double, feet and head / Coming together in life’s pilgrimage; / As if some dire constraint
of pain, or rage / Of sickness felt by him in times long past, / A more than human weight
upon his frame had cast” (ll. 66-70). Nevertheless, the latter part of the poem makes it
clear that Wordsworth’s purpose in detailing the leech gatherer’s physical appearance is
not so much to be faithful to “facts” as to document his impression.

The speaker’s apparent lack of interest in the reality of the leech gatherer’s pain
and suffering has led many critics to problematize the nature of strength and comfort that
the speaker draws from his encounter with the old man. Interpreting “Resolution and
Independence” as a pertinent example of “the moves Wordsworth characteristically
makes to displace anxieties with an assurance of authority” (95), Riede argues that “the
consolation comes not so much from the leech gatherer’s endurance as from the poet’s
displacement of his wanderings from time into eternity, from history into the timeless
realm of the imagination” (95). It is true that Wordsworth does not in this poem consider
the problem of poverty represented by the leech gatherer’s situation in historical or socio-
political dimensions, and I do not intend to contest this reading of the a-historical side of
Wordsworth’s treatment of the poor. I do wish to emphasize, however, that Wordsworth
is not using the figure of the leech gatherer simply to displace his anxieties about
becoming like the leech gatherer. As suggested above, Wordsworth’s poems about the
rural poor in *Lyrical Ballads* illustrate the awareness of the inevitable distance between the observer and the observed, and “Resolution and Independence” is another example that demonstrates that the distance between the speaker and the rustic figure cannot be so easily collapsed. What distinguishes “Resolution and Independence” from the poems in *Lyrical Ballads*, however, is the poet’s attitude toward the distance between the sympathetic spectator and the object of sympathy. By the time Wordsworth writes “Resolution and Independence,” he does not seem so agonized by the impossibility of entirely identifying with the leech gatherer’s painful emotions. Instead of experiencing distress over the difficulty of the sympathetic observer’s sharing of the feelings of his or her object of sympathy, Wordsworth turns his attention to the mental and emotional effects of sympathy on the sympathetic spectator. Here again, it is important to bear in mind that identification and sympathy are not the same in Wordsworth’s poetics of sympathy.

More importantly, “Resolution and Independence” offers another significant explanation for the way Wordsworth typically envisions the relationship between the sympathetic observer and the object of sympathy by providing more detailed background information about the speaker, who is presented, again, as a poet figure. The speaker’s identity as a poet is especially important because it is closely linked to his obsession with “Dim sadness—and blind thoughts” (l. 28). As stated earlier, the speaker’s fear of “despondency and madness” arises mainly from his contemplation of the destructive power of pain and suffering. Though he is afraid of becoming like Thomas Chatterton, a young poet who committed suicide amid dire poverty, this does not necessarily mean that
the speaker fears becoming like the leech gatherer. The following lines make clear that the speaker is viewing the issues of pain, poverty, distress, and suffering from a poet’s perspective (no matter how “a-historical” it is) and that he fears less that “he may become what he beholds” (Riede 101) than that he as a poet may be powerless to do anything meaningful in the face of human suffering.

My whole life I have lived in pleasant thought,
As if life’s business were a summer mood;
As if all needful things would come unsought
But how can He expect that others should
Build for him, sow for him, and at his call
Love him, who for himself will take no heed at all? (ll. 36-42)

The speaker’s statement that he has lived his “whole life . . . in pleasant thought / As if life’s business were a summer mood” clearly suggests that he has been protected from hardships of life that he is witnessing in the leech gatherer’s situation.21 Now that the speaker has realized that “all needful things” cannot “come unsought,” he is wondering how his vocation as a poet can be justified. Unlike others who “build” and “sow”—the kinds of activities described suggest that the speaker probably has rustic people in mind—the speaker does not physically labor or toil to provide for himself. That the speaker might be referring to rustic people is significant not because it proves that Wordsworth privileges physical labor over mental labor, but because it reveals his deep veneration for rustic people’s occupations, which he believes offer an opportunity to stay in touch with elementary feelings of the human mind. Wordsworth’s respect for rural

21 The speaker’s mention of Chatterton who died young and poor does imply that the speaker has not been entirely free from the threat of extreme poverty, but the speaker makes it clear that Chatterton’s situation is different from the leech gatherer’s in that Chatterton’s pain of heart arose mainly from the fact that he was under-appreciated. This is why the speaker calls Chatterton “The sleepless Soul that perished in his pride” (l. 44).
people’s occupation explains why the speaker is greatly concerned whether he can expect these rural people to “Love him” “at his call” as well as why he keeps asking the leech gatherer, “How is it that you live, and what is it you do?” (l. 119). He is asking the question not because he is appalled by the old man’s miserable situation but because he wonders whether the leech gatherer can help him resolve his own self-doubts. The last stanza, in which the speaker is amazed to find “In that decrepit Man so firm a mind” (l. 138), suggests that the thought of “the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor” will be a source of strength and help for him as he continues on his journey as a poet. The consolation that the speaker gets from his encounter with the leech gatherer, then, is not as empty as critics suggest. Although the speaker, unlike Dorothy Wordsworth, has not apparently gained any insights into the historical determinants of the leech gatherer’s situation, he at least has found a source of strength that can sustain him and, he hopes, justify his vocation. Before he meets the leech gatherer, the speaker is unsure not only of his vocation but also of his ability as a poet to handle the overpowering presence of human suffering. The speaker now has something to draw on in his poetic struggles with the reality of suffering, however: his memories of the leech gatherer and of what he felt about him.

What then should or can a poet do with his memories of “sympathetic” incidents? The answer is already given in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, in which he explains the ideal relationship between the poet and his readers: “if Nature be thus cautious in preserving in a state of enjoyment a being thus employed, the Poet ought to profit by the

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22 Again, rural people mean much more to Wordsworth than a pitiable object of sympathy, and focusing exclusively on the tragic and miserable side of the leech gatherer’s life could lead to an incomplete understanding of the relation between the speaker and the leech gatherer.
lesson thus held forth to him, and ought especially to take care, that whatever passions he communicates to his Reader, those passions, if his Reader’s mind be sound and vigorous, should always be accompanied with an overbalance of pleasure” (362). That is to say, the poet should teach his readers what he has learned in his personal experiences by helping them feel pleasure in their reading experiences and in their learning. Wordsworth’s response to Sara Hutchinson’s complaint about the tediousness of the leech gatherer’s speech can be understood in this regard. Stating that “everything is tedious when one does not read with the feelings of the Author,” Wordsworth is obviously emphasizing the importance of literary identification on the part of readers through the exercise of their poetic imaginations. The question, then, is how or whether this kind of literary identification is different from the poet’s sympathetic identification with his subjects. Wordsworth’s answer is that they are different, and especially in his later poems, he seems to have given up on the possibility of the poet’s identification with his subjects. More specifically, Wordsworth’s representation of the leech gatherer in “Resolution and Independence” suggests that he no longer holds that the poet needs to have intimate knowledge of his subjects’ internal feelings and thoughts in order to draw a powerful picture of sympathetic encounters. This explains the shift in focus in the description of a sympathetic experience from the poet’s knowledge of his subject’s strength of mind to the poet’s impression and memories. At the same time, Wordsworth’s representations of rural people in The Ruined Cottage and The Prelude intimate that he still believes that regardless of the distance between the poet and his object of sympathy, the poet should
try to help his readers *identify with* his own sympathetic process. My analysis of *The Ruined Cottage* and *The Prelude* will therefore focus especially on Wordsworth’s depiction of the relationship among the poet, the poet’s object of sympathy, and readers.
CHAPTER 3

WORDSWORTH’S POETICS OF SYMPATHY: READERS’ EDUCATION

3.1. Sympathetic Chains in The Ruined Cottage

The Ruined Cottage, written prior to “Resolution and Independence,” provides an even more sophisticated treatment of the same theme: the poet’s role in sympathetic encounters with suffering people. The plot of the poem is quite typical of Wordsworth’s poems about the rural poor: a speaker meets a victim of unaccountable, undeserved, and relentless suffering and becomes heart-stricken, but in the end, he regains his peace of mind and continues on his way with a more mature sense of humanity. Two significant aspects of the poem differentiate it from others, however. First, unlike other suffering characters, Margaret does not have the enduring mind of Michael or of the leech gatherer. The beggar in “The Old Cumberland Beggar” does not display the fortitude of mind, either, but he does not succumb to sadness and despair like Margaret—or at least, the poem does not focus on that part of his character. One possible explanation for this difference might be found in Margaret’s sex, which could be interpreted as a mark of Wordsworth’s stereotypical view of women.23 It could be that he understands that women with tiny bodies had fewer resources than any man, so that her sex makes the nobility of

23 Though Margaret’s husband Robert also breaks down, the Pedlar’s storytelling focuses more on how Margaret is both physically and spiritually ruined through her excruciating sufferings, which is why I took interest in the significance of her sex.
mind even more difficult. His descriptions of the female poor in *The Prelude*, such as the Maid of Buttermere or his old landlady, however, illustrate that Margaret’s sex does not constitute a sufficient reason for why she fails to demonstrate power of mind in the face of suffering.  

Another characteristic unique to *The Ruined Cottage*, perhaps more important than the first, is that there are two different sympathetic observers of Margaret’s suffering—namely, the Pedlar and the speaker. The speaker does not have any direct interaction with her in the poem. In fact, Margaret is already dead by the time the Pedlar tells her story—that is, the speaker learns about Margaret’s tragic life only through the mediation of the Pedlar’s storytelling. The poem’s composition history (see footnote 12) makes it clear that Wordsworth did not intend from the beginning to include two sympathetic spectators in the poem, which suggests that the different roles that Wordsworth assigns to the Pedlar and the speaker might offer a way to trace the development in his thoughts on the relationship between the sympathetic observer and the object of sympathy. The presence of two sympathetic spectators and their relationship to

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24 Swann’s comment on the origin of Margaret’s character provides one clue to the question of why Margaret does not display strength of mind: “Margaret stems as much from literature as from life, and most immediately from the hosts of abandoned and suffering women who people sensational fiction and monthly-magazine poetry of the late eighteenth century” (84). This account of the literary source of Margaret’s character suggests that her character needs to be understood in relation to female characters in late eighteenth-century fiction. That *The Ruined Cottage* was originally begun “as a stark story of Margaret’s decline and death” (Butler xii) also intimates that at least in the early stage of the composition of the poem, Wordsworth drew on the conventions of characterizing suffering women in eighteenth-century literature. Wordsworth of course does not blindly follow the conventions of sensational fiction. The representations of sympathy in his poetry are actually strongly opposed to shallow representations of suffering characters that are designed to inspire superficial feelings of sympathy, and there is indeed no excess of emotion or sensation in the characterization of Margaret. Nevertheless, the fact that “abandoned and suffering women” like Margaret were the stock themes of eighteenth-century fiction and poetry provides another reason for considering Wordsworth’s representations of the rustic poor in light of eighteenth-century theories of sympathy.
each other are also significant in understanding the Pedlar’s sense of pleasure that many critics have found problematic—the Pedlar not only feels happiness but also teaches its importance to the speaker, as if it is the most appropriate response to Margaret’s story.

Not many critics have paid attention to the significance of the sympathetic chains that are forged among Margaret, the Pedlar, and the speaker in their interpretation of the poem, which I believe is crucial to fully comprehending Wordsworth’s view of sympathy and a major didactic function of poetry. Instead, critics focus mainly on the question of how Wordsworth evades a social or historical problem by aestheticizing it into an occasion for a transcendent experience on the poet’s part, and The Ruined Cottage, of course, is not the only example. In the discussion of Wordsworth’s elusion of the socio-political reality, terms like “projection” and “displacement” are often used by critics to problematize the typical relationship between the sympathetic observer and the object of sympathy in his poetry. More specifically, critics tend to argue that the sympathetic spectator, who is in most cases a poet figure, projects his own distressed state of mind onto the object of sympathy, and that this focus of attention on the sympathetic observer’s thoughts and emotions leads to neglect not only of the sufferer’s feelings but also of the social and historical actualities that have produced pain and sufferings. In this case, sympathy is not really an exchange of ideas or feelings. This is how most critics believe the process of the aforementioned Wordsworthian displacement of the historical into the poetic occurs. At the same time, despite Wordsworth’s attempt to “transcend” or “erase” history and culture, many critics believe that his poetry does engage with social and cultural issues, albeit in a displaced way. Liu’s interpretation of the historical
implications of Wordsworth’s treatment of the rural poor in *The Ruined Cottage*, in which he argues that Wordsworth’s denial of history is paradoxically the deepest realization of history, offers a very efficient example. Believing that “history can enter the poetry only in denied form” (51), Liu searches for the great forms of absence—that is, the author’s unconscious choices—in *The Ruined Cottage* that are “truly” historical, and his focus falls on “weaving.” For him, the fact that Margaret’s husband, Robert, is a traditional wool weaver is historically significant because his industrial situation marks the transitional period when “the shift by century’s end from Northern to Bristol-area systems” (332) caused unemployment. The next move Liu makes in his argument is very important: he draws an analogy between Robert’s situation and Wordsworth’s. Pointing out the fact that Wordsworth was writing when “preoccupation with the labor of writing was so important that it often generated the subject of writing itself” (332), Liu asserts that Wordsworth as a poet was standing at a crux congruent with that of a weaver.

Liu is quite right in observing the poem’s engagement with social issues such as the changing climate of the literary market and in reading it as a poem about Wordsworth’s vocational imagination. His claim that Wordsworth is projecting his own situation on to Robert, however, is hard to validate. Concentrating only on the forms of absence to find meaning in the text, Liu fails to see the distinction Wordsworth makes between his own position as the observer and that of Robert as the observed. More specifically, the consciousness of the inescapable distance between the observer and the observed noticeable in Wordsworth’s early poetry is still prominent in *The Ruined*.

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25 It is also noticeable that Liu’s focus is on Robert rather than on Margaret when the poem is less invested in Robert than in Margaret as a victim of suffering and pain.
Cottage. And if Wordsworth is projecting his state of mind onto any characters in the poem, it is not onto Robert (or even Margaret) but onto the Pedlar and the speaker, who are the spectators of the tragedy of Robert and Margaret. Very significantly, Margaret’s suffering is presented in the poem as something that has already happened; the narrative present of the poem concerns mostly the Pedlar’s recital of her story. In addition, the poem devotes much space to describing how the poet-speaker responds to the tale of her plight. The focus of the poem, then, is not so much on Margaret’s tragedy itself as on the responses of the Pedlar and the speaker to her sufferings. In other words, even though the Pedlar who has intimate knowledge of Margaret’s situation tells her story, he does not attempt to assume narrative authority or mediate her narrative as the speakers in “Michael” and “Simon Lee” do.

First, the Pedlar’s storytelling does not include dialogues between Margaret and Robert, making it clear that the Pedlar does not have direct access to their internal thoughts. Instead, the Pedlar reports his conversation with Margaret, which clarifies his position as an outside observer of Margaret’s and Robert’s sufferings. For example, in describing how Robert’s breakdown affected Margaret, the Pedlar merely quotes Margaret and does not pretend to fully understand her painful feelings: “‘Every smile,’ / Said Margaret to me here beneath these trees, / ‘Made my heart bleed’” (ll. 241-43).

Given this, Swann’s critique that “paradoxically, the more Wordsworth tries to realize the abandoned woman fully and sympathetically, the more firmly he locates himself on the side of delusion or false consciousness” (93) does not do great justice to the poem, for the poem is about the Pedlar’s and the speaker’s understanding of their roles as sympathetic
spectators rather than about Margaret as a victim of suffering. Here, I would like to emphasize again that Wordsworth draws on the eighteenth-century view of sympathetic relations which posits the inevitable distance between spectator and spectacle.

In this regard, the prevalent theory about the process of projection in *The Ruined Cottage* that emphasizes the poet’s projection of his mind onto Margaret’s or Robert’s situations needs serious revision, and that consequently calls for a different perspective on sympathy. If the relationship between the sympathetic observer and the object of sympathy does not have to be characterized by projection that ultimately leads to the displacement of social issues, the discourse of sympathy for Wordsworth can be seen as much more than a site for expressing his “escapist” view of history. In other words, he is not merely “using” the figure of the suffering poor in order to articulate his own problem but is seriously engaging in the question of what is a poet’s proper role in dealing with the reality of suffering and pain. Although it is impossible for the Pedlar or the speaker to reach a complete understanding of Margaret’s or Robert’s pain, it does not mean that they disregard its reality or that they are incapable of truly responding to it. Therefore, *The Ruined Cottage*, as a poem, explores the question of how to respond to—that is, sympathize with—others’ sufferings, which brings us back to the significance of having two sympathetic spectators in the poem. Indeed, among all Wordsworth’s poems about poor people, *The Ruined Cottage* presents the most complicated interrogation of the nature of sympathy through the comparison of two types of sympathetic responses to suffering.
The Pedlar, who has had direct interaction with Margaret in the past and tells her story to the speaker, is the one who most closely and intensely shares Wordsworth’s concern about his mission and duty as a poet. For one thing, the speaker’s account of the Pedlar’s personal background bears a resemblance to the story of Wordsworth’s own growth in *The Prelude*:

\[
\ldots \text{much had he seen of men,}
\text{Their manners, their enjoyments and pursuits,}
\text{Their passions and their feelings, chiefly those}
\text{Essential and eternal in the heart,}
\text{Which ’mid the simpler forms of rural life}
\text{Exist more simple in their elements}
\text{And speak a plainer language. He possessed}
\text{No vulgar mind though he had passed his life}
\text{In this poor occupation . . . (The Ruined Cottage ll. 59-67).}
\]

In this passage that is not found in MS. D, Wordsworth carefully establishes the character of the Pedlar as a poet figure.\(^{26}\) In spite of the difference between the Pedlar and Wordsworth in terms of their occupations, the passage stresses that the Pedlar’s “poor occupation” has nurtured no vulgar sentiments in his mind. Rather, his affinity with rural life and rural people has given him an opportunity to stay close to human passions and feelings that are “Essential and eternal in the heart,” something Wordsworth values as a necessary element in the making of a great poet. The Pedlar’s interest in rural people is also noteworthy in that it manifests Wordsworth’s belief in rural life as a site for recovering essential elements of human minds that “’mid the simpler forms of rural life /

\(^{26}\) In general, Wordsworth presents speakers as poet figures in his poems, and *The Ruined Cottage* is not an exception. The speaker is not the only poet figure in the poem, however. As there are two different sympathetic observers of the suffering of Margaret and Robert, there are also two different poets writing poems about it. While the Pedlar writes a poem about Margaret as a direct witness of her suffering, the speaker, who is presented at a remove from the “original” story of suffering, writes a poem about his response to the Pedlar’s tale about Margaret. As I will discuss later, the presence of these two types of poets and the presence of two types of sympathetic observers in the poem are crucial to Wordsworth’s articulation of ideal readership.
Exist more simple in their elements / And speak a plainer language.” As I will discuss in
the next section, similar passages that emphasize the importance of life experience in
rural environments for a poet are easily found in *The Prelude*.

Though his eye flashes “poetic fire” (l. 72) and “he would repeat / The songs of
Burns” (ll. 72-73), the Pedlar “was untaught, / In the dead lore of schools undisciplined”
(ll. 74-75), very much unlike Wordsworth who had the privilege of being educated at
Cambridge. Wordsworth does not believe, however, that the Pedlar is less a poet because
of his lack of education but instead calls him “a chosen son”:

Why should he grieve? He was a chosen son:
To him was given an ear which deeply felt
The voice of Nature in the obscure wind,
The sounding mountain and the running stream.
To every natural form, rock, fruit, and flower,
Even the loose stones that cover the highway,
He gave a moral life; he saw them feel
Or linked them to some feeling. (ll. 76-83)

The Pedlar is “a chosen son” for two reasons: first, he has an ear “which deeply [feels] / The voice of Nature”; second, he gives “a moral life” to every natural object that comes
across his way by seeing “them feel / or [linking] them to some feeling.” These two
reasons are none other than qualifications for being a great poet, and they are significant
because they provide insights into how Wordsworth envisions the way a poet interacts (or
should interact) with nature. First of all, that a poet has an ability to feel “the voice of
Nature” that most people cannot even hear points to Wordsworth’s belief in nature as the
greatest source of poetic imagination, which is of course related to his repeated emphasis
on a poet’s affinity with rural life. The other way that a poet interacts with nature is even
more important in its implication that the relationship between a poet and nature is
mutual. As a person whose imaginative faculty is enriched through both sensory and emotional contact with nature—a poet uses his ear not simply to hear but to feel “the voice of Nature”—a poet gives something back to nature: namely, “a moral life.” In other words, though nature has a voice of its own that can benefit those who can hear it, without a human consciousness that feels “a secret and mysterious soul / A fragrance and a spirit of strange meaning” (ll. 84-85) residing in all natural objects, its voice is incomplete. At the same time, a poet cannot initiate the process of giving a moral meaning to nature without experiencing the power of nature first. This reciprocal nature of the relationship between a poet and nature challenges a reading that too easily dismisses Wordsworth’s view of nature as solipsistic. Notably, Wordsworth describes in the following lines the Pedlar’s interaction with nature as “sympathies”: “Such sympathies would often bear him far / In outward gesture, and in visible look, / Beyond the common seeming of mankind” (ll. 90-92). Here, the speaker’s statement that the Pedlar’s sympathetic relationship with nature makes him look far “Beyond the common seeming of mankind” coincides with the idea that he is “a chosen son,” suggesting that Wordsworth grants a special position to a poet and that a poet occupies a special position because of his ability to sympathize with nature.

The function that the Pedlar’s sympathetic mind serves in natural environments, then, can be summarized thus: it enables him to penetrate the spiritual power of nature and complete the meaning of nature. The question, then, is what is the function of his sympathetic mind in human society, and the poem explores this question through his

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27 This passage strongly echoes “We see into the life of things” (l. 50) in “Tintern Abbey.”
responses to Margaret’s suffering.28 Given that, it is not surprising that the Pedlar’s very
first remark in the poem is about mortality and transience of human life, illustrating his
preoccupation with the question of human suffering and pain:

The old man said, “I see around me [          ]
Things which you cannot see: we die, my Friend,
Nor we alone, but that which each man loved
And prized in his peculiar nook of earth
Dies with him or is changed, and very soon
Even of the good is no memorial left.” (ll. 129-34)

As a person who claims to see what other people “cannot see,” he reveals a rather
obvious truth that “we die.” Considering that he is about to tell the story of Margaret’s
decline and death, this reminder of human mortality seems to demonstrate how much the
Pedlar is obsessed with Margaret’s death. He quickly modifies his statement, however, in
the next line, when he says “Nor we alone.” For him, mortality is not limited to human
beings but extends to all objects for which human beings feel affection. This remark on
mortality and transience of all objects prized by human beings as well as of humans not
only reinforces the idea of the reciprocal relationship between human beings and nature
but also deepens the symbolic meaning of the ruined cottage. The ruined cottage that was
once a warm and comfortable home for Margaret and Robert is not merely an object that
parallels its owners’ downfall. Instead, it has a life of its own imparted by humans that
lived in it and loved it and therefore cannot but lose its life when its inhabitants are gone.

Considering that the poem is an exploration of the question of how to respond to
Margaret’s death, the remark that the Pedlar implicitly makes on the relationship between
Margaret and her ruined cottage is quite significant, especially because the Pedlar’s

28 Many critics find his lack of “action” in the face of Margaret’s ordeal problematic, and Jonathan Barron
and Kenneth R. Johnston’s reading of the Pedlar’s guilty feelings provides a good example.
storytelling occurs amidst the remnants of Margaret’s ruined cottage. It may be that there is no “life” left in the ruined cottage and that what the Pedlar and the speaker are witnessing is its “corpse,” but the passage that immediately follows this comment on mortality in MS. D suggests that the Pedlar is interested less in the question of whether the “life” of objects lasts longer than humans than in what is a poet’s role in the face of the reality of death:

The Poets in their elegies and songs
Lamenting the departed call the groves,
They call upon the hills and streams to mourn,
And senseless rocks, nor idly; for they speak
In these their invocations with a voice
Obedient to the strong creative power
Of human passion. Sympathies there are
More tranquil, yet perhaps of kindred birth,
That steal upon the meditative mind
And grow with thought. (MS. D. ll. 73-82)

The first two lines clearly dictate a poet’s mission when he is faced with his loved ones’ departure: he laments their deaths in “elegies and songs.” There is indeed nothing new about this idea, for writing elegies or songs for a dead person has traditionally been a poet’s duty. What is original about the Pedlar’s comment on a poet’s role is the belief that natural objects will respond to a poet’s invitation to participate in his commemoration of the dead and that it is possible because of a poet’s “strong creative power of human passion.” As is evident from the very next sentence that begins with “Sympathies,” “the strong creative power of human passion” is none other than sympathy, which suggests that a poet’s commemoration of the dead is an act of sympathy. Here, it is important to consider why the Pedlar defines sympathy this way, especially when talking about a poet’s role of remembering and honoring the dead. First of all, that sympathy is defined
as a “power” points to how Wordsworth understands its nature: it is not simply an emotional or mental state but an ability to bring about certain changes in the world, though the changes might not occur in a material sense. More specifically, even though sympathy has its origin in “human passion,” most essential feelings and emotions of human beings, it is not “human passion” itself but a power that arises from it. This distinction is significant because it reveals Wordsworth’s preoccupation with the question of how to “teach” people to exercise “human passion” at an occasion that requires the operation of a sympathetic mind—everyone has “human passion,” but not everyone is capable of using its power. The word “creative” is also important in that it points to Wordsworth’s belief in sympathy as a power that can help to defy the destructive force of death. Another important characteristic of sympathy that the passage reveals is that there are types of sympathy that “steal upon the meditative mind / And grow with thought.”

This notion of sympathy is highly significant in comprehending Wordsworth’s poetics. If a sympathetic mind is an important qualification for being a great poet, it is an ability that can be further developed or trained through meditation. By laying such a heavy emphasis on meditation, Wordsworth makes clear that sympathy is an intellectual as well as an emotional capacity. Accordingly, a great poem is the outcome not merely of an outburst of “powerful feelings” but also of intellectual and philosophical thoughts.

The concept of meditation illuminates another important trait of sympathy. Meditation is by definition a process that takes a certain period of time, which in turn raises a question of the role of memory in the exercise of a sympathetic ability. The
Pedlar’s reaction to the “life” (or death) of the ruined cottage and the objects belonging to it nicely elucidates the relation between memory and sympathy:

“. . . The waters of that spring if they could feel
Might mourn. They are not as they were; the bond
Of brotherhood is broken—time has been
When every day the touch of human hand
Disturbed their stillness, and they ministered
To human comfort. As I stooped to drink,
Few minutes gone, at that deserted well
What feelings came to me! A spider’s web
Across its mouth hung to the water’s edge,
And on the wet and slimy foot-stone lay
The useless fragment of a wooden bowl;
It moved my very heart.” (ll. 135-46)

As the Pedlar tries to drink some water from the well, he notices signs that suggest that there is not much life left in it. The well does have some water, but a spider’s web across the mouth of the well and the broken wooden bowl only prove that it has been deserted for a long time, hardly serving its purpose of slaking people’s thirst. Though it is a very sad sight, his emotions would not be so strong if he did not or could not remember the time when the well interacted with the inhabitants of the cottage and “ministered / To human comfort.” In other words, without his memory of the time when “the bond of brotherhood” between humans and their beloved objects was solid—that is, the time when the waters of the spring were full of “life”—the sight of the lifeless well would not move his heart so strongly.

The Pedlar is not the only one who retains the past memory of Margaret and Robert and their place, however. The memory of Margaret’s and Robert’s past is also lodged in the remnants of the cottage, and these trigger such emotionally powerful responses in the Pedlar’s mind. Considering it has been a while since Margaret’s death, it
seems likely that the Pedlar’s sympathy for Margaret is less emotional than intellectual in nature, especially after a long period of deep meditation on her suffering and death. It is the memory residing in objects inside and around the cottage that makes the Pedlar’s own memory return to him with all its emotional force and thus takes his sympathy for Margaret to another level. Memory then serves as a link between emotional and intellectual reaction to objects of sympathy, and this is why the Pedlar’s storytelling takes place at the ruined cottage.

In this regard, though the Pedlar seems concerned about the danger of “yielding to the foolishness of grief” (MS. D. l. 173) when he apologizes for his tale to the speaker, it is hard to say that his response to Margaret’s death lacks emotional depth, and his account of his memory of Margaret clearly shows the intensity of his sympathetic feelings for Margaret:

. . . Poor wretch! At last
She rose from off her seat—and then—Oh Sir!
I cannot tell how she pronounced my name:
With fervent love and with a face of grief
Unutterably helpless and a look
That seemed to cling upon me, she inquired
If I had seen her husband. As she spake
A strange surprize and fear came o’er my heart
And I could make no answer—then she told
That he had disappeared, just two months gone. (ll. 310-19)

In this scene where Margaret tells the Pedlar about her husband’s disappearance, the depth of the Pedlar’s sympathy for Margaret is quite obvious. It is actually too strong to be easily described in human language. For example, the way “she pronounced [his] name” is beyond words, and her face of grief in his memory is “Unutterably helpless.” Interestingly, he describes the indescribable emotions that Margaret invoked in his mind
in terms of sensory experience, by saying “a look / That seemed to cling upon me.”

Despite these strong feelings for Margaret, just like the speaker’s in “Michael,” the Pedlar’s sympathy does not lead him to any sort of action to alleviate Margaret’s pain, raising here again the question about the “use” of sympathy. The Pedlar’s helplessness in the face of Margaret’s suffering seems especially problematic considering his own definition of sympathy as “the strong creative power of human passion.” If sympathy is a creative power, why is his sympathy so “unproductive”? It even seems to validate the aforementioned critics’ point about the Pedlar’s inability to confront the reality of Margaret’s pain, which they relate to Wordsworth’s lack of historical consciousness.

Some critics find it problematic that the Pedlar makes no effort to gather information about Robert’s whereabouts, and Jonathan Barron and Kenneth R. Johnston interpret the Pedlar’s lack of effort to provide practical help as an important source of his feelings of guilt toward Margaret (74).

It is emphasized throughout the poem, however, that Margaret’s situation cannot be resolved through material help, and this fact differentiates the poem from sensational literature about suffering women. Although financial straits initiated Margaret’s suffering, her real downfall does not begin until her husband enrolls himself in the army, as is illustrated by the fact that her cottage is still maintaining its shape at this point. What really grieves the Pedlar is witnessing the beginning of her mental and spiritual breakdown caused by her husband’s disappearance. That is, the Pedlar sees that Margaret is beginning to die at this moment, and the desolate scene around her cottage that he notices on his next visit is its evidence. Seeing that Margaret’s cottage is losing its “life”
along with its owner, who cannot leave the place in the faintest hope that her husband
might return, the Pedlar is again powerless, but it does not necessarily mean that he feels
guilty. Guilt is not an accurate term, for it implies that the Pedlar has the power to help
Margaret but does not. I am not denying the significance of the sense of impotence that
the Pedlar feels here. At the end of the poem, the speaker blesses Margaret “in the
impotence of grief,” but it is in fact the Pedlar who experiences “the impotence of grief”
first. This accounts for the feeling of uneasiness that pervades the poem, complicating the
question about the function of sympathy even further.

Although it is true that the Pedlar’s profound sympathy for Margaret does not
affect her directly—he is able to provide neither material nor spiritual comfort—it is hard
to conclude that his sympathy for her “creates” nothing. The Pedlar’s description of the
power that the memory of Margaret holds over him suggests that his sympathy for her is
an important source of his poetic imagination as well as his moral life:

. . . Sir, I feel
The story linger in my heart. I fear
’Tis long and tedious, but my spirit clings
To that poor woman: so familiarly
Do I perceive her manner, and her look
And presence, and so deeply do I feel
Her goodness, that not seldom in my walks
A momentary trance comes over me;
And to myself I seem to muse on one
By sorrow laid asleep or borne away,
A human being destined to awake
To human life, or something very near
To human life, when he shall come again
For whom she suffered. (MS. D. ll. 362-75)

As he himself notes, the Pedlar is aware that there is nothing exciting or sensational about
Margaret’s story; instead, he fears it is “long and tedious.” Despite the apparent lack of
engaging quality, her story “linger[s] in [his] heart,” making his spirit “cling” to her. The effects of her story on his mind are remarkable. First, though she is physically dead, she is somehow still “alive” in the Pedlar’s mind, as he can feel her presence “so familiarly.” Second, the presence of her memory is so powerful in his mind that it often puts him in “a momentary trance” and makes him “muse on” Margaret, her husband, and the question of “human life.” This description of the process of his sympathy exactly fits into his earlier comment on how a poet’s sympathy is deepened through meditation. What the Pedlar’s sympathy “creates,” then, is none other than his poem about Margaret and her “human life.” In this sense, he does not seem absolutely to believe in his statement about the brutal reality of death—“Even of the good is no memorial left” (l. 134)—for he himself is trying to present Margaret with a memorial written by the power of his sympathy for her. Although the notion of the eternity of art has a long tradition, there is something peculiar about the Pedlar’s view of what eternalizes an art work. His understanding is basically that unlike material objects that die with humans that have cherished them, poems, especially elegies, do not necessarily die because they retain “human life” of both the dead ones and the poet who sympathizes with the dead.

Needless to say, poetry is written to be read, and The Ruined Cottage presents an example of a readerly response to the Pedlar’s poem about Margaret through the speaker, the other sympathetic spectator of Margaret’s suffering. The speaker’s response is one of intense interest and sympathy. When the Pedlar stops his storytelling, being afraid that he is boring the speaker, the speaker makes a brief attempt at calming down his craving for

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29 It is hard to explain what the Pedlar means by “human life,” but the idea that Margaret will awake “To human life, or something very near / To human life” when her husband “shall come again” intimates that he is talking about spiritual life that does not necessarily end with physical life.
the Pedlar’s story about Margaret, but, unable to free his mind from his deep interest in
the story, he begs in the end the Pedlar to resume the story “for [his] sake”:

I rose, and turning from that breezy shade  
Went out into the open air, and stood  
To drink the comfort of the warmer sun.  
Long time I had not stayed ere, looking round  
Upon that tranquil ruin, and impelled  
By a mild force of curious pensiveness,  
I begg’d of the old man that for my sake  
He would resume his story. (ll. 272-79)

That the speaker wants to hear Margaret’s story for his own sake, not for Margaret’s or
for the Pedlar’s sake, is very important in understanding the kind of readership idealized
in The Ruined Cottage. Before the Pedlar’s break from the storytelling, no matter how
interested he is, the speaker is merely a passive listener, who is fairly distanced from the
story of Margaret’s suffering. His asking for more of the story “for [his] sake” indicates a
great change in his relationship to the story, however, for it can be understood as an
acknowledgement of his “part” in the story. If Margaret was merely a suffering woman
who called for his sympathy before this moment of acknowledgement, she is now no
longer a stranger to him; his sympathy for her inspired by the Pedlar’s storytelling has
changed whom he is, making him realize that he is not so safely distanced from
Margaret’s suffering. The speaker of course never attempts to imagine himself in her
situation, and his sympathy for her makes no difference to their relationship as a spectator
and a spectacle. It does not mean, however, that we can deny the influence that her story
exerts over the speaker, and the most important change that her story brings about in the
speaker’s mind is that he cannot stay indifferent to her story. For example, despite his
tabstry to refresh his mind through “the comfort of the warmer sun,” it does not help

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much, and he is after all “impelled / By a mild force of curious pensiveness” (my italics) and forced to beg the Pedlar for more storytelling. Interestingly, the speaker’s response to Margaret’s tale bears a striking resemblance to the Pedlar’s own response to her suffering in that both of their responses are characterized by a deep and compelling attraction to her story. This similarity in their reactions to Margaret’s story suggests that in Wordsworth’s poetics, there is not (or should not be) a fundamental difference between the poet’s sympathetic understanding of his subject and the reader’s literary identification with the object of sympathy. Two significant questions arise at this point regarding the exemplary readerly response that the speaker displays in the poem. First, what makes it possible for him to have such strong reaction to Margaret’s story when he has never had direct interaction with Margaret? Closely related is the other question: if the speaker undergoes a different kind of sympathetic process from the one Pedlar goes through, how exactly is it different?

The Pedlar’s comment on the nature of his tale suggests that the speaker’s longing for the continuation of the Pedlar’s storytelling comes from his refined sense and taste, which is another important characteristic of Wordsworth’s ideal readership. As the Pedlar observes, his story has neither a strong plot that can make “general” readers curious about the progression of the narrative nor “moving accidents” that can grasp their attention:

’Tis a common tale,  
By moving accidents uncharactered,  
A tale of silent suffering, hardly clothed  
In bodily form, and to the grosser sense  
But ill adapted, scarcely palpable  
To him who does not think. (ll. 290-95)
By describing his story as “a common tale” of “silent suffering,” the Pedlar makes it clear that his tale is not fit for those who passively seek for external excitements. The Pedlar’s remark on readers with “the grosser sense” incapable of thinking resonates with the comment that Wordsworth makes on his contemporary readers in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, where he laments the common reading practice that allows readers to indulge in sentimental and superficial responses to stories about others’ sufferings. As Colin Campbell notes in *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, the “empathetic ability [was] a common theme throughout the literature of Sentimentalism” (Campbell 140), and this increased attention to the theme of empathy in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries illustrates that not only a few poets or thinkers but in fact a great number of people were deeply interested in the question of how to respond to others’ sufferings, which is the main concern of *The Ruined Cottage*. Wordsworth’s description of the general taste of his time, however, reveals that people’s interest in the question of empathy did not lead them to what he might call “true sympathy,” which would take the sympathetic spectator to a new level of understanding of “human life.” Instead, to Wordsworth’s great disappointment, the general reading public longed for “outrageous stimulation,” such as frantic novels and “sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse” (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* 358). Considering Wordsworth’s emphasis on the “worthy purpose” of his poetry to “purify” and “enlighten” the corrupted and degraded feelings of his readers, the Pedlar’s “unexciting” recital of Margaret’s story can be seen as an attempt to frustrate those who are accustomed to sentimental stories that stimulate superficial emotional
responses. In contrast with this kind of readers, the speaker is capable of being impressed by Margaret’s tale—to him, her tale is “palpable,” especially because of his ability to “think.” It is not that the poem disregards the significance of his emotional reaction; rather, the speaker’s loss of his peace of mind points to the depth of his feelings for her pain. What makes him an exemplary reader is his ability to turn those emotional responses into intellectual ones, which is closely related to the Pedlar’s emphasis on the importance of meditation in the process of sympathy. It is not a coincidence, then, that the speaker feels “impelled / By a mild force of curious pensiveness.”

Granted that the speaker’s unusually “refined” sense and taste enable him to appreciate the story about Margaret just as the Pedlar himself cherishes it, the question still remains as to what kind of process of sympathy the speaker goes through and how it is different from the Pedlar’s. The speaker’s description of his responses to the first half of the Pedlar’s recital of Margaret’s tale sheds light on how the speaker’s sympathy for Margaret is developed:

He spake with somewhat of a solemn tone:
But when he ended there was in his face
Such easy cheerfulness, a look so mild
That for a little time it stole away
All recollection, and that simple tale
Passed from my mind like a forgotten sound.
A while on trivial things we held discourse,
To me soon tasteless. In my own despite
I thought of that poor woman as of one
Whom I had known and loved. He had rehearsed
Her homely tale with such familiar power,
With such a countenance of love, an eye
So busy, that the things of which he spake
Seemed present, and, attention now relaxed,
There was a heartfelt chillness in my veins. (ll. 257-71)
Curiously enough, the speaker’s very first response concerns the storyteller rather than the subject of the tale itself—that is, the speaker’s attention is completely focused on the look on the Pedlar’s face. In fact, the easy cheerful expression on the Pedlar’s face is so astonishing to the speaker that Margaret’s “simple tale” even passes “from [his] mind like a forgotten sound” for some time. The next phase of his reaction to the tale is also curious. The speaker’s attempt at a conversation about other subjects fails, causing him to realize that he has come to think of Margaret in the way he has never done before: “In my own despite / I thought of that poor woman as of one / Whom I had known and loved.”

Earlier, I argued that Margaret comes to be more than a stranger to the speaker, and this is the very moment in which the speaker realizes it. Instead of dwelling on its significance, however, the speaker turns his attention back to the Pedlar as if he is still on the same subject (he does not even change the line), intimating that the feelings of familiarity that he has about Margaret can be attributed to the “familiar power” with which the Pedlar “rehearsed / Her homely tale.” Here, the word “familiar” is quite significant, considering how the Pedlar describes his memories of Margaret earlier in the poem: “so familiarly / Do I perceive her manner, and her look / And presence” (MS. D ll. 365-67) (my emphasis). Given the definition of the word—“Well or habitually acquainted, having a close acquaintance or intimate knowledge. Of a person’s manner: Resulting from close association” (O.E.D)—it seems safe to say that the Pedlar is more “familiar” with Margaret and her story than the speaker is. Besides, as a person who witnessed Margaret in pain, the Pedlar repeatedly says to the speaker, “It would have grieved / Your very soul to see her” (ll. 414-15), implying that direct interaction with
Margaret could increase the intensity of the speaker’s sympathy for her. It may be that the speaker’s familiarity with Margaret and, consequently, his sympathy for her are not as strong as the Pedlar’s. Nevertheless, the important thing is that the speaker, who has never met Margaret in his life, is feeling as if he has “known and loved” her and that it is possible because of the Pedlar’s “familiar power” and “countenance of love.” It then makes sense that the speaker mentions his reaction to the Pedlar’s cheerful and mild look even before his response to the story of Margaret—no matter how refined his sense and taste may be, the speaker needs the Pedlar with his “familiar power” to initiate the process of sympathy. In other words, without the Pedlar’s story between him and Margaret, there is no way the speaker can sympathize with Margaret and let her story make him reflect on the “secret spirit of humanity / Which, ‘mid the calm oblivious tendencies / Of nature, ’mid her plants, her weeds, and flowers, / And silent overgrowings, still survived” (MS. D. ll. 503-506).³⁰

These sympathetic chains formed among Margaret, the Pedlar, and the speaker are central in Wordsworth’s sympathetic education. A poet, who has had “familiar” interaction with his object of sympathy, writes a memorial that retains the “human life” both of his subject and of his memories. A reader, then, learns about the “life” of the subject of the poem through his “familiar” interaction with the poet’s rendering of the poem. Despite this difference in specific processes of sympathy that the Pedlar and the speaker undergo, for both of them, the ultimately desired effect of sympathy is the same: it can save them from the destructive force of “sorrow and despair” they feel “From ruin

³⁰This description of the “life” that still remains in the remnants of the ruined cottage corresponds with the Pedlar’s comment on “human life” that is shared by human beings’ beloved objects.
and from change” (MS.D ll. 520-21) through its power of meditation. As seen below, just as the Pedlar “turned away / And walked along [his] road in happiness” (MS. D. ll. 523-24), the speaker, too, feels comforted in the end and is ready to go on his way:

The old Man ceased: he saw that I was mov’ed;  
From that low Bench, rising instinctively,  
I turned aside in weakness, nor had power  
To thank him for the tale which he had told.  
I stood, and leaning o’er the garden-gate  
Reviewed that Woman’s suff’rings, and it seemed  
To comfort me while with a brother’s love  
I blessed her in the impotence of grief. (MS. D. ll. 493-500)

Too overwhelmed by the story he has just heard, the speaker feels weak and does not have “power / To thank him for the tale which he had told.” What is noticeable here is that the speaker feels the need to “thank [the Pedlar] for the tale.” This gesture of gratitude can be understood as the speaker’s acceptance of the Pedlar’s teaching on sympathy and pleasure, which is further supported by the fact that he feels comforted “while with a brother’s love / [he] blesse[s] her in the impotence of grief.” Notably, he is acknowledging the “impotence” of his grief for Margaret when it comes to relieving her of her sufferings, and thus the feelings of comfort he feels do not have to be interpreted as his attempt to deny the reality of her sufferings. What interests the speaker more than the question of how he can alleviate her sufferings is how he should take her story and develop his sympathy for her into a greater understanding of the power of human minds to be affected by feelings and thoughts for others, and he has decided to take the Pedlar’s advice on how to overcome “an idle dream” of sorrow and despair “that could not live / Where meditation [is]” (MS. D. ll. 522-23). In this sense, the concept of pleasure in Wordsworth’s poetry is not necessarily antithetical to sorrow itself, though it is
antithetical to “an idle dream” of sorrow, and Trilling’s definition of pleasure for Wordsworth in his essay “The Fate of Pleasure: Wordsworth to Dostoevsky” is worth paying attention to:

For Wordsworth, however, pleasure was the defining attribute of life itself and of nature itself—pleasure is the “impulse from the vernal wood” which teaches us more of man and his moral being “than all the sages can.” And the fallen condition of humanity—“what man has made of man”—is comprised by the circumstance that man alone of natural beings does not experience the pleasure which, Wordsworth believes, moves the living world. (77)

Here, Trilling’s definition of pleasure as the impulse of nature “which teaches us more of man and his moral being” is particularly interesting, especially in relation to the speaker’s statement that the Pedlar as a poet imparts a “moral life” to natural objects. Considering Wordsworth’s emphasis on the Pedlar’s rural background, Wordsworth would not disagree with Trilling’s point that pleasure is “the defining attribute” of nature. He would also agree on “the fallen condition of humanity,” which he wishes to restore by changing his readers’ reading habits. This is why the poem sets such great store by the speaker’s acceptance of the Pedlar’s teaching on pleasure, which happens through his sympathetic identification with the Pedlar.

That said, in Wordsworth’s ideal poetic world, though it is impossible for the poet to achieve complete identification with the object of his sympathy, the reader’s identification with the poet’s sympathetic mind is, if not entirely possible, desired. This kind of literary community that Wordsworth wishes to establish between the poet and

31 Averill understands the feelings of pleasure that the Pedlar and the speaker experience within the context of Aristotelian katharsis. He sums up the psychological process that the Pedlar and the speaker undergo as follows: “the characters meditate upon the tale of sorrow, give themselves up to it, and are purged of their previous feelings” (60). Averill’s introduction of Aristotle’s terminology has its merit of locating the meaning of pleasure within a larger cultural context, but it does not fully explain the sense of powerlessness and uneasiness that coexists with the sense of tranquility in the poem.
readers has been subject to criticism for its lack of political awareness. Siskin’s analysis of the historicity of the Wordsworthian literary community provides a pertinent example:

[Matthew] Arnold offered Literature as a cure because he thought its gaze made us feel. It puts us in touch, according to this argument, with the “deep” feelings that are both our most intimate emotions and our primary links to community. In the climactic act of feeling demanded by what are supposed to be the best works of art, every individual, as we have seen, is supposed to identify sympathetically with the work—its imagery or characters or speaker or author—and, inevitably, with each other. As one self becomes like another, conformity to a psychological norm is achieved. Once Wordsworth and others inscribed this capacity to conform sympathetically with the sign of “health,” deviation from the norm became a sickness. (84)

Even though Siskin is right in pointing out the significance of readers’ sympathetic identification with the work in Wordsworth’s—and Arnold’s—view of literature, he does not acknowledge the distinction that Wordsworth tries to makes between readers’ sympathy for characters and for the speaker or author. In Wordsworth’s poetics of sympathy, the reader’s sympathy for characters does not necessarily involve the process of identification, whereas the reader’s sympathetic identification with speaker or author is quite significant. More importantly, however insightful it may sound, Siskin’s understanding of sympathy as “conformity to a psychological norm” oversimplifies Wordsworth’s notion of sympathy. For Wordsworth, sympathy is an intellectual as well as an emotional process—as discussed above, meditation constitutes an important part of the process of sympathy—and thus “good” poetry should challenge readers to think about the problems with not only their habit of feeling but also their habit of thinking. Although feeling and thinking are intricately related in Wordsworth’s poetry, Wordsworth’s emphasis on the intellectual part of the sympathetic process points to his conscious effort to leave some space for thinking about the “psychological norm” to which he asks his
readers to conform. Considering the two different positions that the speaker of *The Ruined Cottage* occupies can help here: he is at once the Pedlar’s audience within the poem and the speaker for readers outside the poem. Though he is presented as the figure of an ideal reader, this does not mean that the poem is written to make every reader respond to the Pedlar’s storytelling the way the speaker does. Rather, the main purpose of the poem seems to make readers think about the speaker’s emotional and intellectual responses to the Pedlar’s story so that they can reflect on their own habits of feeling and thinking.

Given Wordsworth’s consciousness of the ideological implications of the ideal relationship between the poet and readers he envisions in the poem, it seems more productive to ask questions about the viability of his educational project presented in *The Ruined Cottage*. First of all, how exactly is a reader affected by the “familiar power” of a poet? The speaker simply says he is deeply affected by the way the Pedlar tells the story without explaining how it happens to him. To make things more complicated, the poem presents a reader whose faculty of reason and imagination is already fairly trained and developed, raising an inevitable question of how a poet can teach sympathy to readers with already corrupted taste and sensibility, who would certainly find the Pedlar’s elegy “long and tedious.” The speaker’s readiness to be moved by the Pedlar’s storytelling might encourage some readers to try to appreciate Margaret’s tale, but it may not be enough in training readers in sympathy. Wordsworth does not attempt to provide his answers to these questions until he gets to his autobiography, *The Prelude*.
3.2. The Channeling of Sympathetic Lessons in *The Prelude*

Comparing *The Prelude* with Rousseau’s *Confessions*, W. J. T. Mitchell asserts that *The Prelude* is “an impersonal epic that [erases] almost all ‘personal matters’” (660). Although it is true that unlike Rousseau, Wordsworth refuses to “name names, give dates, or identify particular definite influences” (Mitchell 660), *The Prelude* is deeply personal in the sense that it is entirely about his remembrances, perception, and feelings. Wordsworth does not try to record every single personal experience in the poem, however. The poem traces the poet’s experiences pertaining especially to the construction of his poetic identity, pointing to the conscious nature of Wordsworth’s selections of his experiences. As mentioned at the beginning of the previous chapter, in his conscious selections of events, Wordsworth includes stories about his encounters with rustic people and places them at important turning points of his life, intimating that these figures have a specific role to play in his growth as a poet with a sympathetic mind. Therefore, in my examination of Wordsworth’s educational project in *The Prelude*—more specifically, that of educating readers with unsympathetic minds—I will focus on his representations of rural people and his theory of sympathy articulated in the poem. I will also consider the significance of having a first person speaker who is not merely a poet figure but can be identified as the poet himself.32

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32 One might question the idea that the speaker is Wordsworth himself, but considering Wordsworth’s claim about the autobiographical nature of the poem, it seems safe to assume that Wordsworth at least intended the first person speaker to be identified as himself. In addition, as I discuss later in the chapter, Wordsworth himself was aware of the gap between his self writing about himself and his self represented in writing.
Wordsworth’s explanation of the significance of the figures of the rustic poor for a poet in *The Prelude* indicates that his basic view of the rural poor has not changed much:

When I began to inquire,  
To watch and question those I met, and held  
Familiar talk with them, the lonely roads  
Were schools to me in which I daily read  
With most delight the passions of mankind,  
There saw into the depth of human souls—  
Souls that appear to have no depth at all  
To vulgar eyes. (XII. 161-68)

His use of the term “schools” reaffirms his faith in the educational value of rustic people, which is to teach him about “the passions of mankind.” His stated reason for considering rustic people an embodiment of fundamental passions of the human mind has not changed, either. His description of rustic life as “the life I mean of those / Whose occupations really I loved” (IV. 182-83) corresponds with his statement in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that rustic people retain essential feelings of humanity because their occupations protect them from the corrupting influence of civilization represented by urban life. Even though Wordsworth’s basic ideas about rustic life and rustic people are the same, a notable change in his view of the practicability of sympathetic education through rustic figures is seen in the passage quoted above in which Wordsworth mentions “vulgar eyes.” For Wordsworth who has been trained in sympathy all his life, “the lonely roads” where he met rustic people and “held / Familiar talk” were “schools” that allowed him to see “into the depth of human souls” and thereby to further develop his sympathetic faculty. For those with “vulgar eyes,” however, encounters with rural people cannot serve any didactic purpose, and as discussed earlier, these people to whom rustic souls “appear
to have no depth at all” pose a serious challenge to the educational project put forth in *The Ruined Cottage*. Again, the question is how a poet can teach sympathy to readers who are incapable of appreciating “the passions of mankind” in rustic people. Wordsworth’s mention of “vulgar eyes” suggests that he is aware of this problem in writing *The Prelude*, and accordingly, the poem takes different approaches to the sympathetic education of readers. For one thing, instead of presenting a figure of an ideal reader as he does in *The Ruined Cottage*, in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth focuses entirely on representing the development of his sympathetic mind, and thus, a close look at his theory of sympathy seems necessary in understanding the rationale of the educational method he employs in the poem.

Wordsworth’s theory of sympathy is best presented in Book VIII where he discusses how his love of nature has led to his love of humankind.33 Concerning his development of the ability to love his fellow-beings, Wordsworth states, “For I *already* had been taught to love / My fellow-beings, to such habits trained / Among the woods and mountains, where I found / In thee a gracious guide” (VIII. 69-72) (my italics). Here, Wordsworth is describing how his early experience “Among the woods and mountains” helped him retain “High thoughts of God and man, and love of man” (VIII. 64) in the “great city” (VIII. 63). As is evident from his use of the term “already,” Wordsworth believes that his sympathetic faculty was *already* fairly developed by the time he faced a challenge that threatened to discourage his love of humanity. It seems natural, then, that

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33 One might ask whether the love of humankind is the same as sympathy, but considering Wordsworth’s definition of sympathy in *The Ruined Cottage* as “the strong creative power / Of human passion” (MS. D. ll. 78-79) that enables us to see into “the secret spirit of humanity” (MS. D. 1. 503), it seems safe to use these two terms interchangeably.
the process of how our love of nature develops should be an object of study for him. In fact, Wordsworth’s decision to represent rustic people in his autobiographical poem does not seem irrelevant to the fact that these people are closer to nature. Interestingly, however, Wordsworth describes the development of our love of nature and consequently of humankind as an *unconscious* process:

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Even then the common haunts of the green earth
With the ordinary human interests
Which they embosom—all without regard
As both may seem—are fastening on the heart
Insensibly, each with the other’s help,
So that we love, not knowing that we love,
And feel, not knowing whence our feeling comes. (VIII. 166-72)
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The nature that Wordsworth describes here is far from extraordinary; rather, it is represented by “the common haunts of the green earth” which draw only “the ordinary human interests.” Wordsworth, then, emphasizes that for a child, even the most common natural environment can be a source of great joy and “transport” (VIII. 162) that can nurture the ability to love and feel. The problem is that nature affects us so “insensibly” (a few lines later, Wordsworth also uses the term “imperceptibly”) that we are not conscious when we love or feel under the influence of nature.

To make things more complicated, although we do come to realize later that the love of nature has been developed in our mind, it is impossible, according to Wordsworth, to obtain a rational analysis of how exactly it has happened:

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. . . But who shall parcel out
His intellect by geometric rules,
Split like a province into round and square?
Who knows the individual hour in which
His habits were first sown even as a seed,
Who that shall point as with a wand, and say
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In this passage, Wordsworth is saying that no one is able to neatly draw a map of his or her mind on which every origin of every feeling is clearly marked. His trope of “geometric rules” here is especially significant in its implication that our rational faculties are not quite appropriate for tracing the process of the development of our minds, which in turn suggests that he is not completely denying the possibility of being able to trace the process. This is a critical issue for Wordsworth, because if there is a way to trace the development of our love for nature, it means that there is a way consciously to train our minds in sympathy.

Wordsworth’s representations of rustic people can be understood in this regard. Though his sympathetic faculty had already been nurtured in nature in his childhood, he still needed rustic people to refine and cultivate his moral sensibility further. Given that representation is a highly conscious process, the very fact that Wordsworth attempts to represent these people indicates that he does believe in the possibility of somehow being able to capture the process of their educational influence. Wordsworth does not, however, attempt to explain rationally how these people have educated him in sympathy. As a matter of fact, Wordsworth’s representations of rural people in The Prelude bear a striking resemblance to his rendering of the leech gatherer in “Resolution and Independence” in that the object of his representation is not rural people themselves but

34 The hierarchical relationship Wordsworth establishes between reason and passion in the following passage—passion is a more comprehensive concept for Wordsworth than reason—betrays Wordsworth’s skepticism about rational faculties as a means of getting at truth: “But all the meditations of mankind/ Yea, all the adamantine holds of truth / By reason built, or passion (which itself / Is highest reason in a soul sublime)” (V. 37-40).
his own impression and memories of them. In addition, in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth is presented in most cases merely as a passive observer, and there is hardly an account of any sort of active interaction between him and rustic figures, which explains his focus on their outward appearances in his representations. Wordsworth’s representation of his “grey-haired dame” Ann Tyson in *The Prelude* is one good example. Although he must have had some sort of active interaction with her, Wordsworth does not record it in the poem; instead, he focuses on his observation of her “innocent and busy” life.

Wordsworth’s description of the shepherd whom he used to observe as a “rambling schoolboy” provides an even more efficient example of the representational techniques Wordsworth characteristically employs in *The Prelude*:

His form hath flashed upon me glorified
By the deep radiance of the setting sun;
Of him have I descried in distant sky,
A solitary object and sublime,
Above all height, like an ærial cross,
As it is stationed on some spiry rock
Of the Chartreuse, for worship. Thus was man
Ennobled outwardly before mine eyes,
And thus my heart at first was introduced
To an unconscious love and reverence
Of human nature; hence the human form
To me was like an index of delight,
Of grace and honour, power and worthiness.  (VIII. 404-16)

In stating how the shepherd introduced him to love of humanity, Wordsworth uses such words as “glorified,” “sublime,” and “worship,” as if he actually means to idealize or mystify the shepherd. Besides, the passage even has pastoral overtones. Earlier in Book VIII, however, Wordsworth emphasizes the fundamental difference between his representation of the shepherd and the idyllic, mythical image of the shepherd usually
found in pastoral poetry, saying that “shepherds were the men who pleased [him] first: / Not such as, in Arcadian fastnesses / Sequestered, . . . / Nor such . . . / As Shakespeare in the wood of Arden placed, / Nor such as Spenser fabled” (VIII. 182-87). He also clearly shows his awareness of the reality of “the rural ways / And manners” (VIII. 205-06) that are “severe and unadorned” (VIII. 206), suggesting that his finding beauty in rustic life does not necessarily mean that he dismisses its harsh reality. In fact, his interest in rural people arises from his preoccupation with human suffering. Granted, what is noteworthy about the way Wordsworth represents the shepherd here is that it draws entirely upon his observation of the shepherd’s outward appearance. By explicitly saying that the shepherd was “Ennobled outwardly before [his] eyes,” Wordsworth again makes clear that his task is to represent his memories of how rustic people helped him further develop his sympathetic mind, not to portray them as individualized human beings.

Wordsworth’s depiction of the blind beggar in Book VII can be understood in a similar context:

. . . ’twas my chance
Abruptly to be smitten with the view
Of a blind beggar, who, with upright face,
Stood propped against a wall, upon his chest
Wearing a written paper, to explain
The story of the man, and who he was.
My mind did at this spectacle turn round
As with the might of waters, and it seemed
To me that in this label was a type
Or emblem of the utmost that we know
Both of ourselves and of the universe,
And on the shape of this unmoving man,
His fixèd face and sightless eyes, I looked,
As if admonished from another world. (VII. 610-22)
Wordsworth’s description of the blind beggar’s physical appearance is quite brief, and his attention is fixed upon the paper on the blind beggar’s chest that explains “The story of the man, and who he was.” Just as he was not interested in the shepherd as an individual being, Wordsworth does not show interest in the specific details of the blind beggar’s story. Instead, he engages in speculating on the symbolic meaning of the label on the blind beggar’s chest. The symbolic meaning Wordsworth fathoms in the label is that there is “a type / Or emblem of the utmost that we know / Both of ourselves and of the universe” in it. This idea of common humanity is the sympathetic lesson that he learns from his encounter with the beggar, and it helps him gain a deeper understanding of human nature. More specifically, right before his encounter with the blind beggar, Wordsworth is amazed by how “‘The face of every one / That passes by [him] is a mystery” (VII. 597-98), and the blind beggar’s paper of his life story enlightens him on the mystery of humanity. Again, the blind beggar himself is not the object of representation here. Even the label itself is not the object of representation—the materiality of the label is completely disregarded. What Wordsworth takes great care to represent is his memory of the sympathetic message he received from this encounter.

Wordsworth’s investment in representing his own memories of rustic people points to the importance of understanding the role of memory in his poetics and its relation to his theory of sympathy. Memory was one of the key terms that signified important transformations in eighteenth-century thinking. According to Gidal, by changing the relationship between subject and act, Locke’s empiricist logic of knowledge led to “the internalization of the art of memory” (461), which is fundamentally a shift in
representational logic. In the new model of the art of memory, the mind no longer simply perceives the truths deposited from the external world, but instead “constructs its knowledge through the act of recollection itself,” making memory play both “a signifying and a constitutive role” (Gidal 460). This concept of memory as a shaping force is quite relevant to Wordsworth’s poetics. The following passage effectively demonstrates Wordsworth’s own awareness of the role memory plays in the construction of the story of his life: “Of these and other kindred notices / I cannot say what portion is in truth / The naked recollection of that time, / And what may rather have been called to life / By after-meditation” (III. 644-48). Simply put, Wordsworth does not merely remember things that happened in the past, but also creates new “truths” through the process of “after-meditation.”

Wordsworth’s remembrance of the Maid of Buttermere provides a good example of how the process of “after-meditation” constructs new meaning for a poet. After watching a melodrama based on the story of Mary Robinson, who had fallen victim to a bigamous marriage, Wordsworth and Coleridge went to meet her in person. During their visit to Mary of Buttermere, they were both smitten by the grace and dignity of her manners, and Wordsworth records their impressions as follows:

Both stricken with one feeling of delight
An admiration of her modest mien
And carriage, marked by unexampled grace.
Not unfamiliarly we since that time
Have seen her, her discretion have observed,
Her just opinions, female modesty,
Her patience, and retiredness of mind
Unsoiled by commendation and excess
Of public notice. This memorial verse
Comes from the poet’s heart, and is her due;
For we were nursed—as almost might be said—
On the same mountains, children at one time, (VII. 332-43)

For Wordsworth, what makes the Maid of Buttermere a powerful figure is her gracious attitude of accepting and enduring the sufferings of life, which greatly inspires “the poet’s heart” and leads him to write a “memorial verse.” This calm, patient image of the Maid of Buttermere comes back to Wordsworth and evokes powerful, deep feelings in him which “in themselves / Trite, do yet scarcely seem so when [he thinks] / Of those ingenuous moments of [his] youth” (VII. 360-62). In his “after-meditation” on Mary of Buttermere, Wordsworth draws an image not only of her but also of her baby, exclaiming “Happy are they both, / Mother and child” (VII. 359-60). If Wordsworth’s first perception of the Maid of Buttermere is presumably based upon the “fact” of his visit to her, as far as her baby is concerned, there is no record that Mary had a child by her seducer. The fact is he is drawing on local knowledge in conjuring up the inspiring image of the maid with her baby. As a matter of fact, even his remembrance of his personal encounter with the Maid of Buttermere itself cannot be seen as a record of what really happened in the past, and it is hard to distinguish the old “truths” from the new “truths.”

In addition to the constitutive power of memory, the act of writing—in other words, representation—also plays an important part in the (re-)construction of his narrative. As stated earlier, Wordsworth does not try to record every single moment of his life but selects some of the most important incidents, emphasizing the part the act of writing or representation plays in the construction of his memories: “From many wanderings that have left behind / Remembrances not lifeless, I will here / Single out one, then pass to other themes” (IV. 361-63). Considering the stabilizing power of writing, Wordsworth’s
conscious selection from among his memories is crucial to understanding how he makes meanings out of the memories in his head, which are less fixed than the representations of the memories in the poem. Eugene Stelzig notes in his essay on “Resolution and Independence” that “a writer’s recollection of the past is always in the service of the present—in other words, it is a function of the needs of the moment of writing” (528). As Stelzig correctly observes, Wordsworth’s selections are determined by the purpose he has at the moment of writing, which is to record the development of his poetic mind; his past is reconfigured according to that purpose. Wordsworth’s decision to represent his memories of poor people in *The Prelude* thus can be seen as an indication of his belief in the moral significance of their figures, rather than his frustration about the “passiveness” of his perception. Even though he cannot provide a rational explanation for how his love of nature has been developed in the first place, now that he has “capabilities of feeling” thanks to his rural background, he can choose to look back and give new meanings to his past experiences through the act of writing. In short, as conscious processes of meaning making, memory and representation serve for Wordsworth as a site for interrogating the educational possibility of his personal memories.

The constitutive function of memory and representation is especially evident in Wordsworth’s account of his encounter with the discharged soldier in Book IV. In writing about the growth of his poetic sensibility during the summer vacation after his first year at Cambridge, Wordsworth “Single[s] out” (IV. 363) his memory of the discharged soldier among “Remembrances not lifeless” (IV. 362). Regarding the discharged soldier, the first thing Wordsworth chooses to remember and write about is
the fact that he observed the soldier himself “unseen” (IV. 405). As is seen in the passage quoted below, he even “peruse[d]” the soldier as if he were some kind of text, and he records that what struck him most about the discharged soldier’s appearance is the sense of solitude and hopelessness:

. . . in his very dress appeared
A desolation, a simplicity
That seemed akin to solitude. Long time
Did I peruse him with a mingled sense
Of fear and sorrow. (IV. 417-21)

Here again, Wordsworth’s representation of the discharged soldier is focused mainly on what kinds of feelings and thoughts the soldier evoked in Wordsworth’s mind, rather than the soldier himself, and his feelings are summarized in “a mingled sense / Of fear and sorrow.” Wordsworth’s complicated feelings for the soldier provide a clue to his motive for watching him himself “unseen.” It seems that he is ashamed of his act of watching the discharged soldier unseen, and his description of how he stopped watching and addressed the soldier makes his feelings of shame more obvious: “Without self-blame / I had not thus prolonged my watch; and now, / subduing my heart’s specious cowardise, / I left the shady nook where I had stood / And hailed him” (IV. 433-37). The question here is why the poet felt ashamed of observing this desolate and lonely figure, and, more importantly, why he feels that it is an essential part of his memory of the discharged soldier worth writing down. Considering his attention was fixed on the signs that reveal the soldier’s pain and sorrow—for example, he noticed that “From his lips meanwhile / There issued murmuring sounds, as if of pain / Or of uneasy thought” (IV. 421-23)—it is not likely that he blamed himself for his lack of sympathy for the man.
Wordsworth’s description of the soldier’s indifferent attitude toward life suggests that Wordsworth was perhaps overwhelmed with a feeling of helplessness at the sight of someone who is in too much pain even to feel it (or at least this seems to be how Wordsworth the poet realizes how he felt back then). Although Wordsworth offered the soldier what little help he could offer and took him to lodging, he could not help but notice on their way to the cottage the tone of “weakness and indifference” in the soldier’s utterance:

. . . Solemn and sublime
He might have seemed, but that in all he said
There was a strange half-absence, and a tone
Of weakness and indifference, as of one
Remembering the importance of his theme
But feeling it no longer. (IV. 473-78)

Overpowered by suffering and pain, the discharged soldier who can remember and cannot feel “the importance of his theme” here is strongly reminiscent of Margaret in The Ruined Cottage. Just as the Pedlar experiences “the impotence of grief” when he witnesses Margaret’s tragedy, Wordsworth realizes after listening to the soldier’s story that no matter how strong his sympathy for the soldier is, he is incapable of regarding him as “Solemn and sublime.” Interestingly, Wordsworth stops making comments on his own feelings after he gets to the part where he actually spoke to the soldier, and it seems a conscious decision on his part so that he can underline the mixed feeling of “fear and sorrow” he felt before he addressed him. Though Wordsworth does not explicitly state in the poem what sympathetic lesson he learned from his encounter with the soldier, the way he documents the story about him clarifies, or even creates, the meaning of the
event: it was a significant event in his growth as a poet who was struggling to figure out the meaning of sympathizing with people he cannot help.

Besides the construction of new meanings, the writing process plays another important role in Wordsworth’s poetics, which is to make him conscious of his own consciousness: “so wide appears / The vacancy between me and those days, / Which yet have such self-presence in my mind / That sometimes when I think of them I seem /Two consciousnesses—conscious of myself, / And of some other being” (II. 28-33). Positing Romantic poetics of pleasure as the ultimate cause of melancholy poetics in Victorian literature, Riede argues in “Melancholy and Victorian Poetry” that “once Wordsworth made ‘the Mind of Man’ his ‘haunt’ and the ‘main region of his song’, . . . the poetic tradition was turned inward and the mind was divided against itself into at least two states of consciousness: the mind observing and the mind observed” (30). Here lies another significance of rustic figures: they remind Wordsworth of himself observing them, precisely because he cannot identify with them.

These “two consciousnesses” of Wordsworth’s mind are quite important in comprehending his relationship to readers, complicating the relationship between identification and sympathy. As mentioned above, Wordsworth believes in the public function of his autobiographical poem, deeming it “labour not unworthy of regard” of his readers—that is, the poem is his conscious effort to develop sympathy in his readers’ minds. The question is how exactly the poem can affect readers’ perceptions and transform their hearts. In the case of representations of rustic people, the poet’s identification with their feelings and thoughts is not absolutely necessary for their
education of the poet, because what matters is the poet’s sympathetic ability that allows him to appreciate their spiritual depth.\footnote{Wordsworth’s theory of sympathy is based on the belief that it is possible to escape the “collapse of sympathy and identity” (Jaffe 141) which Audrey Jaffé argues is one of the main themes of Victorian fiction.} Readers’ identification with the poet, on the other hand, is very important, because readers do not necessarily have sympathetic minds—again, the whole point of the poem is to help them develop capacity for sympathy. There is no way readers can identify with Wordsworth’s past self, because they do not share his past experiences. In fact, Wordsworth himself does not completely identify with his self observed, which is why he refers to it as “some other being.” My contention is that even though Wordsworth is aware that readers cannot identify with Wordsworth “observed”—the one remembered—he believes that they can identify with Wordsworth “observing”—the one remembering—through the reading experience in which they relive the poet’s moment of writing and consequently the moment of meaning making. This accounts for the “egoistic” turn of Wordsworth’s poetic career, a journey of figuring out most effective methods of the sympathetic education of readers.

Wordsworth’s concept of language is quite pertinent here. Challenging the eighteenth-century concept of language as an instrument for the expression of thought,\footnote{Alexander Pope, for example, states, “Expression is the dress of thought” (“An Essay on Criticism” 318).} Wordsworth argues that

Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with: they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts. If words be not (recurring to a metaphor before used) an *incarnation* of the thought but only a *clothing* for it, they surely will prove an ill gift. . . Language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve. (“Essay on Epitaphs” 84-85)
For Wordsworth, language is not simply a means of communication; instead, it has a power to shape our thoughts, feelings, and minds. This shaping power of language in the end bridges the gap between writing and reading, keeping both the writers and the readers under its influence. In other words, the act of writing does not only create new meanings, but also actively transforms both the writers’ and the readers’ minds. Jon Klancher is therefore correct in pointing out that Wordsworth believed “in the power of signs to transform the real itself” (138). *The Prelude* has “a substance and a life” in this sense.

Explaining how his imagination has been impaired and restored, Wordsworth says, “and I would give / while yet we may, as far as words can give, / A substance and a life to what I feel: / I would enshrine the spirit of the past / For future restoration” (XI. 333-42). For him, his poem is not dead words on the paper, but has a life of its own which can help him and his readers with “future restoration.”

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth presents his own poetic growth as an exemplary model for readers. As is evident from his remark to Coleridge, his immediate audience, Wordsworth’s purpose is to make readers follow his own steps and expand their sympathetic abilities: “what we have loved / Others will love, and we may teach them how: / Instruct them how the mind of man becomes / A thousand times more beautiful than the earth / On which he dwells” (XIII. 444-48). At the same time, however, Wordsworth is aware that it is not possible for readers to exactly imitate the developmental process of his own sympathy, because the process is basically imperceptible. Wordsworth’s educational project therefore works through the channeling of the sympathetic lessons from rustic people to the poet to the readers. As a poet blessed
with childhood experiences which helped him develop a love of nature and humankind, Wordsworth is able to learn from his encounters with rustic people. Wordsworth then instructs his own readers by inviting them to participate in the conscious process of narrative construction.
“The greatest benefit we owe to the artist,” states Eliot in her essay “The Natural History of German Life,” “is the extension of our sympathies” (270). Eliot then holds that “All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People” (271), suggesting that common and ordinary life is the most suitable subject for “amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellowmen beyond the bounds of our personal lot” (271). Eliot’s belief in the significance of common life echoes Wordsworth’s view of rustic life as the most appropriate subject matter for the enlargement of the readers’ sympathetic minds, and not surprisingly, many of her novels deal with the “provincial style of the peasant” (“The Natural History of German Life” 275) as important subject matter. In addition, Eliot shares Wordsworth’s faith in rustic life as the basis of the most essential and elementary qualities of moral sentiment, as is evident from her statement in “The Natural History of German Life” that “a return to the habits of peasant life is the best remedy for many moral as well as physical diseases induced by perverted civilization” (80-81).

37 Eliot’s remark on the seriousness of the perversion of “the life of our more heavily-laden fellow-men” (271) as opposed to the false representation of “the manners and conversation of beaux and duchesses” (271) demonstrates what counts as “the People” for Eliot.
At the same time, however, Eliot’s remark that “We want to be taught to feel, not for the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant, but for the peasant in all his coarse apathy, and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness” (271) suggests that she is more acutely conscious of the danger of idealizing rural life than Wordsworth and thus more cautious in her depiction of rural people. Consequently, Eliot has been less subject to the kind of critique that Wordsworth has suffered—namely, the critique of his socially empty “mythologizing” of rustic people.38 Recent critics especially attempt to “redeem” Eliot’s fictional reconstruction of the historical past in her pastoral novels. For example, pointing out that *Adam Bede* has commonly been read as “a rewriting of the Edenic myth, a positive revision of the pastoral” (288), Mary Jean Corbett maintains that Eliot’s investment in the characters who destabilize the myth about the pastoral world by transgressing against social norms illustrates that she never uncritically accepts “the myth of the rural past” (288). Comparing Thomas Macaulay’s and Eliot’s representations of the rural past, Eleni Coundouriotis also argues that even though Eliot’s portrayal of the pastoral world of Hayslope in *Adam Bede* captures a nostalgia that idealizes the eighteenth century, it at the same time “critically examines the way in which her own period misremembers the past” (286). Focusing on Eliot’s criticism of the German novelists who mystify rustic figures in “The Natural History of German Life,” Deborah Heller Roazen also emphasizes that for Eliot, “the peasant himself is no paradigm of moral or spiritual harmony” (173).

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38 I am not suggesting, however, that Eliot’s “pastoral” novels have completely escaped this kind of criticism. For example, Terry Eagleton’s reading of *Adam Bede* as the recasting of “historical contradiction into ideologically resolvable form” (114) offers one of the most famous examples of the critique of Eliot’s ideological “complicity” with her historical times.
Another difference between Eliot and Wordsworth in the employment of the theme of rustic life is that while Wordsworth is interested mainly in the relationship between him as a poet and rustic people and in the ensuing question of how he perceives them, Eliot is concerned less about her own relationship to rustic people than about the relationships among them. This shift in focus in the representation of country life is closely connected to Eliot’s use of the novel form, which involves much more aesthetic distance between the author and the object of representation and simultaneously more interpersonal sympathy. The implications of Eliot’s employment of the novel form in her sympathetic education will be especially significant in the discussion of *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot’s autobiographical novel.

Eliot’s interest in the relations among rural people is significant yet for another reason: it extends to her preoccupation with rustic communities as subject matter, another crucial difference between her and Wordsworth in their representations of rural life. Whereas Wordsworth is not interested in rustic people as a community in his poetry, Eliot is deeply invested in the relationship between rustic people and their communities, especially in the failure of sympathetic exchanges between them. As discussed in the introduction, the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the country in the nineteenth century substantially transformed traditional country life—specifically, “modern fragmentation” instigated by an industrialized system of production and distribution threatened to disrupt the traditional value system upheld by tightly knit agrarian communities. Eliot’s understanding of the impact of these historical processes is crucial to comprehending the two apparently conflicting aspects of rural communities she
delineates in her novels. On the one hand, the pastoral touch that Eliot adds to her
depiction of rural communities especially in her early novels intimates that she believes
that rural communities are less under the disturbing influence of the historical changes
than urban cities.\textsuperscript{39} At the same time, many of the rural communities in Eliot’s novels are
described as morally problematic, suggesting that Eliot does not think that rural
communities’ “immunity” to the disrupting power of historical processes necessarily
leads to a strong sense of morality. It is true that Eliot believes that rural life better retains
the moral foundation of the human mind, but at the same time she sees the problems with
rural communities’ blind resistance to historical changes.\textsuperscript{40}

These two sides of rural communities are very significant in apprehending Eliot’s
interest in them as a locus for considering issues of morality and sympathy. While
acknowledging the symbolic significance of rural communities, Eliot also emphasizes the
problems with their ethical codes. In illustrating the problematic nature of their moral
status, Eliot’s novels focus specifically on their lack of sympathy for their individual
members, and the basic definition of sympathy and its implication give a clue to why
Eliot finds the failure of sympathy in rustic communities so troubling. The \textit{O.E.D.} defines
sympathy as “the quality or state of being affected by the condition of another with a

\textsuperscript{39} Emphasizing the significance of a rural community as the moral foundation of the human mind for Eliot,
James Eli Adams argues that Eliot turns “to the life and language of a rural community to affirm moral and
spiritual continuity” (237). Although Adams is right in pointing out the symbolic meaning that a rural
community has for Eliot, the rural communities of her present time had already undergone significant
changes, and it is not entirely clear whether she actually believed in the possibility of finding “moral and
spiritual continuity” with the agricultural past.

\textsuperscript{40} In this regard, although Anderson does not extend her discussion to Eliot’s attention to the problems of
rural communities, she is right in suggesting that “even as Eliot loosely associates peasant life with vital
connection to the past and town life with an overly cultivated tendency toward disconnection and
abstraction, the act of recollection is conceived as a valuable one, and the peasant’s entrenchment in custom
carries a negative valence precisely insofar as it is unreasoning, blind, and lacking in self-consciousness”
(13-14).
feeling similar or corresponding to that of the other; the fact or capacity of entering into or sharing the feelings of another or others.” In this definition of sympathy, the concept of fellow-feeling or common humanity is clearly implicated, pointing to the significance of sympathy as the foundation of a community. The fact that sympathy fails not only in urban communities but also in rural communities, then, signifies that the most fundamental bond among people is collapsing. Holding on to the pastoral myth about the stronger sympathetic ties in rural communities, however, Eliot’s contemporaries focused only on the first aspect of rural communities mentioned above and did not take the problem of sympathy in rustic communities seriously. Given this, Eliot’s complex representations of rural communities suggest that she understood illuminating the connection between the two seemingly contradictory aspects of rural communities as the essential part of her moral education of readers.

Closely related to Eliot’s project of expanding her readers’ moral sensibility by demystifying the pastoral ideal of her time is her investment in challenging her readers’ reading habits. According to Corbett, Eliot’s contemporary readers extolled Adam Bede as a realistic representation of “an agrarian order that posits no essential difference between master and worker” (292). As Corbett aptly points out, Eliot’s middle-class readers’ tendency to interpret the novel as tidy moral fable and “an antidote to social ills” (292)41 stems from their desire to dismiss the reality of economic and social differences between them and working-class people, which constitutes an important reason for the romanticization of the eighteenth century as the rural past. A close examination of Adam

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41 Corbett quite pertinently quotes Jane Carlyle’s response to the novel as one of her examples: “Jane Carlyle, for instance, wrote to George Eliot that reading Adam Bede ‘was as good as going into the country for one’s health’ and that she found herself ‘in charity with the whole human race’ upon finishing it” (292).
Bede, however, reveals that the novel does not cater to Victorians’ belief in the unchanging and moral side of rural life but rather challenges it, and Eliot’s readers’ eagerness to read the novel merely as the idealization of pre-modern rustic life explains why Eliot is so intent on making her readers rethink their ways of approaching texts in her attempt to enlarge their capacity for sympathy. More specifically, that Eliot’s readers were too ready to read Adam Bede simply as one of the “pastoral” texts illustrates their propensity to indulge in ready-made responses determined by their class interests and desires to hold on to the illusion of a classless ideal. It is not difficult to imagine, then, that for an author like Eliot who believed her duty as an artist is “amplifying experience and extending [readers’] contact with [their] fellowmen beyond the bounds of [their] personal lot” (271), this kind of reading habit that does not allow readers to be challenged by texts was viewed as one of the most serious problems to tackle.

Eliot’s artistic principles articulated in the famous seventeenth chapter in Adam Bede can be understood in this context. In this chapter titled “In Which the Story Pauses a Little,” the narrator explains why he cannot create unlikely, extraordinary characters that would easily gratify the readers’ taste: “Then we shall see at a glance whom we are to condemn, and whom we are to approve. Then we shall be able to admire, without the slightest disturbance of our prepossessions” (222). Here, the narrator is strongly opposed to a kind of reading that allows readers to indulge in effortless, painless sympathetic feelings for characters. Mason Harris’s discussion of Arthur Donnithorne as a bad reader

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42 Eliot makes a similar comment in Adam Bede on how sympathy can be developed. According to her, the only one way in which one can develop sympathy is “by getting his heart-strings bound round the weak and erring, so that he must share not only the outward consequence of their error, but their inward suffering” (256).
who misuses the imagination is quite pertinent here. Proposing that Arthur “provides a
contrast to the narrator’s Wordsworthian realism” (41), Harris finds the origin of Arthur’s
sin in the “literary imagination” that he has developed through his aristocratic learning
and style of life. Harris suggests that Arthur’s blind pursuit of the taste of the upper class
that has trained him in a superficial understanding of human suffering allows him to
indulge sentimentally in condescending feelings of sympathy and love, ultimately
preventing him, despite all his good intentions, from seeing the consequences of his
behavior toward Hetty. Arthur’s example very aptly illustrates the concerns Eliot has
about her contemporary readers’ view of literature. Just like Arthur who thinks of
literature merely as a form of entertainment, Eliot’s urban, middle-class readers do not
take literature seriously and fail to distinguish sentimentalism from genuine sympathy,
demonstrating again the significance of challenging readers’ reading habits in Eliot’s
sympathetic education of readers.

In this chapter, I examine Eliot’s methods of training her readers in the faculty of
sympathy in her early novels, *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss.* The main reason
for discussing these two novels together is that both problematize the readers’ notion of
sympathy and their ways of reading texts through the depiction of failures in sympathetic
exchanges between individuals and rural communities. More specifically, both Hetty
Sorrel and Maggie Tulliver transgress against communal norms and become ostracized
from their communities, and by inviting her readers to re-evaluate these communities’
reaction to Hetty’s and Maggie’s violations of communal ethics, Eliot makes them

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43 *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch* are also significant texts in the discussion of Eliot’s depiction of rural
communities, but I have decided to focus my argument on *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss,* in which
rural communities’ failures to sympathize with their members are foregrounded.
reconsider the question of moral responsibility and thereby complicates the common understanding of sympathy. Another important reason that I have chosen to deal with *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss* in the same chapter is that the rustic communities portrayed in both novels display the aforementioned aspects of rural communities that are apparently conflicting with each other. For this reason, in my discussion of Eliot’s theory of sympathy in *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*, the rustic communities’ potential for sympathetic education and their limitations will be an important focus.

4.1. Re-reading “Hetty Sorrel’s story” in *Adam Bede*

It is a well known fact that Eliot conceived the story of *Adam Bede* from an anecdote told by her Methodist Aunt Samuel, who visited “a condemned criminal, a very ignorant girl who had murdered her child and refused to confess” (30 November 1858). As Eliot recollects, the story of the “ignorant girl” whom her aunt accompanied to the place of execution made a large impression in her mind, and after almost twenty years, she developed the story into *Adam Bede*, working towards the scene in the prison as the climax of the novel. Despite Hetty’s child-murder and its aftermath being the central material of the novel, the novel is titled “Adam Bede,” not “Hetty Sorrel,” situating the character of Adam at the center of the story. Moreover, Adam’s union with Dinah, the character who “grew out of [Eliot’s] recollections of [her] aunt” (30 November 1858), removes Hetty from the center of the novel even further. Considering Eliot’s investment

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44 All quotations from letters to and from George Eliot will be specified by the date of the letter. All quotations are from *The George Eliot Letters.*

45 Eliot notes in the same letter that Dinah’s marriage to Adam was suggested by George Henry Lewes who was “convinced that the reader’s interest would centre on her” and thus “wanted her to be the principal figure at the last.”
in problematizing the notion of sympathy through the community’s reaction to Hetty’s transgression, presenting the novel as Adam’s rather than Hetty’s story seems a very curious decision. My argument is that decentering Hetty’s story is a deliberate choice on the author’s part and that it is in fact at the heart of her sympathetic education of readers. In this section, I examine the way in which the Hayslope community misreads and misremembers Hetty’s story and its relation to Eliot’s theory of sympathy articulated in the novel. I will then investigate how Eliot extends her criticism of Hayslope’s lack of sympathy to the critique of her readers’ ways of sympathizing with characters and reading texts through the doubling of Hetty and Dinah and the consequent narrative disposal of Hetty.

Introduced first by Adam’s mother as the love interest of Adam, Hetty is presented as a shallow, superficial character that does not seem to deserve Adam’s faithful love, as is evident from the following description of Hetty that emphasizes her vain and self-absorbed nature:

Hetty Sorrel often took the opportunity, when her aunt’s back was turned, of looking at the pleasing reflection of herself in those polished surfaces, for the oak-table was usually turned up like a screen, and was more for ornament than for use; and she could see herself sometimes in the great round pewter dishes that were ranged on the shelves above the long deal dinner-table, or in the hobs of the grate, which always shone like jasper. (117)

Considering that this is the first time Hetty is described in detail in the novel, she is not really a character with whom readers can easily sympathize. As is demonstrated by the fact that Hetty uses any object that reflects her image, she has apparently made it a habit of seizing at every opportunity to please herself by looking at her own reflection.

Whereas the “polished surfaces” of the furniture are a great source of pride for her aunt,
Mrs. Poyser, Hetty does not care at all how her aunt feels about them but simply regards them as a means through which she can see her pleasing image. This picture of a girl who is too engrossed with herself to show attention to anyone else is far from positive, and the problematic nature of Hetty’s vanity is accented even more strongly when it is contrasted with Dinah’s “loving, self-forgetting nature” (121).

At the same time, however, the novel provides many details that prevent readers from indulging in simple moral condemnation of Hetty’s character or her behavior. For instance, the fact that Hetty has to use materials with “polished surfaces” rather than a real mirror in order to see her reflection draws attention to her class status that would not allow her to fully gratify her sense of vanity, evoking feelings of pity, if not sympathy, for her. In addition, that she is “distractingly pretty” (127) complicates readers’ moral judgment of her actions in the novel. According to the narrator, Hetty’s beauty is a kind of “beauty which seems made to turn the heads not only of men, but of all intelligent mammals, even of women” (127). It is no wonder, then, that Hetty has developed a strong consciousness of her prettiness, which is very likely to lead to a sense of vanity. Her sexual transgression, the main cause of her downfall, is also to some degree attributable to her dangerous beauty that attracts even the attention of a gentleman. I am not suggesting here that the novel denies that Hetty is morally responsible for her actions, and there is no gainsaying the heinousness of her child-murder. Nevertheless, the severity of Hetty’s punishment—banished from her community, she dies miserably in the end—
along with various factors in her life that contribute to her tragedy raises a question as to
the justness of her punishment and the logic of Eliot’s distribution of sympathy for her
characters.

On this account, the Hayslope community’s moral disapproval of Hetty’s conduct
is worthy of a close investigation. When Hetty finds herself deep in trouble, the whole
community, with the exception of Adam and Dinah, treats her merely as a criminal, no
longer recognizing her as its member. It is important here to note that the community’s
moral disapproval of Hetty is closely connected to its fundamental lack of sympathy for
her, as is evident from the narrator’s explanation for why even her own family disowns
her: “[the] sense of family dishonour was too keen, even in the kind-hearted Martin
Poyser the younger, to leave room for any compassion towards Hetty” (459). Given the
terrible nature of Hetty’s infanticide, it seems reasonable that Hetty’s community finds
her morally reproachable, especially when it is characterized by a strong sense of
morality.  

The novel, however, questions whether the community’s feelings of moral
disapproval entitle it to a complete withdrawal of sympathy from Hetty. Adam and Dinah
certainly do not endorse Hetty’s behavior, but they still feel strong sympathy for her.
Regarding the question of moral responsibility, Henberg emphasizes the importance of
distinguishing sympathy from moral endorsement. Acknowledging the need to
sympathize with Hetty, Henberg states, “Informed sympathy, however, is as critical as it
is forgiving. Hetty must be judged responsible for her predicament because she ignores

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46 Chapter 32, in which Mrs. Poyser “Has Her Say Out” about Squire Donnithorne’s plan to get rid of the
corn land in the Chase farm, supplies a good example of rustics’ pride in their work ethics based on
agricultural culture. The fact that Mrs. Poyser’s “Say Out” succeeds in dissuading old Squire from pursuing
his capitalistic interests suggests that the traditional values of rural communities are still intact in Hayslope.
the proffered help of others, and ignores it—importantly—out of preference for her own distorted view of reality” (30). Even though Henberg is right in pointing out the difference between sympathy and moral judgment, he fails to explain why Eliot takes such care to complicate the question of Hetty’s moral responsibility for her actions and offers a comprehensive look at the causes of her tragedy. Moreover, Henberg’s discussion of Eliot’s distribution of sympathy overlooks the connection between the Hayslope community’s moral condemnation and its lack of sympathy. How exactly are they connected, then?

A close examination of the symbolic meaning of Hetty’s beauty provides one answer to the question. Here is another illuminating description of Hetty’s beauty:

But Hetty’s face had a language that transcended her feelings. There are faces which nature charges with a meaning and pathos not belonging to the single human soul that flutters beneath them, but speaking the joys and sorrows of foregone generations—eyes that tell of deep love which doubtless has been and is somewhere, but not paired with those eyes—perhaps paired with pale eyes that can say nothing; just as a national language may be instinct with poetry unfelt by the lips that use it. (330)

Describing one of the moments in which Arthur Donnithorne’s resolution to restrain his passions for Hetty fails in the face of her charm, this passage offers an explanation for the mysteriousness of her beauty. As is evident from the phrase, “a national language,” there is something universal and transcendent about her face that tells the stories of “the joys and sorrows of foregone generations.” Despite the selfishness or vanity of Hetty’s character, her face conveys deeper human emotions that are ingrained in the collective memory of her community. Connecting Hetty’s beauty to communal memory, the passage suggests that as an integral part of the community, Hetty’s actions and her moral
responsibility cannot be thought of in an isolated context—that is, Hetty’s sin does not belong only to her but to the whole community. This concept of communal sin and shared responsibility coincides with what Mr. Irwine says to Adam when he sees him possessed by a vengeful spirit towards Arthur. Opposing Adam’s notion of moral responsibility and retribution, Mr. Irwine says, “There is no sort of wrong deed of which a man can bear the punishment alone: you can’t isolate yourself, and say that the evil which is in you shall not spread. Men’s lives are as thoroughly blended with each other as the air they breathe: evil spreads as necessarily as disease” (469).47

It is only natural, then, that Adam Bede is able to turn his “pain into sympathy” by connecting his experience to the communal past and realizing that the past generations have suffered like him and Hetty: “‘O God,’ Adam groaned, as he leaned on the table, and looked blankly at the face of the watch, ‘and men have suffered like this before . . . and poor helpless young things have suffered like her” (472). Now that he has realized that his individual suffering is part of the continuing history of human suffering, he can have much deeper, more mature “fellow-feeling with the weakness that errs in spite of foreseen consequences” (256). Unlike Mr. Irwine or Adam, however, the Hayslope community does not realize its deep connection to Hetty and fails to see the significance of sympathizing with her. In other words, the community’s ignorance of how people’s “lives are as thoroughly blended with each other as the air they breathe” is why it cannot get past the stage of moral condemnation and learn to sympathize with Hetty.

47 Mr. Irwine’s use of the term “disease” is especially remarkable in its association with Thomas Carlyle’s critique of Victorian society in Past and Present through the story of an Irish Widow “reduced to ‘prove her sisterhood by dying of typhus-fever and infecting seventeen persons’” (1111-12).
Another significant explanation the novel offers for the Hayslope community’s inability to feel sympathy for Hetty is its sense of moral superiority that makes it blind to the fact that all human beings are morally imperfect and thus inevitably make mistakes. This idea of the universality of the errant nature of human beings constitutes the most fundamental basis of Eliot’s notion of common humanity, which dismantles the system of morality founded on the concept of just human retribution and punishment. In Eliot’s view, no human being is so morally advanced that he or she can, in judgment, “apportion the shares of moral guilt and retribution” (469). Eliot’s artistic vision to make her readers “imagine and [. . .] feel the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures” (5 July 1859) can be understood in this regard. As discussed above, making her readers transcend their personal experiences and enabling them to share feelings and thoughts of other people are the most important parts of Eliot’s moral education, and her comment on “the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures” clarifies the purpose of her sympathetic education: helping her readers realize that humans are all morally defective and that this realization alone is enough to justify the need to sympathize with a person like Hetty. Here, the phrase that “those who differ from themselves in everything” is crucial to comprehending Eliot’s characterization of Hetty and its significance in the moral assessment of her behavior. Although Hetty’s uncommonly beautiful face differentiates her from the rest of the community, the narrator at the same time stresses that deep inside there is not much difference between Hetty and any erring human creature by noting the fundamental similarity in the mental processes between “a country beauty in clumsy
shoes” and “a lady in society and crinoline, who applies her refined intellect to the
problem of committing indiscretions without compromising herself” (365). In this sense,
there is indeed no human being who deserves the kind of punishment Hetty receives from
her community. This perspective on moral justice and retribution accounts for why the
novel devotes so much space to complicating the question of Hetty’s moral responsibility
for her tragedy. Without falling into the trap of moral relativism, the novel challenges
those who look at her case from a morally superior perspective through its detailed
account of her background and situation that lead to her downfall.48

Considering that the novel presents the recognition of the errant nature of all
humans as the crucial stage in one’s sympathetic education, it is not surprising that the
most important definition of sympathy is offered through the character development of
Adam, who used to have “too little fellow-feeling with the weakness that errs in spite of
foreseen consequences” (255) but realizes through his compassion for Hetty’s suffering
that all human beings are liable to make mistakes. The following passage provides one of
Eliot’s famous definitions of sympathy through the description of the changes that have
come about in Adam’s character eighteen months after Hetty’s trial:

For Adam, though you see him quite master of himself, working hard and
delightling in his work after his inborn inalienable nature, had not outlived his
sorrow—had not felt it slip from him as a temporary burthen, and leave him the
same man again. Do any of us? God forbid. It would be a poor result of all our
anguish and our wrestling, if we won nothing but our old selves at the end of
it—if we could return to the same blind loves, the same self-confident blame,

48 The narrator’s justification of her characterization of Mr. Irwine in Chapter 17 can be understood in the
similar context: acknowledging that even a benign character like Mr. Irwine does have significant moral
flaws, the narrator stresses that “It is more needful that I should have a fibre of sympathy connecting me
with that vulgar citizen . . . more needful that my heart should swell with loving admiration at some trait of
gentle goodness in the faulty people . . . than at the deeds of heroes whom I shall never know except by
hearsay” (225).
the same light thoughts of human suffering, the same frivolous gossip over blighted human lives, the same feeble sense of that Unknown towards which we have sent forth irrepressible cries in our loneliness. Let us rather be thankful that our sorrow lives in us as an indestructible force, only changing its form, as forces do, and passing from pain into sympathy. (531) (my emphasis)

The narrator’s emphasis on the transformative power of sorrow in this passage implies that Adam’s sympathetic capacities were quite limited in the past and that without his “anguish and . . . wrestling,” he could not have fully developed his sympathetic mind. Here, sympathy is defined as something that can be learned and acquired, as it is in Wordsworth’s poetics of sympathy. In addition, the definition of sorrow, the basic material of sympathy, “as an indestructible force” suggests that like Wordsworth, Eliot understands sympathy not simply as an emotional state but as a power or a faculty. The phrase, “from pain into sympathy,” is particularly significant because it is unique to Eliot’s notion of sympathy. It expresses the idea that one needs to know what pain is in order to learn to sympathize with others’ pain. In other words, a true understanding of other people comes only from the knowledge and experience of pain and suffering, because without an experience of pain, no one can escape the dangers of “blind loves,” “self-confident blame,” “light thoughts of human suffering,” “frivolous gossip over blighted human lives,” and a feeble sense of the divine power. In addition to clarifying what counts as “genuine sympathy” for Eliot, this list of “antonyms” of sympathy explains the connection between the Hayslope community’s moral condemnation of Hetty and its inability to sympathize with her by illustrating the potential problems that can be caused by its treatment of Hetty based on its sense of moral superiority.

49 The experience of suffering and pain is also important in Wordsworth’s theory of sympathy, but it is not as much emphasized.
Given the novel’s investment in the theme of sympathy, it seems to make much sense that the novel is named after the character who achieves the most remarkable growth in the faculty of sympathy. It does not mean, however, that Eliot endorses the Hayslope community’s way of remembering and re-constructing Hetty’s story, which practically displaces her story by Adam’s story. In the following passage, the narrator describes how the community remembers and tells Hetty’s story:

In the broad sunlight of the great hall, among the sleek shaven faces of other men, the marks of suffering in [Adam’s] face were startling even to Mr Irwine, who had last seen him in the dim light of his small room; and the neighbours from Hayslope who were present, and who told Hetty Sorrel’s story by their firesides in their old age, never forgot to say how it moved them when Adam Bede, poor fellow, taller by the head than most of the people round him, came into court, and took his place by her side. (476)

In this portrayal of Adam’s appearance in the courtroom, there is a shift from the narrative present to the narrative future—that is, the narrator is recording the community’s memory of Adam Bede, whose look of pain apparently invoked a surge of compassionate feelings in the minds of those present in the scene. Interestingly, the story the community tells the next generation is called “Hetty Sorrel’s story,” not Adam Bede’s story, while the novel itself is titled “Adam Bede,” which clearly distinguishes the story transmitted by the community and the one that the readers are reading at the present moment. It is also noticeable that those who tell “Hetty Sorrel’s story” are “by their firesides in their old age,” which indicates that these people have had a “personal” relationship with Hetty and consequently “intimate” knowledge of her. As is evident from the cozy and comfortable atmosphere of the storytelling, however, they seem quite
safely distanced from her story.\textsuperscript{50} Another remarkable thing about “Hetty Sorrel’s story” that the community tells is that the focus falls on Adam Bede’s suffering, rather than on Hetty’s, which implies that the community is deliberately evading the need to deal with Hetty’s tragedy, being unwilling to admit its own part in it. Even though the community calls the story “Hetty Sorrel’s story,” except for the main events, the story re-constructed in the storytelling process is practically Adam Bede’s story.

Another description of the way the community remembers Hetty’s story further illuminates the nature of the Hayslope community’s memory and the function of communal storytelling. On the morning when Hetty’s execution is scheduled, the narrator describes how Hetty and Dinah make “a sight that some people remembered better even than their own sorrows” (507). These people might be watching out of curiosity or out of sympathy, but regardless, that “some people remembered better even than their own sorrows” is a striking statement in its implication that Hetty’s story in fact constitutes the innermost part of people’s memory. Despite the community’s effort to erase its painful and disturbing memory of Hetty through its focus on the heroic and virtuous side of Adam, it is apparently not something it can dispose of or get over easily. This might be why the whole community is so enthusiastic about Adam’s and Dinah’s wedding: the community is trying to make up for its failure to sympathize with Hetty by showing “eager interest on [Dinah’s] marriage morning, for nothing like Dinah and the history which had brought her and Adam Bede together had been known at Hayslope within the memory of man” (577). Although Hetty’s name is not explicitly mentioned here, it is

\textsuperscript{50} One can easily guess what sort of moral lesson is superimposed in the process of communal storytelling—probably not much different from the ending of Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market.”
undeniably Hetty whose “history which had brought [Dinah] and Adam Bede together,” and the community is evidently aware of it. Still, Hetty’s name is not fit to be brought up on this joyous occasion. The community’s distancing way of coping with its memory of Hetty accounts for why Eliot emphasizes the distinction between the community’s “Hetty Sorrel’s story” and her novel Adam Bede so much: by highlighting the problems with the way Hetty’s community mis/remembers her through the comparison between two different stories about Hetty, Eliot shows her readers the power of memory and the importance of proper use of it. The misguided use of memory results in falling “too readily into such over-easy conventions of judgment” (Mooneyham 39), which is simply the antithesis of sympathy.

It is therefore obvious that the Hayslope community’s way of reading “Hetty Sorrel’s story,” which clearly reveals the limitations in its ability to sympathize with its members, should be avoided. The question of what is the “correct” way of reading “Hetty Sorrel’s story” still remains, however. Readers are evidently invited to think about what it means to read Hetty’s story with a sympathetic mind, and the novel’s intense critique of Hayslope’s sense of moral superiority provides an important clue to the question of how to develop feelings of genuine sympathy for Hetty. At the same time, the novel does not allow the readers to settle the question too easily. As Stephen Gill has aptly pointed out, despite the novel’s obvious investment in the topic of sympathy, Adam Bede is not “a novel which invites one to identify closely with any one figure” (22), and this is especially the case with Hetty. Though readers are excessively asked to sympathize with Hetty, she is clearly not a likeable character. Moreover, in spite of the novel’s warning
against the Hayslope community’s complete inability to sympathize with Hetty’s suffering through the concepts of communal sin and communal payment, the narrator does not seem too sympathetic toward Hetty. Even when he says his “heart bleeds for her” (435), he sounds oddly distanced. Also, even in his description of Hetty’s ordeal that is supposed to appeal most to the readers’ sympathy, he has to mention her “narrow heart and narrow thoughts [with] no room in them for any sorrows but her own” (435). He even tries to remind the readers of their distance from her by saying “God preserve you and [him] from being the beginners of such misery!” (435). The narrator’s attempt to prevent readers from becoming completely immersed in Hetty’s intense moments of sorrow presents a serious challenge when readers attempt to feel for her suffering and pain. To make things more complicated, even though Hetty’s infanticide is the germ of the novel, the novel is titled “Adam Bede,” and the development of Adam’s romantic relationship with Dinah does to a certain extent shift the focus of the novel from Hetty to Adam and Dinah. In other words, not only the Hayslope community but also the narrative of the novel displaces Hetty’s story by Adam’s, although not in the same manner, and the readers are left to deal with a troubling ending of the novel in which Hetty’s disappearance from both the community and the narrative is celebrated.

In examining the significance of the narrative disposal of Hetty in Eliot’s sympathetic education of readers, a close analysis of the relationship between Hetty and Dinah is necessary. A common interpretation of the relationship between Hetty and Dinah is that Hetty is “rescued by Dinah, whose Methodism has been nurtured in a bleak industrial town and who recognizes no distinctions of rank” (Harris 42). Dinah, who has
spent most of her life “among the sick and the mourning, among minds hardened and shriveled through poverty and ignorance” (158), is indeed one of the most sympathetic characters in the novel, and it is true that she goes to Hetty’s rescue when no one dares to reach out to her and gives “the human contact” that Hetty can hold on to in the prison. Dinah’s rescue, however, turns out ineffectual, for there is no hint in the novel that Hetty’s soul or mind is saved. More importantly, on a symbolic level, Dinah’s existence conflicts with Hetty’s. Specifically, Dinah’s conjugal union with Adam is almost contingent upon Hetty’s expulsion from the community, and Dinah in effect replaces Hetty within the narrative. Although Hetty herself does not think too highly of Adam, Adam is presented as a very desirable match who is endorsed by the entire community, and his marriage to Dinah “restores” the order of the community that has been disrupted by Hetty’s sin.

Dinah and Hetty are in fact always pitted against each other in terms of their sexual attractiveness, as is demonstrated by Mrs. Poyser’s remark about how “The men ’ud never run after Dinah as they would after Hetty” (235). Adam’s perception of Dinah in his first personal encounter with her also illustrates the contrasting nature of the relationship between Dinah and Hetty: “It was like dreaming of the sunshine, and awakening in the moonlight” (161). The description of Dinah’s and Hetty’s physical appearances in their bedrooms in Chapter 15 offers an even clearer picture of their “special” relationship:

What a strange contrast the two figures made! Visible enough in that mingled twilight and moon light. Hetty, her cheeks flushed and her eyes glistening from her imaginary drama, her beautiful neck and arms bare, her hair hanging in a curly tangle down her back, and the baubles in her ears. Dinah, covered with her
long white dress, her pale face full of subdued emotion, almost like a lovely corpse into which the soul has returned charged with sublimier secrets and a sublimer love. They were nearly of the same height; Dinah evidently a little the taller as she put her arm round Hetty’s waist, and kissed her forehead. (204)

Although Dinah is “evidently a little the taller” and makes a gesture of sympathy by “put[ting] her arm round Hetty’s waist, and kiss[ing] her forehead,” the curiously complementary nature of their beauty is quite prominent. The description of Hetty is very sensual. It focuses on the most essentially feminine parts of her body such as her bare neck and arms or her hair, but mainly with the goal of pointing out her vanity and shallow nature. More specifically, though her cheeks are “flushed” and her eyes are “glistening,” it is not from feelings of love or deep passion, but from “her imaginary drama” where she has been playing the role of a high-class lady with nothing but superficial qualities. Dinah, on the other hand, is compared to a “corpse.” No matter how “lovely” or “charged with sublimier secrets and a sublimer love,” a corpse lacks bodily warmth, and at this point in the narrative, Dinah is not quite a match for Adam. It is almost as if Dinah’s lack of liveliness compensates for Hetty’s excessive sensuality.

51 Other examples that illustrate Hetty’s vain and shallow nature abound in the novel: “the essence of vanity being a reference to the impressions produced on others; you will never understand women’s natures if you are so excessively rational. Try rather to divest yourself of all your rational prejudices, as much as if you were studying the psychology of a canary bird, and only watch the movements of this pretty round creature as she turns her head on one side with an unconscious smile at the earrings nestled in the little box” (294).

52 Pointing out the prevalence of the pictorial representation of dead women in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European culture, Elisabeth Bronfen argues that the feminine corpse served as a site for the surviving man’s self-articulation. Although there is no male spectator of Dinah in this scene, Bronfen’s account of the cultural significance of the image of the dead woman’s corpse provides an interesting perspective on Dinah’s image as “a lovely corpse.” Despite the richness of her signification, when it comes to her relation to Adam, Dinah needs to be “resuscitated” in order to be his bride. What I find particularly interesting about this process is that it occurs in conjunction with Hetty’s loss of sensuality.
Given this compensatory relationship between Dinah and Hetty, Dinah’s long absence from Hayslope is not a mere coincidence. After this encounter with Hetty, Dinah disappears from the narrative and does not come back until the prison scene where they stand facing each other once again, this time to have their faces merge into one: “The light got fainter as they stood, and when at last they sat down on the straw pallet together, their faces had become indistinct” (493). This is no doubt a climactic moment of sympathy, and as stated earlier, Eliot had this scene in mind as the climax of the novel when she began writing it. Ironically, however, instead of being reintegrated into the community through this sympathetic exchange with Dinah, Hetty disappears from the narrative for good soon after this scene.

Adam’s observation of the changes in Dinah’s appearance later in the narrative indicates that Hetty’s bodily charm might have been transferred to Dinah at the moment their faces have become indistinct: “It struck him with surprise; for the grey eyes, usually so mild and grave, had the bright uneasy glance which accompanies suppressed agitation, and the slight flush in her cheeks, with which she had come down stairs, was heightened to a deep rose-colour. She looked as if she were only sister to Dinah” (528). Dinah’s transformation is so drastic that she does not even look like herself, and what brought about this change is obviously her self-consciousness as a woman. Quite interestingly, the description of her complexion and eyes exactly corresponds to the picture of Hetty in Chapter 15: just like Hetty’s cheeks, Dinah’s cheeks have “the slight flush” which develops into “a deep rose-color; just as Hetty’s eyes are “glistening,” Dinah’s grey eyes have “the bright uneasy glance.” This uncanny resemblance, again, suggests that Dinah
can be eligible for marriage to Adam and thus become an integral part of the Hayslope community only after Hetty loses her space in the community. Not incidentally, Dinah’s passion for public preaching seems to diminish after Hetty’s disappearance from the narrative. After her marriage to Adam, Dinah gives up her preaching without too much trouble and takes up a role that is more “appropriate” for a woman in traditional rural society, completing her integration into Hayslope.

The complementary relationship between Dinah and Hetty complicates the process of readers’ sympathetic identification with Hetty and consequently their reading of “Hetty Sorrel’s story.” Without Dinah who virtually takes Hetty’s place as the protagonist’s romantic partner, Hetty’s banishment from the community—and from the narrative—would be much more noticeable, and readers might feel more obliged to pay attention to her suffering caused by other characters’ lack of sympathy for her situation. Dinah’s presence in the narrative, however, turns our attention away from Hetty’s miserable situation and directs it at the resolution of Adam’s suffering and pain, especially towards the end of the novel. In this sense, oddly enough, the novel’s ending seems to adopt the Hayslope community’s way of remembering Hetty’s story, in which the painful memories of Hetty are replaced by Adam’s story. Here lies the important function of the doubling of Hetty and Dinah in Eliot’s education of readers in sympathy. By drawing a parallel between the Hayslope community’s reading of Hetty’s story and readers’ tendency to enjoy the “happy” ending of the novel, the complementary relationship between Hetty and Dinah disrupts any sense of superiority readers might have over the community and thus challenges the readers tempted to settle down for an
“easy” solution for the problem of sympathy presented in the novel.\textsuperscript{53} It might be easy to criticize Hayslope’s unsympathetic treatment of Hetty, but it is not such an easy task to figure out how to avoid it and learn to sympathize with her.

This brings us back to the question of what is the proper way of reading Hetty’s story in reading the novel titled \textit{Adam Bede}. Instead of providing any definite answer to the question, Eliot focuses on making readers grow self-conscious about their ways of relating to characters and reading stories about them, and in so doing, she draws on readers’ memory of the narrative. Here, it is necessary to understand the significance of memory in comprehending Eliot’s theory about the developmental process of the faculty of sympathy. Earlier, I discussed how the phrase, “from pain into sympathy,” draws attention to the transformative power of pain and suffering. Pain, however, does not automatically metamorphose into sympathy\textsuperscript{54}; it requires the processing of the memory of pain as well as the realization of its power.\textsuperscript{55} Adam’s recognition of the presence and power of painful memories in his mind on the morning of Hetty’s trial in Chapter 42 illustrates this point particularly well. Feeling for the first time “powerless to contemplate irremediable evil and suffering” (471), Adam realizes that:

Deep, unspeakable suffering may well be called a baptism, a regeneration, the initiation into a new state. The yearning memories, the bitter regret, the agonised sympathy, the struggling appeals to the Invisible Right—all the intense emotions which had filled the days and nights of the past week, and were compressing themselves again like an eager crowd into the hours of this single morning, made Adam look back on all the previous years as if they had been a dim sleepy

\textsuperscript{53} In this regard, Corbett’s argument that “Eliot frequently invites her audience to read in one way and then changes direction in midstream” (294) can be applied also to the reading of the relationship between Hetty and Dinah.

\textsuperscript{54} Hetty is a good example of this.

\textsuperscript{55} Here is another significant influence of Wordsworth’s theory of sympathy on that of Eliot. As discussed in the previous chapter, Wordsworth’s theory about the role of memory in the development of sympathy is best articulated in his autobiography \textit{The Prelude}. 

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existence, and he had only now awaked to full consciousness. It seemed to him as if he had always before thought it a light thing that man should suffer; as if all that he had himself endured, and called sorrow before, was only a moment’s stroke that had never left a bruise. Doubtless a great anguish may do the work of years, and we may come out from that baptism of fire with a soul full of new awe and new pity. (471-72)

This passage describes Adam at the initial stage of his sympathetic education, and his pain has not yet been fully developed into sympathy—as stated earlier, for him it takes about eighteen months—but it effectively demonstrates through the symbol of baptism of fire what triggers the process of the transformation of memories into sympathy. In defining “[d]eep, unspeakable suffering” as “a baptism, a regeneration, the initiation into a new state,” Eliot implies that intolerable, incomprehensible agony can cause all our past memories to surface to the level of consciousness and present them in a new light, correcting our view of sorrow as “only a moment’s stroke that ha[s] never left a bruise.” The image of “a bruise” is especially interesting because by expressing the effects of suffering in physiological terms, Eliot stresses its potential power; though we might be unaware of the effects of our suffering and sorrow on us, it does not mean that they are not there. On a similar note, expressions like “new awe” and “new pity” suggest that there have been awe and pity all along that only needed an occasion to be awakened and then sublimated into a new state. Here lies the significance of memory: our “old” awe and “old” pity exist in the form of memory.

The multiple memory processes that readers go through reading the novel can be understood in this regard. First, readers share the protagonist Adam’s memory of Hetty’s suffering as well as his own suffering through their identification with Adam’s “baptism of fire.” Second, readers to some extent identify with the community’s troubled memory
of Hetty—after all, readers do delight in Adam and Dinah’s happy union, which points to their implicit involvement in the community’s erasure of Hetty. Finally, readers have a memory process of their own which prevents them from “sublimating” their memory of Hetty into something else too soon. This particular memory process is possible because the readers’ memory is affected by differing spans of the passage of time. More specifically, unlike Adam and Dinah (or other members of the community), readers do not have eighteen months to go through the process of transformation—their memory of Hetty’s suffering and pain is, relatively speaking, too recent. The readers’ “unprocessed” memory of Hetty’s suffering along with other memories they identify with makes them stay aware of the multiple layers of consciousness that are crucial to the formation of sympathetic feelings. In other words, all these memory processes that occur simultaneously make readers distance themselves from their own feelings for and thoughts about Hetty and her story, the potential material of sympathy, and thereby raise the consciousness of their conflicting views of Hetty. Readers’ critical awareness of the process of their sympathetic minds is significant because it helps them possibly resist the narrative progression that could inevitably produce false sympathy—readers can neither attempt to impose a moral lesson on Hetty’s story from a distanced position as the Hayslope community does nor simply criticize the community’s lack of sympathy for her.

Through “Hetty Sorrel’s story,” Eliot presents her readers with a serious challenge to their ways of reading and of sympathizing with characters. Although Eliot provides a definition of sympathy through Adam, which can be summed up by the phrase “from pain into sympathy,” readers are invited to engage in a much more complex process of

\footnote{Adam Bede was not published serially.}
thinking and feeling than “from pain into sympathy” in re/reading Hetty’s story. Instead of merely making readers identify with Hetty’s—or even Adam’s—pain and expecting that feeling of pain to develop into sympathy, the novel asks the readers to think about the implications of different readings of “Hetty Sorrel’s story,” including their own. As discussed above, not only the morally judgmental community of Hayslope, but also the narrative progression of the novel attempts to displace Hetty’s story by a less painful story to read—specifically, Adam’s story with a happy ending. At the same time, the novel highlights the disturbing nature of the displacement of Hetty’s story and invites readers to come up with a different way of reading the story, promoting the self-consciousness of their reading and sympathetic processes.

Here, two curious things are noticeable about Eliot’s theory of sympathy presented in Adam Bede. First, sympathy is generally thought of in relation to feelings or emotions, but this is not necessarily the case in Adam Bede. For the readers of Adam Bede, thinking rather than feeling is considered essential to the development of the faculty of sympathy. As suggested in the previous chapter, Wordsworth’s emphasis on meditation in one’s sympathetic education demonstrates that sympathy is understood as an intellectual as well as an emotional ability also in Wordsworth’s theory of sympathy. By constantly encouraging readers to grow suspicious of their immediate emotional responses to characters or narrative events and consider them from different moral perspectives, however, Eliot puts more emphasis on the operation of the intellectual side of the mind in the development of sympathy. The second interesting thing about Eliot’s theory of sympathy is that her attempt to raise readers’ self-awareness of the process of
their sympathetic minds almost seems to undermine the concept of common humanity, turning sympathy into a struggle with oneself. Sympathy is presumably about the relationship between two people, but for the readers of *Adam Bede*, it ultimately becomes a relationship between one and oneself. This seemingly weakened faith in the idea of common humanity might be related to Eliot’s understanding of what the failure of sympathy in rural communities signifies. The bond of humanity was indeed breaking down, and in order to restore that bond, Eliot possibly thought that her readers needed a clearer understanding of their own sympathetic minds. Eliot’s emphasis on the need to reconsider a relationship between one and oneself perhaps explains the autobiographical nature of Eliot’s next novel *The Mill on the Floss*, in which the same theme of the conflict between individual members and rural communities is foregrounded.


“‘They’re such children for the water, mine are,!’” cries Maggie’s mother, Mrs. Tulliver, “‘They’ll be brought in dead and drowned someday. I wish that river was far enough’” (166). As if to fulfill Mrs. Tulliver’s “prophecy” about her children’s drowning, Maggie suffers an unexpected death in a flood of the river Floss along with her brother Tom at the end of the novel. Unable to find an adequate explanation for Maggie’s sudden death, many critics argue that Eliot uses an external calamity as a way of extricating her protagonist from a situation that cannot be resolved within the narrative. Ignês Sodré, for example, believes that the novel’s ending is forced and unnatural and that Eliot “concludes Maggie’s story with an external catastrophe, a great flood . . . to allow the
guilty Maggie to die heroically and therefore to be admired, forgiven, and loved” (196).

A close look at Maggie’s situation right before her death explains why the novel’s ending seems so unnatural. As the river Floss is about to flood into her room in the middle of the night, Maggie is reading a letter from her lover Stephen Guest, who used to be her cousin Lucy’s lover. A few weeks earlier in the narrative, Maggie has supposedly “eloped” with Stephen, but she has finally resisted the “Great Temptation” to consent to his insistent proposal of marriage and has returned alone to the town of St Ogg. In his letter to Maggie, Stephen vehemently blames Maggie for her “perverted notion of right which led her to crush all his hopes” (647). Torn between her love for him and her moral scruples about loving her cousin’s lover, Maggie cries out in agony, “‘I will bear it, and bear it till death. . . . But how long it will be before death comes! I am so young, so healthy. How shall I have patience and strength?’” (649). Ironically, at the very moment Maggie laments the prospect of her “long” and “healthy” life, death announces itself and puts an end to all her moral conflicts. This is why most critics are at a loss for how to explain the abrupt ending of Maggie’s internal struggles and even argue that the novel is flawed because of its ending.

The symbolic meaning of the way Maggie dies, however, challenges such a simple understanding of the novel’s conclusion. Although Maggie’s death is quite unexpected and sudden in terms of plot development, there are numerous hints at Maggie’s drowning within the narrative including the town legend of St Ogg, and my proposition is that through these hints, the novel sets up a significant, albeit implicit, connection between Maggie’s death and her community’s lack of sympathy. Even though
Maggie’s transgression against communal norms is supposedly less serious than Hetty’s and is out of the boundary of human, if not divine, laws—Maggie’s transgression does not at least involve homicide—Maggie’s community turns out as relentless and unsympathetic as Hetty’s, and Eliot strongly criticizes her community’s lack of sympathy. What is puzzling, however, is that nature serves as the primary medium of Maggie’s death, almost as if to support the St Ogg’s community’s moral condemnation of Maggie’s behavior. Maggie’s death in a flood is actually quite ironic, considering Eliot’s view of nature as a source of human love and sympathy. If Adam Bede traces Adam’s growth as a sympathetic person to illustrate Eliot’s theory of the developmental process of sympathy, The Mill on the Floss focuses mainly on Maggie’s childhood in nature as well as her childhood memories of nature. Therefore, in my examination of Eliot’s problematization of the common notion of sympathy in The Mill on the Floss, I will first discuss Eliot’s theory of the role of childhood memories in the development of sympathetic imagination as represented in the description of Maggie’s and Tom’s childhood. Through the comparison of Maggie and Tom in their adulthood, I will also look at Eliot’s theory of how people become cut off from sympathy as well as how they nurture it, which I believe is significant in understanding the failure of sympathy in the St Ogg’s community, a rural community supposedly close to nature. I will then investigate Maggie’s troubled relationship to her rural community and consider how it illuminates the problematics of the ending in which Maggie suffers an unexpected death in the river Floss.
Before we examine Eliot’s rendering of childhood memories in *The Mill on the Floss*, it is important to understand the autobiographical nature of the novel. As A.S. Byatt points out in her introduction to the novel, even though *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857-8) and *Adam Bede* also draw on people and places from the Warwickshire where her father Robert Evans served as a clergyman, *The Mill on the Floss* contains “personal material” (8) (italics Byatt’s) that gives itself a “recognizable, peculiarly autobiographical quality” (9) which neither of the other two novels has. The most important autobiographical element is perhaps the relationship between Tom and Maggie Tulliver as children, which is quite similar to that between Eliot and her brother Isaac, who, like Tom, was rigorously just and severe and later “judged his sister’s passionate aberrations from conventional behavior harshly” (Byatt 9). Emphasizing the significance of the subject of a brother-sister relationship in the novel, Ignês Sodré states that “[the] relationship with this profoundly loved older brother seems to have remained in George Eliot’s mind as an ideal image of closeness and happiness” (195). It is true that Eliot’s description of childhood memories revolves around Maggie and Tom as children and that their relationship is crucial to comprehending Eliot’s view of sympathy. As Janice Carlisle aptly observes, however, *The Mill on the Floss* achieves its status as an autobiographical text not simply because it reflects some facts of Eliot’s personal life (179), but because Eliot *self-consciously* fictionalizes her own childhood in it, providing insight into the human mind as both the perceiver and the object of perception.
The opening chapter, where the mysterious “I” narrator daydreams about “standing on the bridge in front of Dorlcote Mill” (55), effectively encapsulates what Eliot perceives to be important features of childhood memories. First of all, the narrator’s description of the landscape around the mill in his or her reverie points to Eliot’s belief in the continuing presence of childhood memories as a power to affect our present perception of the world. As is evident from the following passage, the narrator provides quite a vivid description of the scenery that gives an impression that the narrator is beholding it even as he or she is writing it.

As I look at the full stream, the vivid grass, the delicate bright-green powder softening the outline of the great trunks and branches that gleam from under the bare purple boughs, I am in love with moistness, and envy the white ducks that are dipping their heads far into the water here among the withes—unmindful of the awkward appearance they make in the drier world above. (54)

In addition to providing detailed observations of the landscape, the narrator uses the present verb tense, making the narrator’s emotional reactions to “the full stream,” “moistness,” or “the white ducks” seem like those of the present moment. Besides, the constant reference to the narrator’s direct sensory experience—the narrator keeps looking at and listening to various natural phenomena while feeling “the cold stone of [the] bridge” (55)—emphasizes the sense of immediacy of the narrator’s reverie. The landscape the narrator is describing, of course, might not be an “accurate” representation of what it really looked like in the past. What is more important than the narrator’s

57 The “I” narrator’s identity is unclear, and it would be hard to assume that the reverie directly reflects the narrator’s own childhood experience. The narrator’s remark at the end of the chapter that he or she was dreaming about “one February afternoon many years ago” (55), however, intimates through its specific reference to time and place that the reverie is possibly about childhood memories.

58 As Alley correctly observes, Eliot presents for the first time in her fiction a narrator whose gender is unidentified, for “neither is ‘her’ bonnet blown off the bridge nor is ‘his’ cigar seen burning in the ashtray when he awakens” (67). I will therefore refer to the narrator in gender-neutral terms.
description of the scenery itself, however, is his or her emotional responses to it—the narrator is “in love with moistness, and [envies] the white ducks,” and also feels that “the little river” is like “a living companion” (53). 59 In other words, even though the scenery described in the reverie itself might be the construction of the narrator as an adult, the narrator’s affectionate feelings for the scenery of Dorlcote Mill are not a pure construction but something that has its roots in his or her past memories. Furthermore, the fact that the narrator’s “arms are really benumbed” because the narrator has “been pressing [his or her] elbows on the arms of [his or her] chair” (55) points to the role of bodily sensations in the recollection of childhood memories of emotions and thoughts.

Another important characteristic of childhood memories that the opening chapter indicates is that they evoke a sense of distance between childhood and adulthood. The narrator’s relationship to the little girl who has also been watching the mill is particularly significant in comprehending the sense of remoteness that childhood memories inevitably call to mind. Up to the point where the narrator mentions “[t]hat little girl,” the readers are led to believe that the narrator might be one of the characters and that he or she is physically present in the remembered scene. The narrator’s description of the little girl, however, points to the dreamlike quality of his or her narration through the obvious similarities between their situations—the little girl “has been standing on just the same spot at the edge of the water ever since [the narrator] paused on the bridge” (54-55) (my italics)—and prepares the readers for the moment of being snapped out of the narrator’s

59 The sympathetic feelings that nature inspires in this scene are similar to the sense of companionship the speaker feels in his communion with nature in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight”: “Only that film, which fluttered on the grate, / Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing. / Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature / Gives it dim sympathies with me who live, / Making it a companionable form” (ll. 15-19).
reverie. Though neither the narrator’s nor the little girl’s identity is ever revealed in the novel, the uncanny resemblance between their stances makes the little girl look like the narrator’s past self. Positing the concept of “self-duplication” as a key code of autobiography, Carlisle understands the relationship between the narrator and the little girl as an example of “a structure of reflected and proliferating images” (183) that is characteristic of an autobiographical text. Carlisle’s notion of self-reflection underscores the inevitable distance between the narrator and the little girl—without a certain distance, there could not be any reflection. It is thus no wonder that the moment the narrator notices the girl, he or she does not think of approaching the girl or addressing her, but instead prepares to leave the scene, saying that “[i]t is time the little playfellow went in” (55) and that “[i]t is time too for me to leave off resting my arms on the cold stone of this bridge” (55). Though it might be possible for the narrator to believe that he or she is actually present in the scene from the past and react emotionally to it, it is impossible even in a daydream to identify with the little girl who is possibly from his or her childhood memories, which implies that there is a radical gap between childhood and adulthood. The aesthetic distancing between the narrator and the little girl is also significant in comprehending the implications of Eliot’s decision to deal with the theme of childhood memories and sympathy in the novel form. Although the awareness of the distance between the self observed and the self observing is also crucial in Wordsworth’s self-representation in *The Prelude*, Eliot’s fictionalization of her childhood memories in

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60 The “queer white cur with the brown ear,” “the beaver bonnet,” and the stance of rapt attention the girl assumes correspond to the images of Maggie as a child, but at the same time, there is no explicit explanation of the little girl’s identity.
The Mill on the Floss presupposes much more distance between the author and the object of representation, redirecting readers’ attention to the question of sympathetic relationships among characters.

The narrator’s comments on the significance of Tom’s and Maggie’s childhood and their childhood memories elaborate on these ideas about childhood presented in the opening chapter:

It was one of their happy mornings. They trotted along and sat down together with no thought that life would ever change much for them: they would only get bigger and not go to school, and it would always be like the holidays . . . Life did change for Tom and Maggie; and yet they were not wrong in believing that the thoughts and loves of these first years would always make part of their lives. We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had not childhood in it,—if it were not the earth where the same flowers come up again every spring that we used to gather with our tiny fingers as we sat lisping to ourselves on the grass—the same hips and haws on the autumn hedgerows—the same redbreasts that we used to call ‘God’s birds’ because they did no harm to the precious crops. What novelty is worth that sweet monotony where everything is known and loved because it is known. . . These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-notes, this sky with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grassy fields, each with a sort of personality given to it by the capricious hedgerows—such things as these are the mother tongue of our imagination, the language that is laden with all the subtle inextricable associations the fleeting hours of our childhood left behind them. Our delight in the sunshine on the deep bladed grass today, might be no more than the faint perception of wearied souls, if it were not for the sunshine and the grass in the far-off years, which still live in us and transform our perception into love. (93-94)

As children, Tom and Maggie do not have a proper sense of time and what changes its passage will bring to them. As both an adult and a person with narrative hindsight, the narrator knows that “life did change for Tom and Maggie” and that it would certainly not “always be like the holidays”—obviously, adulthood is viewed as a time of suffering and pain here. The narrator nevertheless passionately advocates their belief that their childhood memories of love will continue to hold significant power over their minds.
throughout their lives. The reason why the narrator attaches so much importance to “the thoughts and loves of these first years” is quite clearly stated: they are the most fundamental source of love. Though Eliot does not provide a specific definition of love here, the rest of the novel suggests that it includes love of humankind—in other words, sympathy. Without our memories of childhood in which we develop loving minds through spiritual communion with everything around us, we “could never have loved the earth so well” in our adulthood. What is striking about the narrator’s description of childhood memories is that they are understood as a language, which emphasizes their role as a medium. Moreover, they are not any kind of language, but “the mother tongue of our imagination.” Here, the phrase, “the mother tongue of our imagination,” is particularly noteworthy in its implications. It first of all draws attention to the role imagination plays in the transformation of “our perception into love,” which implies that our perception might not automatically turn into love without proper use of imagination. At the same time, by expressing childhood memories of love as the native language of imagination, the novel suggests that our imaginative minds cultivated in our childhood are not something that can be easily lost. This explains the trope of life used to describe the abiding power of childhood memories—for Eliot, our childhood memories do not disappear but instead are ingrained in our minds and “still live in us” whether we are conscious of their presence or not.

61 Numerous references to Percy Bysshe Shelley in *Middlemarch* suggest that Eliot read Shelley, and his definition of love as “the bond and the sanction which connects not only man with man, but with everything which exists” in his essay “On Love” seems quite relevant to Eliot’s definition of sympathy in this passage.
Eliot’s explanation of the transformative power of childhood memories is very similar to Wordsworth’s account in *The Prelude* of how his sympathetic mind has developed, especially in that both emphasize the role of nature. As discussed in the previous chapter, for Wordsworth, his love of nature in his childhood has led to his love of humankind later in his life. A close look at Tom’s and Maggie’s objects of love in the passage quoted above—they are all natural creatures such as flowers, grass, hips and haws on the autumn hedgerows, and redbreasts—reveals that Eliot shares Wordsworth’s belief in the value of learning to appreciate the beauty of nature and developing love of nature in childhood. Without this love of nature nurtured in childhood, our adult responses to the world “might be no more than the faint perception of wearied souls” (94) who are incapable of showing any feelings of sympathy for other wearied souls. The feeling of familiarity that Tom and Maggie sense in every natural creature is especially vital because it allows them to experience feelings of infinite trust, which can be transformed into more mature sentiments of sympathy in their adulthood.

This belief in the significance of childhood experiences of nature stems from the assumption that children are closer to nature and thus able to take lessons from nature without any reservation. This view of children’s intimate relation to nature points to another crucial similarity between Eliot’s and Wordsworth’s thoughts on childhood: both posit a discontinuity between childhood and adulthood. Wordsworth’s theory of the distinction between childhood and adulthood is best presented in “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,” where he contrasts children who viscerally and instinctively respond to nature with adults whose responses to nature are
not as spiritually immediate. According to Wordsworth, adults are too consumed by the
care of life to enjoy a sensual, physical, instinctive sense of oneness with nature. Eliot’s
comment on the differences between children and adults in terms of their behavior
patterns reveals quite a kindred view: “We learn to restrain ourselves as we get older. . .
We no longer approximate in our behaviour to the mere impulsiveness of the lower
animals, but conduct ourselves in every respect like members of a highly civilised
society. Maggie and Tom were still very much like young animals, and so she could rub
her cheek against his, and kiss his ear in a random, sobbing way” (91). In her focus on
animalistic features of young Maggie and Tom, Eliot clearly echoes Wordsworth’s view
of childhood as a state of simplicity and unrestrained desires. Eliot is then confronted
with the same problem as Wordsworth. If there is such a great gap between childhood
and adulthood, how can she as an adult go about representing childhood experiences
which, given her emphasis on the uniqueness of childhood experiences of nature, should
be an important part of her sympathetic education? Moreover, Eliot’s description of
childhood memories as “the language that is laden with all the subtle inextricable
associations the fleeting hours of our childhood left behind them” (italics mine)
corresponds to Wordsworth’s belief that it is impossible to analyze in retrospect the
development of love of nature in childhood.

Despite these similarities, Eliot’s representation of childhood memories is
different from Wordsworth’s in that she attaches much importance to childhood
memories of pain and suffering as well as to those of love. For Eliot, children do have
their own share of sorrow and suffering, and their pain can be as severe as that of adults.
For example, describing Maggie’s miserable state of mind when Tom severely scolds her for neglecting his rabbits and turns away from her, the narrator exclaims, “These bitter sorrows of childhood!—when sorrow is all new and strange, when hope has not yet got wings to fly beyond the days and weeks, and the space from summer to summer seems measureless” (89). By drawing attention to the newness and strangeness of sorrow for children, the narrator argues that even though little Maggie’s sorrows might seem insignificant and trivial from an adult perspective, we should not overlook the intensity of their bitterness because children have “no memories of outlived sorrow” (145) that can help them deal with sorrows of the present moment. Here, the very fact that the narrator compares an adult’s point of view on sorrow with a child’s point of view suggests that Eliot is not actually seeking to recover or recall “genuine” childhood experiences. Rather, Eliot is more interested in pursuing the question of what adults do with memories of their childhood in the development of their sympathetic minds.

The question is, why is it so important to acknowledge the reality of children’s sorrows and pain? Eliot provides an answer in the following passage which immediately follows the famous hair-cutting scene:

“Ah, my child, you will have real troubles to fret about by and by,” is the consolation we have almost all of us had administered to us in our childhood, and have repeated to other children since we have been grown up. We have all of us sobbed so piteously standing with tiny bare legs above our little socks, when we lost sight of our mother or nurse in some strange place, but we can no longer recall the poignancy of that moment till we weep over it, as we do over the remembered sufferings of five or ten years ago. Every one of those keen moments has left its trace and lives in us still, but such traces have blent themselves irrevocably with the firmer texture of our youth and manhood; and so it comes that we can look on at the troubles of our children with a smiling disbelief in the reality of their pain. Is there any one who can recover the experience of his childhood, not merely with a memory of what he did and what
happened to him, of what he liked and disliked when he was in frock and trousers, but with an intimate penetration, a revived consciousness of what he felt then. (122-23)

As mentioned above, adults think lightly of the troubles of children because they think children’s sufferings are trifling and unimportant as compared with theirs. The fact is that the sorrows and pain we suffer as children are not only real at the moment, but they live “in us still” and leave lasting traces, whose presence we forget because “such traces have blent themselves irrevocably with the firmer texture of our youth and manhood.” That traces of moments of sorrow and suffering in childhood become inextricably intertwined with our adulthood memories is significant in its implication that childhood memories have power over us in our adulthood in a way we are mostly unaware of. If we were conscious of the permanent traces those griefs would leave in their minds, we would probably not be able to “pooh-pooh the griefs of our children” (123). The phrase, “a revived consciousness,” is particularly important here, pointing to the power of childhood memories to bring back vivid sensations of pain and bitterness felt in the past and experience them again. In short, memories of pain have a life of their own that can be revived, if given the opportunity, on a conscious level.

What is striking here is that though Eliot makes a similar point about the enduring power of childhood memories of love, she does not say that childhood memories of love blend themselves permanently with adulthood memories. Instead, by calling them “the mother tongue of imagination,” Eliot emphasizes their value as a force that can transform our “pain into sympathy.” Childhood memories of pain, on the other hand, need to be sublimated into sympathetic feelings. The transformation, however, cannot occur during
childhood, because children’s experiences of pain and suffering are too direct and thus unavailable for mature reflection. As stated earlier, children do not have “memories of outlived sorrow,” and more importantly, childhood memories of pain can be recovered only on a conscious level, which is irredeemably adult. This explains why Eliot challenges the adult “disbelief in the reality of their [children’s] pain.” Whether we are aware or not, experiences of pain and sorrow in our childhood leave lasting marks on our minds and therefore need to be processed and transformed in our adulthood through the operation of childhood memories of love, especially those nurtured in nature.

Apparently, Maggie’s childhood memories of love in nature successfully perform their function of turning the traces of keen moments of sorrow and pain in her childhood into mature sentiments of sympathy, for she grows up to be a sympathetic person. Adult Maggie’s responses to fictional characters in novels, for example, effectively demonstrate the growth of her ability to sympathize with others. Explaining to Philip why she does not want to keep on reading the novel he has lent her, Maggie says that she always “care[s] the most about the unhappy people” (433) and therefore is “determined to read no more books where the blond haired women carry away all the happiness” (433), which highlights the difference between grownup Maggie and young Maggie, who is too occupied with her desire for love and attention to care about other people’s sufferings. Arguing that Maggie chooses Stephen Guest as a lover out of her envy and jealousy for her blond haired cousin Lucy, Ignês Sodré understands Maggie’s defense of dark heroines as an expression of her feelings of rivalry for Lucy, not as an expression of her sympathetic feelings for suffering people. It is true that Maggie as a child envies Lucy
and even fancies a world where she is the queen “in Lucy’s form” (117), but Sodré is not taking into account the changes in Maggie’s character that her painful experiences have brought about during her passage from childhood to adulthood. As Maggie explicitly says to Philip, she is “jealous for the dark women,” not because she is dark herself but because she “always take[s] the side of the rejected lover in the stories” (433). That is, as a person who has experienced pain and has had a chance to reflect on it, Maggie can have sympathy for “unhappy,” “rejected” people. Although it is not absolutely clear whether Maggie is safe from the danger of having superficial, effortless feelings of sympathy for characters in pain, the contrast between young Maggie and adult Maggie is very obvious, as is demonstrated by young Maggie’s naïve notion of a story that she reveals during her encounter with the gypsies: “It was just like a story: Maggie liked to be called pretty lady, and treated in this way” (173). The emotional maturity and sympathetic mind of Maggie as an adult illustrate that, unlike Hetty who fails to enter adulthood and outgrow her childish vanity and selfishness, Maggie has eventually grown out of the intense “need of love, [the] hunger of the heart” (91) that characterizes her childhood.

Unlike Maggie whose childhood memories of love and pain develop into sympathy, her brother Tom and most of her other community members fail to achieve sympathetic education, as is demonstrated in their responses to Maggie’s “violation” of communal ethics. Despite the fact that he shares most of Maggie’s earlier experiences of nature, Tom in his adulthood is a completely different person from Maggie. Extremely practical, narrow-minded, and focused only on restoring his family’s reputation, Tom is incapable of forgiving Maggie for the “disgrace” she has brought upon the family and
therefore says to her, “‘You don’t belong to me’” (612). Maggie’s townspeople’s reaction to her transgression is even more ruthless. To the St Ogg’s community, Maggie’s inner struggle with or her resistance to temptation is not a matter of concern or interest; instead, “St Ogg’s Passes Judgment” according to the fact that Maggie has returned unmarried. Commenting on the deeply hypocritical nature of the “public opinion” in St Ogg’s, the narrator points out that it is not her elopement itself but her return “without a trousseau, without a husband” (620) that makes her conduct seem detestable and heinous in the eyes of her townspeople. The fact that the absence of a trousseau is mentioned even before the absence of a husband reveals the superficiality of the community’s moral sense as well as its obsession with materiality. For Maggie’s townspeople, marriage is merely a monetary transaction, which is why they focus more on the absence of a trousseau than on the absence of a husband. The material-oriented aspect of the townspeople’s minds accounts for their wish to “purge” their community of Maggie’s physical presence, which is strikingly similar to the Hayslope community’s attitude toward Hetty: “It was to be hoped that she would go out of the neighbourhood—to America, or anywhere—so as to purify the air of St Ogg’s from the taint of her presence” (621). Here, the phrase, “to purify the air of St Ogg’s,” intimates that Maggie is seen as some kind of infectious disease, which again evokes the image of the aforementioned Irish widow in Carlyle’s essay who proved her sisterhood by infecting her unsympathetic neighbors.

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62 Although Tom in the end reconciles with Maggie in drowning, his disowning of Maggie is strongly evocative of the Poyser family’s lack of sympathy for Hetty.
63 This phrase is the title of Chapter 2 of Book 7.
The limitations of Tom’s and the St Ogg’s community’s capacity for sympathy signify that childhood experiences of nature do not necessarily guarantee the development of sympathetic minds. It is true that rustic people are more exposed to the influence of nature, but not everyone is able to realize the power of his or her childhood memories of love in nature, “the mother tongue of [their] imagination,” and use them to process childhood memories of pain “blent . . . irrevocably with the firmer texture of his or her youth and manhood.” This view of rural people’s relationship to nature explains one of the differences between Eliot and Wordsworth mentioned in the introductory part of this chapter. Whereas Wordsworth presupposes a close connection between rustic life and the ability to love nature, Eliot does not believes that rural people are automatically less corrupted and more appreciative of the power of nature than urban people. Rural people might have a better chance of developing love of nature in their childhood, but as is seen in the case of Tom, it does not mean that they all learn to acknowledge the continuing presence of childhood memories.

That said, Tom’s or the St Ogg’s community’s lack of sympathy for Maggie is not a direct cause of her tragic death, and the question of why nature becomes the instrument of her death still remains unanswered. Furthermore, the novel does not provide a clear explanation for how some people succeed in developing the faculty of sympathy while others do not. Instead of presenting a theory about how Maggie learns to turn her childhood memories of nature into sympathy, the latter half of the novel focuses on her townspeople’s lack of sympathy, and my hypothesis is that by establishing a close connection between Maggie’s community’s disrespectful attitude toward nature and her
death by nature, the novel supplies an implicit explanation for how some people come to ignore the presence of their childhood memories of nature. As mentioned earlier, the novel presents many hints at Maggie’s drowning, and these hints suggest on a symbolic level that the community is responsible for her death in a flood.64 The most obvious foreshadowing of Maggie’s death is the prediction that her mother, Mrs. Tulliver, unknowingly and frequently makes. Haunted by the fear that Maggie might drown some day, Mrs. Tulliver says to her nine-year-old daughter, “‘where’s the use o’ my telling you to keep away from the water? You’ll tumble in and be drownded some day, an’ then you’ll be sorry you didn’t do as mother told you’” (61). In her later life, although not as a conscious response to her mother’s warning, Maggie does “keep away from the water,” as is evident from the fact that she is in her room wide awake when there is a flood in the town. Nevertheless, the water finds its way to Maggie and mercilessly destroys her along with her brother Tom. Maggie’s vulnerability to the destructive power of the river suggests that a mere caution would not save her, which in turn underlines the idea that humans are not really in control of nature. The fact that Mrs. Tulliver is the one who predicts Maggie’s drowning implies that one individual’s sympathy might not be enough to save Maggie from the fury of nature out of human control. It is true that when Maggie comes back to the town of St Ogg’s “disgraced,” Mrs. Tulliver shows unconditional sympathy for Maggie, and the embrace and “one draught of simple human pity” (614) that she gives to Maggie are described as “[m]ore helpful than all wisdom” (614). When

64 Given the fact that Tom dies with Maggie, it is hard to talk about his responsibility for Maggie’s death. For this reason, I will focus on Eliot’s criticism of the community’s sense of morality in the rest of the argument.
it comes to rescuing her daughter from a mortal peril, however, Mrs. Tulliver is still helpless, which draws attention to the seriousness of the problem with the whole community’s indifference to Maggie’s ordeal.

The community’s implicit involvement in Maggie’s terrible fate is even more powerfully presented through another foreshadowing of Maggie’s death by water in the legend about St Ogg, the patron saint of the town. The legend goes that Ogg the son of Beorl was a boatman, and one day he encountered a young woman with a child in her arms who wanted to be taken across the river Floss. When no one offered help, Ogg the son of Beorl took pity on her and ferried her across the river without asking any questions. It turns out that the woman was the Blessed Virgin, who thanked him later that he “didst not question and wrangle with the heart’s need but wast smitten with pity and didst straightway relieve the same” (182) and promised that “whoso steps into thy [his] boat shall be in no peril from the storm, and whenever it puts forth to the rescue it shall save the lives both of men and beasts” (182). Here, the form the Blessed Virgin takes in the legend draws a parallel between the legend and Maggie’s story: just as Maggie is subject to her community’s judgment because of her supposed sexual transgression, a young mother without a husband is bound to suffer people’s “question[ing] and wrangl[ing] with the heart’s need.”65 In contrast with St Ogg in the legend, Maggie’s townspeople show no sympathy for Maggie but instead morally condemn her, which intimates that Maggie’s death by the flood is not unrelated to her community’s rejection of the “blessing on the boat” (122) through their unwillingness to take pity on a fellow human being in distress.

65 Not coincidentally, the image of a young woman with a child is quite reminiscent of Hetty with her baby.
The narrator’s remark that the mind of St Ogg’s “inherited a long past without thinking of it, and had no eyes for the spirits that walked the streets” (184) suggests that the discontinuity between the past and the present is largely responsible for “the want of fellowship and sense of mutual responsibility” (625) in the St Ogg’s community. In other words, the community’s neglect and ignorance of its communal past has resulted in the relaxation of sympathetic ties within the community.66 This assumption about the “naturalness” of St Ogg’s back in the past seems to suggest that Eliot accepts nineteenth-century mythologizing of rural communities of the past. A close look at the legend of St Ogg, however, reveals that Eliot’s view of the past is a little more complicated than a simplistic mystification of the ancient time. First of all, except for St Ogg, no one in the legend shows sympathy for the woman in distress, indicating that Eliot’s ancient world is not simply idealistic. Apparently, failure in sympathetic relationships is a much more serious problem in present days than it was in St Ogg’s days, for back then, one individual member’s sympathy could save the entire community. In contrast, Maggie’s mother’s sympathy for Maggie fails to save her. It is important, however, to note that Eliot’s purpose in contrasting the present with the past is not to emphasize the power of St Ogg’s sympathetic mind but to highlight the seriousness of lack of sympathy in present days. In addition, the detail that even after his death, “Ogg the son of Beorl was always seen with his boat upon the wide-spreading waters” with the Blessed Virgin beside him draws attention to how and why people came to lose the power of the “blessing on the

66 Eliot’s emphasis on acknowledging the importance of an individual’s relation to his or her communal past obviously echoes Adam’s recognition in Adam Bede that his individual suffering is part of the larger picture of human suffering.
boat” rather than to how things were better in those days. Eliot is interested more in speculating on how the discontinuity between the past and the present came about than in drawing an accurate picture of the past.

The emphasis on the significance of human beings’ intimate relationship with nature in the novel can be understood in this regard. Unlike humans who become oblivious to their past too easily, nature’s continuities retain the traces of human history, which explains why nature is considered the greatest source of love and sympathy in the novel. For Eliot, collective memory of “suffering, whether of martyr or victim, which belongs to every historical advance of mankind” (363) constitutes the basis of human sympathy through its stress on the universality of the erring nature of human beings, and consequently nature, that stores collective memory by uniting with the material, cultural landscape of human communities, provides a way to reconnect to the foundation of moral feelings.67 The description of collective memory lodged in the physical environment of St Ogg’s effectively demonstrates that Eliot finds a reason for the community’s failure in connecting to its communal past in its inability to communicate with, and learn from, nature:

It is one of those old, old towns, which impress one as a continuation and outgrowth of nature as much as the nests of the bower birds or the winding galleries of the white ants: a town which carries the traces of its long growth and history, like a millennial tree, and has sprung up and developed in the same spot between the river and the low hill from the time when the Roman legions turned their backs on it from the camp on the hill-side, and the long-haired sea-kings came up the river and looked with fierce, eager eyes at the fatness of the land. It is a town “familiar with forgotten years.” (181)

67 This is why Eliot attaches so much importance to childhood experiences of nature. As discussed earlier, children can have more immediate communion with nature than adults.
The most striking characteristic of the town of St. Ogg’s is its appearance as a “continuation and outgrowth of nature,” and the town is aptly compared to a tree. The comparison of the town to a tree that “carries the traces of its long growth and history” is particularly significant in that it points to the enduring presence and power of the communal past. Despite its oldness and the gift of nature that records all its history, the town of St. Ogg’s is described as “a town ‘familiar with forgotten years.’” The phrase “familiar with forgotten years” emphasizes the contrast between nature and human beings in their relations to human history. Though the material part of the town is still familiar with its past history, its inhabitants have long forgotten its significance and presence in their lives. The consequence of the townspeople’s ignorance of their communal past is clearly illustrated in the superficiality of their moral sense shown in their treatment of Maggie. Alienated from the place as well as its history, people ignore the presence of their past along with a sense of “obligation which has its roots in the past” (625).

The question, then, is how the townspeople of St Ogg’s came to lose contact with nature. In the passage following the account of the legend about St Ogg, the narrator provides an explanation for how the disruption of the St Ogg’s community’s close relation to nature came about:

This legend, one sees, reflects from a far-off time the visitation of the floods, which even when they left human life untouched, were widely fatal to the helpless cattle, and swept as sudden death over all smaller living things. But the town knew worse troubles even than the floods: troubles of the civil wars when it was a continual fighting place where first puritans thanked God for the blood of the loyalists and then loyalists thanked God for the blood of the puritans. (183)

68 This phrase is originally from William Wordsworth’s *The Excursions*. 
The main reason why the town forgot about the great power of nature manifested by “the visitation of the floods” is that it encountered “worse troubles than the floods.” Though nature is an important source of love, it at the same time has the power to destroy humans, and the two different sides of the river Floss are a great example. On the one hand, the river Floss is represented as a force that “flows for ever onward and links the small pulse of the old English town in the beatings of the world’s mighty heart” (363). On the other hand, when it is out of control, the river can destroy almost every living creature. The important thing is that whether constructive or destructive, the power of nature to affect human lives should not be underestimated. That hardly anyone in St Ogg’s pays attention to the town legend and its message about sympathy and the power of nature emphasizes the gap between the past and the present. As the narrator suggests, the legend about St Ogg and the Blessed Virgin can be seen as a human attempt to understand the awe-inspiring power of nature, and the fact that they made up a legend about floods suggests that at an earlier point in history, people were able to appreciate the overwhelming power of nature. Even when the floods did not directly affect human life, the realization of the deadly effects of the floods on “the helpless cattle” and “all smaller living things”—in other words, sympathy learned from animals’ suffering—made humans become aware of the power of nature and thus maintain an intimate relation with it. The appearance of “worse troubles even than the floods,” however, turned people’s attention away from nature and ultimately led them to undervalue its power. That “worse troubles even than the floods” are none other than wars among humans points to the close connection between a loss of sympathetic feelings for fellow human beings and the
failure in paying due deference to nature and seeking communion with it. The example of puritans and loyalists who thanked the same God for the blood of each other suggests that a loss of contact with nature can even result in alienation from the object of religious worship. It is an interesting example also because it demonstrates that the historical processes Eliot criticizes for having disrupted the stability of rural communities are not in fact limited to industrialization or urbanization in the eighteenth or nineteenth century but date farther back in human history.

Given the significance of nature, it seems reasonable that the flood is the cause of Maggie’s death, because it makes the St Ogg’s community’s complicity in her death even more obvious. The townspeople’s ignorance of the power of nature—both constructive and destructive—has led to their lack of sympathy, and nature gives them a warning against their indifference to their fellow member’s suffering by killing that member. One might argue that it would be more “logical” to destroy those who lack sympathy. Yet, by leaving unsympathetic townspeople intact and letting them keep on living without realizing their responsibility for Maggie’s death, the novel illustrates even more emphatically the seriousness of the problem of sympathy in rural communities, pointing to Eliot’s pessimism about the possibility of sympathy, at least on the level of plot.

Another important indication of Eliot’s pessimistic view of sympathy is the parallel between the St Ogg’s community’s dismissal of its past and the adult ignorance of the continuing presence of childhood memories of love in nature. As mentioned above, the novel does not clearly explain why and how some people fail to learn from the lesson of nature and nurture sympathy. Through the parallel between the community of St Ogg’s
in present days and the phase of adulthood, however, the novel intimates that most adults are bound to forget about the abiding existence and power of their childhood memories and that it is a very challenging task to overcome that tendency. As discussed in the previous paragraph, the legend of St Ogg suggests that though people used to appreciate the power of nature in the past, they grew oblivious to it as they got caught up in concerns of human society, such as “troubles of the civil wars.” That is to say, the St Ogg’s community’s inability to sympathize with Maggie is only a small part of a much bigger, more serious problem that concerns the progress of human history that has alienated humans from nature. Despite Eliot’s interest in how the discontinuity between the past and the present happened, the novel does not point to any specific historical process as a major cause of humans’ loss of respect for the awesome power of nature, implying that human alienation from nature is more or less an inevitable consequence of the formation of human society. The aforementioned “modern fragmentation” caused by historical changes such as industrialization might have facilitated the process of alienation, but it is not a direct cause. Given the parallel between St Ogg’s at present time and the stage of adulthood, this view of the progress of human history indirectly conveys the idea that as children grow up and immerse themselves in practical concerns of adult life, they are very likely to lose touch with their childhood memories of love and miss an opportunity to develop sympathy. Eliot does not deny that there are occasionally found a few sympathetic people, but at the same time, she emphasizes that there are indeed only a few and that it is virtually impossible to trace the process of their education. As stated
earlier, the novel does not explain how Maggie overcomes her childish desire for affection and turns out sympathetic; instead, it draws attention to the gap between childhood and adulthood as well as the difficulty of representing childhood.

Eliot’s pessimism about the possibility of sympathy expressed on the level of plot of course does not need to be taken as her despair at the possibility of educating her readers in sympathy. What then is her strategy for making her readers realize the power of “the mother tongue of [their] imagination” and learn to use it to nurture sympathy? Eliot does not claim that her novel can accomplish such a thing. However, as a starting point in making her readers realize how they are mistaken about their capacity for sympathy, Eliot presents a situation in the novel that baffles her readers’ understanding and encourages them to think. If Adam Bede makes readers think about the implications of different readings of Hetty, The Mill on the Floss challenges readers to rethink their assumptions about sympathy and human communities through the failure of sympathetic exchanges between Maggie and the St Ogg’s community. Earlier in the chapter, I briefly discussed how sympathy is usually understood as the foundation of society and what it means for Eliot to depict the failure of sympathy in rural communities. In The Mill on the Floss, Eliot radically calls into question such assumption about sympathy by positioning sympathy and society in opposition to each other. A close look at the rationale behind the St Ogg’s community’s harsh treatment of Maggie is necessary here in order to understand the odd relationship that Eliot posits between sympathy and society. As is illustrated by the fact that the St Ogg’s community only pays attention to the fact that Maggie has returned “without a trousseau” (620), the community is not too concerned about the
“immorality” of Maggie’s “elopement” with Stephen Guest. This suggests that communities do not exist to promote a sense of morality in individual members; rather, codes of morality exist to enhance their stability. In other words, human communities do not exist to support the bond among individuals. Instead, they exist to reinforce the communal power-structure, which is why they regard those members who fail to conform to communal norms as a threat to the equilibrium of the community and try to get rid of them. This also explains why no one cares about Maggie’s betrayal of Lucy’s trust, a significant breach in their sympathetic relationship. More importantly, Eliot’s view of the progress of human history represented through the legend of St Ogg implies that human communities are more than likely to disrupt humans’ intimate relation to nature and thus discourage the development of sympathetic minds, because for those in society, “troubles of the civil wars” (183) are worse problems than their fellow members’ deaths in natural disasters. Although Eliot does not teach her readers how to use their childhood memories of love, she at least gives them an opportunity to distance themselves from their communities and reconsider their value system. Again, Eliot’s sympathetic education begins by making her readers rethink their relationship to their inner selves.
CHAPTER 5

SYMPATHY IN TRAGEDY

In his note dated 21-22 November of 1885, Hardy offers his definition of tragedy: “a tragedy exhibits a state of things in the life of an individual which unavoidably causes some natural aim or desire of his to end in catastrophe when carried out” (The Life of Work of Thomas Hardy 182). As a literary mode in which Hardy expressed his fundamentally gloomy and fatalistic view of the human condition, tragedy has duly received much attention from critics, especially in early Hardy criticism. For example, Lionel Johnson, who published the first full-length book on Hardy in 1894, discusses Hardy’s modern tragedy in relation to Greek tragedy and the theory of Aristotle and holds that Hardy integrates classical tragedy and “the concerns of modern thought” (52) fairly successfully. D.H. Lawrence’s essay, “Study of Thomas Hardy,” in which he finds Hardy’s tragic power in his understanding of the consequences of rebellion against the oppressive power of society, provides another important example of early criticism on Hardy’s tragic vision. A few decades later, situating Hardy’s writing in the existential humanist tradition, Jean R. Brooks states that while “Hardy’s poetic pattern stresses the action of fate, it does so to stress too the human responsibility to deflect fate from its path before it is too late” (18-19). Brooks’s point about the relationship between fate and
character in Hardy’s tragedy is particularly noteworthy in that it draws attention to the significance of moral concerns in Hardy’s tragic vision. As Jill Larson insightfully points out, though Hardy’s tragic vision is a reflection of the late Victorian perception that people “no longer share moral first principles, [and] there is no hope for moral consensus in modern Western society” (22), it is still based upon the idea that “How well we deal with luck is a mark of our goodness” (70), and thus morality constitutes an important theme of his writing.

One significant implication of Hardy’s investment in the theme of morality is that despite his awareness that human beings have only limited control over the consequences of their actions, he believed in the educational purpose of his writing. Feeling at odds with the spirit of his age that was “aggressively optimistic, forward-looking, ‘progressive’” (Seymour-Smith 17), Hardy did not really believe in the idea of “human progress.” Hardy’s pessimistic view of progress raises a question of whether it points to his pessimistic view of art, and his note written on 19 April of 1885 suggests that his artistic vision is in fact fairly optimistic: “The business of the poet and novelist is to show the soriness underlying the grandest things, and the grandeur underlying the sorriest things” (qtd. in Seymour-Smith 11). Although living in a tragic and apparently meaningless world, Hardy had a strong desire to make sense of the world if any sense could be made at all, and his effort to “show” his readers both how tragic life is and how great that tragic life can be interpreted as the manifestation of his confidence—or at least hope—that his art can help his readers realize their own desires to seek meaning in the world they inhabit. The question is how his educational project can be carried out.
My contention is that examining Hardy’s view of sympathy, especially in relation to Wordsworth’s and Eliot’s theories of sympathy, can enlighten the understanding of his artistic enterprise. Though Wordsworth’s and Eliot’s influences on Hardy have drawn many critics’ attention,69 the significance of the theme of sympathy in Hardy’s view of the function of literature has hardly been studied. Admittedly, Hardy does not make as many explicit comments on sympathy as Wordsworth or Eliot does, nor does he clearly state his concept of ideal readership. This does not mean, however, that Hardy was not interested in the theme of sympathy or the sympathetic education of readers. In spite of his tragic vision of the human condition, Hardy insists on the importance of love, sympathy, and charity through his depiction of various kinds of human relationships. For him, these are essential qualities for a human being to have in order to meet the vicissitudes of life heroically and defiantly. Hardy’s belief in the possibility of genuine sympathy might not be as strong as Wordsworth’s or Eliot’s—and it seems to weaken throughout his writing career—but he never denies the importance or meaning of searching for the possibility of sympathy in human relationships. Also, his artistic vision that aims to help readers see the need to seek meaning in their own ways suggests that he does share Wordsworth’s and Eliot’s concerns about the readers who indulge in sentimental and superficial responses to literature. Many of his morally problematic but

69 Hardy’s indebtedness to Eliot in his early novels has especially been subject to much critical attention, as is illustrated by the fact that Far from the Madding Crowd, which was published anonymously at first, was even ascribed to Eliot by Hardy’s contemporary critics. Examples of recent criticism that compares Hardy’s novels with Eliot’s also abound. Focusing on the cultural value of the dairy setting, Alicia Caroll discusses Eliot’s and Hardy’s complex negotiation of “the historical depreciation of human milk” (166) in Adam Bede and Tess of the D’Urbervilles respectively. In her comparison of Eliot’s and Hardy’s novels, Nicola Harris finds it questionable that Hardy was “conscious of the influence [Eliot] exerted upon his own ideas” (49), but she does acknowledge a remarkable correspondence between some episodes of Eliot’s and Hardy’s novels.
simultaneously appealing characters are evidence of his preoccupation with the ways readers engage with fictional characters. By complicating the process through which readers choose objects of sympathetic identification, Hardy provides his readers with an opportunity to consider the many-faceted nature of the moral issues presented through his characters. If Hardy did not quite believe that he could enlarge his readers’ sympathetic minds through his texts, he at least believed in the importance of making his readers think about the issues surrounding sympathy.

Wordsworth’s and Eliot’s influence on Hardy’s view of sympathy also shows in his fascination with rural life as subject matter. Hardy’s representations of rural life, especially in his early novels, suggest that he inherited Wordsworth’s and Eliot’s belief in the power of country life to deepen our understanding of humanity and moral values. R.P. Draper’s interpretation of Hardy’s depiction of rustic life in *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* bears a striking resemblance to what has been said about Wordsworth’s or Eliot’s representations of rural life: “Both [novels] engage in loving representation of old country customs, which constantly suggest the charm and humanity of a plainer and simpler life than that known to most of their readers” (48). Writing at the end of the Victorian era, however, Hardy was much more intensely aware of the historical processes that destroyed “the regular rhythm of country life which offered meaningful work, tradition, and an organic relationship with the natural world” (Squires 325) than Wordsworth or Eliot, and his interest in rural life and rural communities seems to arise from his preoccupation with the clash of past and present. The dehumanizing influence of capitalism and industrialization on rural life is especially
prominent in his later novels, such as The Mayor of Casterbridge, Tess of the
D’Urbervilles, or Jude the Obscure. Even in the discussion of Hardy’s early novels, few
critics criticize Hardy’s depiction of country life for being unrealistically mystified or
nostalgic. For example, in his interpretation of Far from the Madding Crowd as a
modified pastoral, Michael Squires argues that “if an aura of idealization and nostalgia
wafts gently through the pages of the novel, it is because the ancient agricultural life was
so quickly vanishing” (325). Squires’ point is that Hardy’s idealization of rural life is
actually a reflection of his consciousness of the disruption of its stability. Similarly,
despite his emphasis on Hardy’s deliberate employment of the pastoral mode in Under
the Greenwood Tree and Far from the Madding Crowd, Draper acknowledges that in
both novels, “the old ways are seen as under threat from the new” (49). Draper then
comments on the changes in Hardy’s representation of the natural world from his early
novels to his later novels, stating that “A nature which sympathises with the suffering of
human beings, expressed in terms of the pathetic fallacy, is replaced by one which is
fundamentally Darwinian—a competitive nature engaged in the ruthless struggle for
survival” (51). The shift in Hardy’s view of nature that Draper mentions is quite
significant in its implication that Hardy’s representations of rustic life can serve as a site
for tracing the changes in his thoughts on sympathy and its significance in his tragic
vision of the world.

In this chapter, I examine Hardy’s depiction of sympathetic relationships in rustic
communities in Far from the Madding Crowd and in The Mayor of Casterbridge. I have
chosen these two novels because both are set in rural environments and the main
characters’ relations to their rural communities are central. Although there is an obvious link between Eliot’s and Hardy’s interest in the failure of sympathetic exchanges between individuals and their communities, Hardy does not necessarily hold rural communities accountable for the main characters’ downfalls, and the rustic communities that he delineates are not as judgmental or conservative as those in Eliot’s novels. This difference in the understanding of the moral status of rustic communities arises less from Hardy’s favorable view of rural communities of his time than from his awareness that there are no longer fixed codes of ethics to promote communities’ judgmental attitudes toward individual members. In addition, as mentioned above, Hardy’s narrators are not always clear about the characters with whom we are supposed to sympathize, complicating the process of readerly sympathy for characters. Furthermore, his increasingly pessimistic depiction of human relationships in his later novels suggests that he gradually loses his belief in the possibility of genuine sympathy. Here lies another reason for discussing Far from the Madding Crowd and The Mayor of Casterbridge together: sympathy is not only an important theme in both novels, but it is treated differently in each case, making it possible to trace Hardy’s changing view of sympathy and its relation to his tragic vision. More specifically, both novels are based on the idea that all human beings are dependent on one another for happiness, and consequently sympathy is presented in both of them as the most effective remedy for the tragic condition of life. Yet The Mayor of Casterbridge illustrates a more pessimistic view of sympathy than Far from the Madding Crowd. Hardy’s changing view of sympathy seems
closely related to his growing sense of disillusionment with the historical process, and therefore, in discussing the different treatments of the theme of sympathy in each novel, I will pay special attention to the changes in his representations of rural communities.

5.1. *Far from the Madding Crowd*: a Pastoral Novel?

“‘I want somebody to tame me: I am too independent: and you would never be able to, I know’” (28), says Bathsheba Everdene to Gabriel Oak, refusing his marriage proposal early on in the novel. Within the course of the narrative, Bathsheba witnesses and experiences a series of tragic events that “tame” her and make her realize that no one, herself included of course, can be completely independent of other people. This realization turns out essential to her sympathetic education, and the novel consequently devotes much space to describing her responses to the tragic incidents that occur in the novel, such as Fanny’s death, Troy’s death, and Boldwood’s virtual suicide. Bathsheba is not the only character whose responses to these tragic events are closely recorded, however. The novel is invested in depicting Bathsheba’s rural community’s reaction as well, carefully contrasting it with Bathsheba’s. Considering Bathsheba’s relationship to her community—despite the class difference, she is fairly well accepted—it is curious that the novel deliberately emphasizes the difference between her and the community. What makes the contrast between Bathsheba and the Weatherbury community even more puzzling is the fact that the picture of a rural community that the novel presents is not merely positive but based to a certain extent on the romanticized image of country life frequently found in pastoral literature. As Squires argues, the novel considerably
modifies the pastoral tradition by adding “realistic details of actual rural life” (299), but some scenes in the novel, such as the breathtakingly beautiful sheep-shearing scene in chapter XXII, seem to justify labeling the novel a pastoral tale that draws on the nostalgic assumption about the integrated community of rustic people and their harmonized relationship to the natural world. The novel’s questioning of the ethical potential of the Weatherbury community through the contrast between Bathsheba and Weatherbury in terms of their respective abilities to grow sympathetically, however, suggests that Hardy’s use of the pastoral mode in *Far from the Madding Crowd* is much more complicated than it initially seems. My critical question is how this contrast between Bathsheba and her community is important in Hardy’s sympathetic education of readers—more specifically, in his project of provoking his readers into rethinking their notions of sympathy. Significantly, the novel offers access to Bathsheba’s internal feelings and thoughts especially at the moments of her most intense suffering and pain, pointing to the importance of her character in Hardy’s educational project in the novel. This section will thus be divided into two parts: the investigation of the moral status and potential of the community of Weatherbury and the examination of Bathsheba’s growth in her ability to sympathize with others which strongly contrasts with her community’s adamant refusal to change.

Pointing out the unchangeable nature of country life, the narrator states, “In comparison with cities, Weatherbury was immutable. The citizen’s *Then* is the rustic’s *Now*” (127). The continuity between past and present is indeed what characterizes Weatherbury most effectively, and the following description of the great barn suggests
that the undisrupted link between past and present contributes greatly to the novel’s positive depiction of the community of Weatherbury:

One could say about this barn, what could hardly be said of either the church or the castle, akin to it in age and style, that the purpose which had dictated its original erection was the same with that to which it was still applied. Unlike and superior to either of those two typical remnants of mediaevalism, the old barn embodied practices which had suffered no mutilation at the hands of time. Here at least the spirit of the builders then was at one with the spirit of the beholder now. Standing before this abraded pile, the eye regarded its present usage, the mind dwelt upon its past history, with a satisfied sense of functional continuity throughout, a feeling almost of gratitude, and quite of pride, at the permanence of the idea which had heaped it up. (126)

The narrator emphasizes the significance of the “functional continuity” residing in the building. While both the church and the castle have been alienated from their original purposes and thus lost much of their spiritual and emotional values, the old barn still serves the purpose for which it was built, the sheep-shearing, and as Norman Page points out, the barn “represents an unbroken continuity between past and present” (89): “So the barn was natural to the shearers, and the shearers in harmony with the barn” (127). What is implied in this comment is the idea that by maintaining the continuity, the barn protects the shearers from the devastating effects of social, economic, and technological changes taking place in nineteenth-century England. Considering Hardy’s disappointment with the industrialization and urbanization which threatened to alienate humans from their labor and thereby undermine the sense of morality based on human labor, Hardy seems to have prized the continuity in rustic communities.

The Weatherbury community’s immunity to change is not portrayed entirely positively in the novel, however. In fact, the community’s inability to respond to changes is considered the biggest obstacle to its sympathetic education. Unlike Bathsheba,
sympathetic mind grows in response to the changes in other people’s lives as well as in her own, the community of Weatherbury is amazingly unaffected by the changes in its members’ lives; the events that permanently change Bathsheba’s life, such as Fanny’s death, Troy’s death, and Boldwood’s attempted suicide, do not have any significant impact on people of Weatherbury.

It is not that the community is completely apathetic or unsympathetic. As compared with the rustic communities portrayed in Hardy’s later novels, Weatherbury has many positive merits, and its capacity for sympathy is one of them. For example, when Bathsheba’s men and Boldwood’s men witness Troy on the night of the party at Boldwood’s and suspect his plan to appear that night, they try to interfere and save both Troy and Bathsheba from possible dangers. Not everyone takes interest or gets involved in this project, of course, and some members even express doubts about its necessity. Reluctant to play any part in other shepherds’ plan to warn Bathsheba of Troy’s return, Smallbury murmurs uncertainly, “I don’t see that ’tis any business of ours” (326). In response to Smallbury’s questioning of their responsibility for their mistress’s and master’s affairs, Samway, one of Boldwood’s men, passionately says, “But it is! ’Tis a thing which is everybody’s business . . . We know very well that master’s on a wrong tack, and that she’s quite in the dark, and we should let ’em know at once” (326). Though these rustics’ good intentions fail to help in the end, their expression of concern suggests that the harmonious relationship they maintain with nature as shepherds has apparently done its office of nourishing sympathetic minds. That is, their labor in nature has taught these people the value of being in accord with each other. The novel ends with
the reaffirmation of the community’s capacity for sympathy, which celebrates Gabriel’s
and Bathsheba’s wedding with “a tremendous blowing of trumpets in the front of the
house” (352). Because of Bathsheba’s “wish that all the parish shall not be in Church
looking at her” (348), Bathsheba’s shepherds are not invited to the wedding, but they still
celebrate the wedding in their own way, communicating that they are happy for the newly
married couple who have survived the tragic and disturbing events of the past and that
they are willing to accept them into their community. In this regard, Hardy seems to hold
a more positive view of rustic communities than Eliot—neither Hayslope nor St Ogg
attempts to make this kind of sympathetic gestures.70

Despite these obvious signs of sympathy, a close look at the working mechanism
of the community’s sympathy reveals that it does not really have potential to evolve into
genuine sympathy, which brings about major changes in the sympathetic observer. As
much as the community cares about what happens to its members and is willing to show
compassion when necessary, its sympathy operates primarily to reinforce the solidarity of
the community. As suggested above, the community is resistant to changes, and its main
reason for sympathizing with its members is to protect the community from possible
threats to the stability of the community. The conversations among the townspeople of
Weatherbury, to which many pages of the novel are devoted, aptly illustrate that the
Weatherbury community puts its own stability before its individual members’ well-being.
Even though a community is none other than a collection of its members, as a unit, it
develops its own character and norms, which often conflict with the desires of individual

70 The Hayslope community heartily celebrates the marriage of Adam and Dinah, but it is only after they
have gotten rid of their troublesome member, Hetty.
members. The conversation at Warren’s Malthouse, where Gabriel becomes acquainted with the rustics of Weatherbury for the first time, is a particularly good example of the rigid nature of the Weatherbury community, which lays a heavy emphasis on individual members’ conformity to communal norms. In the following scene, the rustics are contemplating on Joseph Poorgrass’ story about the time he lost his way in the middle of the night:

A meditation on the obvious inference was indulged in by all, and during its continuance each directed his vision into the ashpit which glowed like a desert in the tropics under a vertical sun; shaping their eyes long and liny, partly because of the light, partly from the depth of the subject discussed—each man severally drawing upon the tablet of his imagination a clear and correct picture of Joseph Poorgrass under the remarkable conditions he had related, and surveying the position in all its bearings with critical exactness. (53)

Right before Joseph Poorgrass tells the story about how he lost his way and miraculously found the right gate, which is the subject of meditation in this passage, readers are introduced to another story about the time he lost his way at night. It is not Joseph, however, who initiates the storytelling. Commenting on Joseph’s timid personality, Jan Coggan brings up the story about the time when Joseph lost his way coming home from work. When Joseph protests against the storytelling, Coggan continues the story “with an impassive face implying that a true narrative, like time and tide, must run its course and would wait for no man” (51). The fact that Coggan can tell Joseph’s story with authority implies that the story has been told many times before. Moreover, Coggan’s belief that “a true narrative, like time and tide, must run its course” regardless of Joseph’s objection points to the ritualistic quality that the people of Weatherbury attribute to the storytelling. Once a story is told, it no longer belongs to an individual but becomes the
property of everyone in the community, and through the ritual of storytelling, the solidarity of the community is enhanced. The word “indulged” describes the process through which the rustics meditate on Joseph Poorgrass’ story. Quite familiar with the content of the story, they meditate on small details to confirm what they already know with a sense of satisfaction. Though each man draws a picture of Joseph “upon the tablet of his imagination,” in actuality, there is not much room for the exercise of a creative mind, for the primary concern is to draw “a clear and correct picture of Joseph Poorgrass . . . with critical exactness” (italics added).

Given these rustics’ rigid adherence to their communal norms, it is not difficult to imagine how they would respond to any kind of individual aberrations, however slight they may be. Gabriel’s rather unstable position can be understood in this context. When Gabriel first shows up at Warren’s Malthouse, the favorite gathering place of the men of Weatherbury, people there immediately stop the conversation and “ocularly criticise[sic] him to the degree expressed by looking at him with narrowed eyelids and contracting the flesh of their foreheads” (47). Although this moment of being on guard against a stranger does not last long—it completely dissolves as Gabriel’s family origin is revealed and approved by the ancient maltster—Weatherbury’s initial reaction to Gabriel’s appearance illustrates how conservative and closed-minded the community is. Besides his family origin, Gabriel’s personality also helps him be accepted into the community quickly. When people at Warren’s Malthouse find out that Gabriel is not “a particular man” (49) and does not mind eating food with dirt—in other words, when they realize that Gabriel’s eating habits are no different from theirs—they heartily welcome him into their society.
Despite his initial success in finding his place, Gabriel does not get entirely integrated into the community, and he is quite conscious of his differences. It is not until Gabriel expresses his rage at the rude comments his fellow shepherds casually make about Bathsheba that other shepherds begin to see that Gabriel might not be one of “them.”

Their response to Gabriel’s passionate manifestation of loyalty to their mistress is one of disappointment: “All earnestly expressed by their features that their minds did not wander to Holland for a moment on account of this statement, well knowing it was a powerful form of speech; but were deploring the difference which gave rise to the figure” (97). To these men, whether or not Gabriel’s sense of allegiance to Bathsheba is morally right is not a matter of concern; instead, they are simply sorry to see that he is different from them. Here lies an important similarity between Eliot’s and Hardy’s views of the ethical status of rustic communities: they both understand rural communities’ insistence on individual members’ unquestioning acceptance of communal norms as a serious obstacle to sympathetic education.

The rustics’ resistant attitudes towards anything that might challenge their fixed ways are also significant in comprehending the stark contrast between these apparently sympathetic-minded people and Bathsheba. Even though people in the community do attempt to take responsibility for living members, such as Troy or Boldwood, when it comes to dead members of the community, they are surprisingly indifferent. Weatherbury’s lack of interest in its dead members suggests that the community ceases to
recognize its members when they have lost power to disrupt the community in any way.\(^7\) Again, the community’s primary concern is to maintain the status quo, not to ensure of each individual member’s well-being or happiness. On this account, the process of sympathy does not involve an attempt to understand or meditate on the meaning of the sufferings of individuals.

It is in this context that Joseph Poorgrass delays his mission to carry Fanny’s corpse to the churchyard gates for her funeral. For Joseph Poorgrass, who does not care about the pain or sufferings Fanny has gone through but merely wishes “he had the company even of a cat or dog” (246), Fanny is only a “burden”\(^7\) with which he is unwilling to continue. When he stops at Buck’s Head for a drink, his reluctance to continue with Fanny’s corpse receives strong support from his fellows. Trying to talk Joseph Poorgrass out of his fear that Providence might make him pay for his neglect of duty, Jan Coggan brags about his religious principles that have never gone through any changes, saying, “I’ll stick to my side, and if we be in the wrong, so be it: I’ll fall with the fallen” (249). For Coggan, the fact that he has never let anyone or anything change his principles is a great source of pride, and his pride in his inflexibility is significant in comprehending the insensitive remark on Fanny he makes later in response to Gabriel’s reproach:

> “Nobody can hurt a dead woman,” said Coggan, with the precision of a machine. “All that could be done for her is done—she’s beyond us; and why should a man put himself in a tearing hurry for lifeless clay that can neither feel nor see, and don’t know what you do with her at all? If she’d been alive I would

\(^7\) Here, the Weatherbury community’s inability to acknowledge the power of the dead seems quite crucial to understanding Hardy’s theory of sympathy, especially when it is seen in light of Wordsworth’s definition of sympathy as a power to defy the power of death.

\(^7\) Chapter XLI is titled “Joseph and his burden: ‘Buck’s Head.’”
have been the first to help her. If she now wanted victuals and drink, I’d pay for it, money down. But she’s dead, and no speed of ours will bring her to life. The woman’s independent of us—time spent upon her is throwed away: why should we hurry to do what’s not required? Drink, shepherd, or be friends, for tomorrow we may be like her.” (250)

What Coggan does not realize is that regardless of her state, Fanny can give something back in return for sympathy for her. For one thing, Fanny can provide Coggan with an opportunity to rethink his “principles,” to which he has been sticking for no other reason than that they happen to be his principles. Refusing to recognize his connection to the dead Fanny and to engage seriously in thinking about the meaning of sympathizing with Fanny, however, he is unable to achieve a growth in his self-understanding. In other words, in dismissing Fanny as an “independent” being, Coggan fails to realize his dependence on her. Even though he says “we may be like her,” it is not a sincere acknowledgement of Fanny’s connection to living people. Rather, Coggan makes the comment in almost the same spirit as when he says “‘drink is a pleasant delight” (247), a remark he makes as “one who repeated a truism so familiar to his brain that he hardly noticed its passage over his tongue” (247). In addition, the fact that Coggan makes comments on Fanny’s death “with the precision of a machine” points to his lack of genuine interest in the topic. The rustics’ fundamental indifference to Fanny’s sufferings and death illustrates the consequences of the community’s resistance to anything that can disrupt its present condition.

In contrast with the Weatherbury community, Bathsheba allows herself to be affected by what happens to her or to her community members and thereby grows into a sympathetic person during the course of the novel. As the character that undergoes the

73 Here, Coggan’s “philosophy” is Epicureanism: eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die.
most radical change in the novel, Bathsheba leaves a very curious first impression on
Gabriel and on readers:

The handsome girl waited for some time idly in her place, and the only sound
heard in the stillness was the hopping of the canary up-and down the perches of
its prison. Then she looked attentively downwards. It was not at the bird, nor at
the cat; it was at an oblong package tied in paper, and lying between them. She
turned her head to learn if the waggoner were coming. He was not yet in sight;
and her-eyes crept back to the package, her thoughts seeming to run upon what
was inside it. At length she drew the article into her lap, and untied the paper
covering; a small swing looking-glass was disclosed, in which she proceeded to
survey herself attentively. She parted her lips and smiled. (5-6)

Described as “The handsome girl,” Bathsheba is caught in her most unguarded state,
providing access to the inmost part of her character. While waiting for her waggoner to
come back, Bathsheba is bored and looking for something to entertain her. What the
narrator’s voyeuristic gaze reveals next is that neither the hopping canary nor the cat can
attract this “handsome girl”—she is apparently not interested in anything going on in the
outside world. Instead, her attention is completely drawn to “a small swing looking-
glass,” which will give her an opportunity to contemplate her own image. To Gabriel who
does not see any “necessity for her looking in the glass” (6), the significance of
Bathsheba’s response to her reflection in the hand-mirror is quite obvious: she is very
pleased with her own image. Gabriel thus concludes that Bathsheba is guilty of
“Woman’s prescriptive infirmity” (6): vanity. At this stage, Bathsheba’s capacity for
sympathy seems even less developed than that of the Weatherbury community.

The narrator’s description of Bathsheba in the paragraph that immediately follows
the quotation above, however, complicates Gabriel’s judgment of Bathsheba’s character
as a vain person, pointing in turn to her potential for moral development:
It was a fine morning, and the sun lighted up to a scarlet glow the crimson jacket she wore, and painted a soft lustre upon her bright face and dark hair. The myrtles, geraniums, and cactuses packed around her were fresh and green, and at such a leafless season they invested the whole concern of horses, waggon, furniture, and girl with a peculiar vernal charm. What possessed her to indulge in such a performance in the sight of the sparrows, blackbirds and unperceived farmer who were alone its spectators,—whether the smile began as a factitious one, to test her capacity in that art,—nobody knows; it ended certainly in a real smile. She blushed at herself, and seeing her reflection blush, blushed the more.

(6)

The narrator notices that her ignorance of the freshness and greenness of “The myrtles, geraniums, and cactuses packed around her” does not deprive her of the “peculiar vernal charm” with which they invest her along with other creatures. Interestingly, the “nature” surrounding Bathsheba here is not exactly nature. “The myrtles, geraniums, and cactuses” are actually exotic plants, which is how they can invest Bathsheba “with a peculiar vernal charm” “at such a leafless season.” The image of the exotic plants can be seen as the foreshadowing of the curious position that Bathsheba will take in Weatherbury later in the novel—she is both a member and an outsider of the community.

More importantly, the narrator suggests that the meaning of Bathsheba’s smile might not be as simple as Gabriel assumes and mentions later in the chapter that Gabriel says the word vanity “perhaps a little piqued by the comely traveller’s indifference” (7). Unlike Gabriel, who has reason to be “piqued,” the narrator is careful not to draw a hasty conclusion about Bathsheba’s motive for “indulg[ing] in such a performance” and simply emphasizes that her performance “ended in a real smile.” The narrator also draws attention to her self-conscious blushing, implying that she is aware of the significance of her “performance.” Comparing this hand-mirror scene with the mirror-scene in Adam Bede, Nicola Harris perceptively comments on the difference between Hetty and
Bathsheba. According to Harris, though Hetty and Bathsheba both delight in their images, in Bathsheba’s case, there is “no imaginary Donnithorne to stimulate, excite and explain this action” (53), and she needs only herself as a witness of her reflection. Harris’ remark on this crucial difference touches on a very important aspect of Bathsheba’s character. If Hetty’s pleasure in seeing her reflection in the mirror comes from her awareness of her prettiness which she knows does not fail to attract the admiration of others, Bathsheba’s satisfaction in seeing her image does not involve fantasizing about other people’s adoration of her beauty. In this sense, Bathsheba is not “vain.” As a woman “too independent” to be tamed, Bathsheba is not dependent on human relationships and lives contentedly in her self-sufficient world—at least until she becomes conscious of her power to attract other people. Self-reliance or self-sufficiency thus marks the beginning point of her journey toward sympathy; vanity marks the second phase.

The first occasion that inspires feelings of real vanity in Bathsheba is Boldwood’s utter indifference to her charms that produce sensational reaction among the farmers in the corn-market at Casterbridge. Even though Bathsheba’s appearance in the corn-market is originally intended as an expression of her “decision to be a farmer in her own person”—in other words, her independent spirit—Bathsheba does not find the farmers’ admiration unpleasant; rather she regards it as “unquestionably a triumph to her as the maiden” (80). It is not until she is confronted with Boldwood’s indifference, however, that she begins to be conscious of her beauty as other people perceive it:

It perplexed her first. If there had been a respectable minority on either side, the case would have been most natural. If nobody had regarded her, she would have
taken the matter indifferently: such cases had occurred. If everybody, this man included, she would have taken it as a matter of course: people had done so before. But the smallness of the exception made the mystery—just as it was the difference between the state of an insignificant fleece and the state of all around it, rather than any novelty in the states themselves, which arrested the attention of Gideon. (81)

This analysis of Bathsheba’s psychology repeatedly emphasizes that she is in fact quite used to people’s indifference, and this is not surprising given her original social position as a milkmaid. As an heiress of her uncle, Farmer Everdene, however, Bathsheba has grown accustomed to other people’s attention, which in turn makes her keenly aware of Boldwood’s indifferent attitude toward her. Bathsheba’s intolerance of the mystery made by “the smallness of the exception” is noteworthy in its implication that vanity is a quality developed in social relations. It also signifies that Bathsheba’s world has undergone a permanent change: now that she has learned the pleasure of being admired by other people, her world is far from being self-sufficient. No longer independent of public esteem, Bathsheba eagerly asks her maid who Boldwood is and even sends him a joke Valentine card, which turns out to be a great source of tragedy later in the novel.

Interestingly, here again, the narrator, who is apparently aware of the tragic consequences of Bathsheba’s thoughtless deed, refrains from making critical remarks on Bathsheba and even defends her rather “innocent” motive for playing a joke on Boldwood by pointing out how “Bathsheba genuinely repented that a freak . . . should ever have been undertaken, to disturb the placidity of a man she respected too highly to deliberately tease” (104). The narrator’s point here is that Bathsheba’s desire for everyone’s approval of her attraction does not deliberately blind her to sufferings or pain it might possibly
cause to other people. The narrator’s generosity toward Bathsheba also implies that her vanity is not necessarily her individual problem but an inevitable consequence of coming into contact with human society.

The question is how one can get past the stage of vanity and move on to that of sympathy, and the novel’s answer is: through suffering that arises from failed or unfulfilling human relationships. Bathsheba experiences suffering and pain for the first time through her relationship with Sergeant Troy, whose compliments on her beauty and charms play an important role in winning her heart. In contrast, though Boldwood initially succeeds in drawing her attention through his indifference, he fails to sustain it because he lacks Troy’s art of flattery. As the narrator notes, “It was a fatal omission of Boldwood’s that he had never once told her she was beautiful” (145). Troy’s gratification of Bathsheba’s vanity produces very powerful effects:

Bathsheba loved Troy in the way that only self-reliant women love when they abandon their self-reliance. When a strong woman recklessly throws away her strength she is worse than a weak woman who has never had any strength to throw away. One source of her inadequacy is the novelty of the occasion. She has never had practice in making the best of such a condition. Weakness is doubly weak by being new. (164)

The consequence of Bathsheba’s loss of her independent spirit is quite damaging to her: it makes her weak and leaves her even more vulnerable to pain and suffering than “a weak woman who has never had any strength to throw away.” Here, the narrator’s statement that “She has never had practice in making the best of such a condition” is remarkable in its suggestion that the ability to deal with suffering is a skill that needs to be acquired through practice. Another significant implication of this statement is that Bathsheba was deceiving herself when she believed that her self-reliant spirit was a great source of her
strength. As her vulnerability to Troy’s flattery shows,\textsuperscript{74} she was able to keep her self-reliant spirit intact before only because her lack of contact with society had not yet exposed her weak spot, which is her reliance on other people’s approval. The experience of suffering that makes one realize one’s weakness, especially in relationships with other people, then, is a necessary process in the development of the real strength that will not be easily thrown away when calamities hit, and the novel suggests that this strength is essential to one’s sympathetic education.

Made “doubly weak” by the newness of her weakness, Bathsheba is now ready to experience intense pain and suffering and mature into a stronger person who can deal with suffering without a complete loss of self-control. Bathsheba’s first moment of severe pain occurs when she finds out about Troy’s ex-lover, Fanny Robin, whose curl of hair he still keeps and refuses to burn despite Bathsheba’s request. Feeling betrayed and slighted by the person for whom she has given up her independence and pride, Bathsheba speculates on her present situation after Troy storms out of the house:

> Until she had met Troy Bathsheba had been proud of her position as a woman; it had been a glory to her to know that her lips had been touched by no man’s on earth, that her waist had never been encircled by a lover’s arm. She hated herself now. In those earlier days she had always nourished a secret contempt for girls who were the slaves of the first good-looking young fellow who should choose to salute them. She had never taken kindly to the idea of marriage in the abstract as did the majority of women she saw about her. (239)

That Bathsheba is lamenting her loss of self-reliance at this very moment implies that even after her marriage, she has not had a chance to think seriously about the significance of the independent position she used to hold as a maiden. It is Troy’s desertion of her

\textsuperscript{74} For example, when Troy keeps paying her empty compliments on her beauty, Bathsheba finds herself “in a restless state between distress at hearing him and a penchant to hear more” (150).
trust that makes her contemplate what it means to be married and lose a sense of self-control that she used to enjoy. Bathsheba’s grieving over her loss of freedom does not end in self-hatred or despair, however. Instead, her thoughts on her current situation lead her to consider other women’s marriage choices from a new perspective. Before she tasted the bitterness of marriage, she was able to look down on most women who apparently lack an independent spirit and thus easily become “enslaved” to men and marriages. To put it simply, she thought she was different and believed she had control over her life, and it gave her a sense of superiority. Now that she has experienced the difficulties of a marital relationship, she realizes for the first time that she is not very different from the “girls who were the slaves of the first good-looking young fellow who should choose to salute them.” In fact, she has turned out to be one of them, and it changes her general outlook on the nature of human suffering and the question of moral responsibility. Many women who fall victim to the misery and cruelty of marriage do so not simply because they are stupid or vain but because humans cannot always be in control of their actions and their consequences.

Bathsheba’s recognition of her connection to other women in terms of suffering and human weaknesses is crucial to the growth in her capacity to feel compassion for other people’s suffering, and the first sign of her growth appears, quite ironically, in her response to the death of Fanny, the main cause of her suffering. Without knowing that Fanny is her husband’s ex-lover, Bathsheba says to Joseph, who delivers the news of Fanny’s death along with Boldwood’s willingness to take care of her funeral: “Indeed I shall not let Mr. Boldwood do any such thing—I shall do it! Fanny was my uncle’s
servant, and, although I only knew her for a couple of days, she belongs to me. How very, very sad this is!—the idea of Fanny being in a workhouse” (241). As Bathsheba herself admits, she barely knows Fanny, but “the idea of Fanny being in a workhouse” hits her very hard. Concerning this intense response on Bathsheba’s part, the narrator states, “Bathsheba had begun to know what suffering was, and she spoke with deep feeling” (241). The implication here is very clear: without her experience of suffering and pain, Bathsheba would not be able to take the reality of Fanny’s hardship as seriously as she does now. That is, neither self-reliant Bathsheba nor vain Bathsheba could take so much interest in what happens to other people. Hardy then shares Eliot’s view of sympathy expressed in *Adam Bede*: “from pain into sympathy,” the idea that one learns to sympathize with others through suffering.

Bathsheba’s sympathetic ability is soon put to test, however, when she finds out that her first object of sympathy is also her first object of jealousy. With Fanny’s coffin inside her house and a strong conviction that Fanny is the owner of the curl of golden hair Troy still cherishes, Bathsheba struggles with conflicting feelings:

Her wayward sentiment that evening concerning Fanny’s temporary resting-place had been the result of a strange complication of impulses in Bathsheba’s bosom. Perhaps it would be more accurately described as a determined rebellion against her prejudices, a revulsion from a lower instinct of uncharitableness, which would have withheld all sympathy from the dead woman, because in life she had preceded Bathsheba in the attentions of a man whom Bathsheba had by no means ceased from loving, though her love was sick to death just now with the gravity of a further misgiving. (255)

Bathsheba, still in love with Troy, is torn between a desire to withdraw her sympathy for Fanny out of jealousy and an urge to resist that impulse which her sense of morality does not approve of. What Bathsheba’s internal struggles in this scene intimate about
sympathy is that it is much more than an instinct and that under certain circumstances, it takes great efforts to exercise sympathy. When Bathsheba was not aware of Fanny’s secret, she was able to sympathize with Fanny almost instinctively. Admittedly, she has to go through a long process before she can take sincere interest in the affairs of other people at all, but once she does, her sympathy works like an instinct. Bathsheba’s realization of Fanny’s “special” relationship to her, however, makes it impossible to maintain an impartial point of view about her object of sympathy, and she has to fight against “a lower instinct of uncharitableness, which would have withheld all sympathy from the dead woman.” The moral decision Bathsheba faces here suggests that even though suffering can nourish feelings of sympathy, further development of the faculty of sympathy takes conscious efforts. In addition, Bathsheba’s resistance to her “lower instinct of uncharitableness” implies that sympathizing with others concerns not only the relationship between the sympathetic observer and the object of sympathy but also the sympathetic observer’s relationship to him or herself. Given the fact that Fanny is already out of reach of anyone’s help, Hardy seems to share Wordsworth’s interest in the changes sympathy can bring about in the sympathetic observer, rather than in the object of sympathy.

What Bathsheba realizes in her desperate struggle to sympathize with Fanny is the strange connection between her fate and Fanny’s, and this realization ultimately deepens her understanding of herself—her potential to mature as well as her weaknesses. After her maid tells her about the rumor about Fanny’s baby, Bathsheba’s mind is even more troubled, but she still cannot make herself withhold her sympathy for Fanny. More
importantly, despite the fact that Fanny is an object of her jealousy, Bathsheba realizes that her fate and Fanny’s fate are actually not so opposed to each other: “The sadness of Fanny Robin’s fate did not make Bathsheba’s glorious, although she was the Esther to this poor Vashti, and their fates might be supposed to stand in some respects as contrasts to each other” (256). Instead, in “conjecturing a connection between her own history and the possible tragedy which may have ended Fanny’s life” (256), Bathsheba almost feels connected to Fanny through suffering. It is not surprising, then, that Bathsheba undergoes the same kind of suffering Fanny experienced at her last moment: loneliness. Bathsheba of course does not know that Fanny also faced a situation in which she had to “bear it all alone” (258), but Bathsheba’s experience of absolute loneliness and helplessness makes her see how weak she can be—perhaps as weak as dead Fanny, for Bathsheba briefly contemplates death as a means of escape from her situation. In terms of social standing and personal background, there is a huge gap between Bathsheba and Fanny, but they both turn out to be “girls who were the slaves of the first good-looking young fellow who should choose to salute them” (239) and pay dear prices for their mistakes.75 Bathsheba’s belief that she is different from other women has already faced a serious challenge and collapsed before Fanny’s death. By stirring Bathsheba’s feelings of jealousy, Fanny’s death fully exposes Bathsheba’s most fatal weaknesses, exposing her also to an opportunity to face those weaknesses and overcome them.

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75 The idea of common humanity implied here is quite evocative of Wordsworth’s remark on how the old beggar is “Inseparably linked” (l. 79) to “every mode of being” (l. 78) in “The Old Cumberland Beggar.”
The ensuing tragic events—Troy’s death and Boldwood’s confinement in jail—present another challenge to Bathsheba’s sympathetic education. Even though Bathsheba’s own sufferings have effectively dismantled her sense of superiority and her pride in her independent spirit, the two biggest obstacles to the development of a sympathetic mind, there is one more step that she needs to take to complete her education in sympathy: learning to be the object of others’ sympathy. Overwhelmed by the tragic reality of Boldwood’s murder of Troy and his attempted suicide, Bathsheba hides inside herself, not opening herself to others’ sympathy: “But she remained alone now for the greater part of her time, and stayed in the house, or at furthest went into the garden. She shunned every one, even Liddy, and could be brought to make no confidences, and to ask for no sympathy” (340). Here, Bathsheba’s insistence on being alone in her times of trouble is not so much an expression of her regained independence as a consequence of her never having learned how to ask for sympathy. It is not until she is threatened with a loss of “the possession of hopeless love from Gabriel” (344) that she realizes the existence of “an absolute hunger for pity and sympathy” (345). Bathsheba’s marriage to Gabriel, then, suggests that one’s sympathetic education can be completed only when humans’ mutual dependence is fully acknowledged. At the same time, however, the fact that Bathsheba wants “‘The most private, secret, plainest wedding that it’s possible to have’” (348) indicates that her education in sympathy has not extended to admitting her need to depend not only on certain individuals but also on the whole community (although whether her community is ready to engage in a sympathetic relationship with
Bathsheba is another question). Despite this limitation in her sympathetic education, Bathsheba’s complex reaction to the tragic incidents in the community effectively reveals the deep-lying problems with her seemingly sympathetic-minded community.

What, then, accounts for the difference between Bathsheba’s and the Weatherbury community’s ability to turn “pain into sympathy” and how does that difference relate to Hardy’s sympathetic education of readers? Nowhere in the novel is there a suggestion that the rustic people of Weatherbury are less subject to intense suffering than Bathsheba. Why are these people then incapable of learning from suffering? The narrator offers one interesting remark on one’s capacity for feeling sufferings: “Capacity for intense feeling is proportionate to the general intensity of the nature, and perhaps in all Fanny’s sufferings, much greater relatively to her strength, there never was a time she suffered in an absolute sense what Bathsheba suffered now” (262). The narrator’s point in comparing Fanny’s sufferings with Bathsheba’s here is to show that there are individual differences in the ability to suffer, which are determined by one’s “general intensity of the nature.” Endowed with a more intense nature, Bathsheba is more sensitive to sufferings and thus more likely to learn their lesson than most people.

As a writer attempting to enlarge his readers’ capacity for sympathy, Hardy is then confronted with quite a daunting question of how to intensify his readers’ capacity for feeling, especially when they do not share “the general intensity of the nature” of his characters. The note Hardy wrote on the day following the publication of the first installment of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* provides one answer: “My art is to intensify the expression of things . . . so that the heart and inner meaning is made vividly visible”
Hardy’s desire to “intensify the expression of things” accounts for why the novel provides such detailed and intense accounts of the moments of Bathsheba’s sufferings and struggles to outgrow her pain, to which other characters have no access. Although powerful descriptions of characters’ deep suffering might not be able to change the readers’ nature and make them feel more intensely, they can at least “show” how people with intense natures feel and suffer. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy offers an even more intensified look at suffering people.

5.2. “A general drama of pain”: Desire Ungratified in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*

“But it is not by what is, in this life, but by what appears, that you are judged” (248), says Michael Henchard to Lucetta, as he forces her to accept his marriage proposal. Though Henchard himself is not perfectly aware of the significance of his statement, the course of the novel reveals the tragic truth of this idea, at least in Henchard’s world. The notion that appearance is a more important factor in judgment of one’s character than reality is closely related to Hardy’s depiction of human relationships in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, which are presented mainly in terms of spectatorship or theatricality. That the novel describes relationships among characters as those of spectator and spectacle is very important in understanding Hardy’s view of sympathy in Henchard’s constant search for a meaningful sympathetic relationship. As one of Hardy’s most famous tragic protagonists, Henchard is described as rough, violent, egocentric, and
avaricious, but at the same time, he has many heroic qualities, such as grandeur of passion and generosity of spirit, and many critics have understood him as a modern tragic hero.76

Not many critics have paid attention to Henchard’s obsessive desire for sympathy, however, which is in fact the strongest impulse of his life. Despite his desperate need, all his attempts to forge a meaningful sympathetic relationship miserably fail, and his failure to fulfill his desire for sympathy proves to be the most tragic fact of his life. Henchard goes through a serious downfall in terms of both money and reputation within the narrative, but it does not have such a devastating impact upon “a man of character”77 like him. What really breaks him down in the end is his realization that his last hope for sympathy, his step-daughter Elizabeth-Jane, is lost forever to other men. As if to prove the statement that “Character is Fate” (185),78 the novel holds Henchard accountable to a considerable degree for his unsatisfied desire. There are other factors, however, that contribute to the tragedy of his life, such as his rustic community’s lack of sympathy or the limitations of Elizabeth-Jane’s ability to sympathize. As suggested earlier in the chapter, Hardy presents a less optimistic vision of the possibility of genuine sympathy in The Mayor of Casterbridge, and in this section, I argue that his rendering of human

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76 In fact, the contradictory nature of Henchard’s character has led to two extreme readings of Henchard’s character. Whereas John Paterson argues that Henchard’s lack of morality brings upon himself his own tragedy, Frederick Karl emphasizes Henchard’s positive qualities and holds that his fate and the morally indifferent world are responsible for his downfall.

77 The subtitle of the novel is “A Story of a Man of Character.”

78 The narrator quotes this statement made by Novalis in order to explain how Farfrae’s character, which is “just the reverse of Henchard’s” (185), contributes to his financial success.
relationships through the terms of spectatorship points to his increased pessimism about
restoring meaningful social relations and that his pessimism is closely linked to his
disappointment with the encroachment of capitalism in rural areas.

Unlike Bathsheba, who is at first described as “too independent,” Henchard is
portrayed as “the kind of man to whom some human object for pouring out his heart
upon—were it emotive or were it choleric—was almost a necessity” (195), and
accordingly, The Mayor of Casterbridge describes a very different kind of journey
toward sympathy. Not entirely conscious of his need to receive sympathy or its
significance, Henchard blindly pursues sympathetic exchanges, and throughout the novel,
he attempts to enter sympathetic relationships with the following three characters: Donald
Farfrae, Lucetta, and Elizabeth-Jane. A close examination of Henchard’s interaction with
each of these characters reveals that though he does have some potential for sympathetic
education as well as a great longing for sympathy, his character ultimately does not allow
him to achieve it.

Henchard’s relationship with Farfrae, which Henchard both initiates and ends,
effectively exposes many of Henchard’s character defects detrimental to the development
of a sympathetic mind, one of them being his egocentric nature. As the first object of
Henchard’s emotional attachment, Farfrae is presented as a man with many attractive
qualities. Though a stranger to the town of Casterbridge, he has some kind of “golden
haze” (122) that captivates everyone’s mind:
What Henchard says about his attraction to Farfrae, however, intimates that his attachment does not have any solid ground. Uttering to himself how strangely “that fellow does draw [him]!” (125), Henchard adds, “I suppose ’tis because I’m so lonely. I’d have given him a third share in the business to have stayed!” (125). Even at the price of giving “him a third share in the business,” Henchard wants to make Farfrae stay near him, but it is not because Henchard is struck by “this stranger’s sentiment” with a poetic appeal. As he himself says, he is “so lonely,” and being impressed with Farfrae’s ingenious suggestion for turning grown wheat into wholesome wheat, Henchard simply decides that Farfrae is the one to alleviate his sense of loneliness. Henchard’s expression of his affection for Farfrae later in the novel also illustrates his utter lack of interest in the character or personality of his object of affection. For example, when Henchard and Farfrae walk together, “Henchard would lay his arm familiarly on his manager’s shoulder, as if Farfrae were a younger brother, bearing so heavily that his slight figure bent under the weight” (161). The weight that Henchard puts upon Farfrae’s “slight figure” here demonstrates both Henchard’s pleasure in Farfrae’s company and his complete indifference to Farfrae’s feelings or thoughts. Henchard’s focus on “pouring out his heart upon” Farfrae without regard to Farfrae’s reaction prevents him from entering into a reciprocal relationship, and this is illustrated by the fact that Henchard’s attachment to Farfrae lasts only as long as he can feel superior to him. For Henchard, being unable to
feel superior means finally acknowledging and seeing Farfrae as he is, which he adamantly refuses to do to the end. Instead, Henchard’s affection is quickly replaced by jealousy.

Another problem with Henchard’s character revealed through his relationship with Farfrae is his unwillingness to acknowledge the importance of trusting or depending on other people, which is deeply problematic for a man with “an emotional void . . . that he unconsciously crave[s] to fill” (219). Here, the word “unconsciously” is quite significant in comprehending Henchard’s contradictory attitude towards depending on other people. On the one hand, his “emotional void” puts him in constant search for someone he can trust and rely on and leads him to recklessly trust anyone he happens to like. On the other hand, his unawareness of his absolute need to rely on others makes him incapable of dealing with the fact that he is dependent on them. Henchard’s sudden change of attitude towards Farfrae offers a good example. In the early stage of their relationship, Henchard divulges his secrets to Farfrae, saying, “‘I am a lonely man, Farfrae: I have nobody else to speak to; and why shouldn’t I tell it to ’ee?’” (147). Although the narrator offers an explanation for Henchard’s motive for confiding in Farfrae by pointing out that he is “plainly under that strange influence which sometimes prompts men to confide to the new-found friend what they will not tell to the old” (147), Henchard actually does not have old friends to confide in, either. It is just that Henchard has so long been lonely and in need of someone upon whom he can rely for confidential communications that he tells Farfrae his innermost secrets without realizing the import of his action, which he later regrets:
They parted thus in renewed friendship, Donald forbearing to ask Henchard for meanings that were not very plain to him. On Henchard’s part there was now again repose; and yet, whenever he thought of Farfrae, it was with a dim dread; and he often regretted that he had told the young man his whole heart, and confided to him the secrets of his life. (172)

This passage describes the subtle changes in Henchard’s view of Farfrae when he finds out for the first time about Farfrae’s potential to outdo him in earning people’s respect.

To Henchard who feels no longer dominant in his position, the first thought that occurs is that he has made himself dependent on Farfrae for the protection of his reputation. Incapable of accepting or dealing with his dependence on Farfrae, Henchard immediately turns his affection into jealousy and competitiveness. Henchard’s thoughtless act of putting his trust in a virtual stranger thus turns out even more damaging to the further development of their relationship than a distrustful attitude.

Lucetta, the next object of Henchard’s emotional attachment, reveals both the selfish and generous sides of Henchard’s character that complicate the process of his search for sympathy. As the man responsible for Lucetta’s ruined reputation in her hometown, Henchard makes an offer to restore her status by marrying her, and he sincerely hopes to build a relationship in which they can exchange genuine affection. The narrator clearly points out, however, that his offer is made out of a very selfish motive: “It was by no means with the oppression that would once have accompanied the thought that he regarded the moral necessity now; it was, indeed, with interest, if not warmth. His bitter disappointment at finding Elizabeth-Jane to be none of his, and himself a childless man, had left an emotional void in Henchard that he unconsciously craved to fill” (219).

79 In fact, after his disappointment in Farfrae, Henchard moves on to Elizabeth-Jane as an object of affection, but his realization that she is not his biological daughter soon puts an end to his budding affection for her.
If there were no emotional void to be filled in his mind, Henchard would actually regard “the moral necessity” of restoring Lucetta to her “proper” status with a sense of oppression. Even when he regards the matter “with interest,” Henchard is so focused on his own need for an object of affection that he is quite apathetic toward Lucetta’s feelings, just as he was entirely indifferent to Farfrae’s reaction in his expression of fondness.

Ironically, it is Lucetta’s rejection of his “good” intention of making it up to her that reveals the complex aspect of Henchard’s character. When Lucetta’s reason for turning down his marriage proposal turns out to be her love for Farfrae, Henchard is possessed by a sense of jealousy and rivalry more than ever and justifies the fact that he “could bring himself to show no mercy” (270). He even attempts to ruin her marriage by reading her past letters in front of Farfrae. Nevertheless, he restrains himself at the last moment, for “Such a wrecking of hearts appall[s] even him” (320). That Henchard gives up of his own accord his plan to harm Lucetta indicates that in spite of his self-centered nature, he has potential to consider other people. Furthermore, he in the end takes pity upon Lucetta when he meets her in the Amphitheater, which served in the past as a rendezvous place for him and Susan Henchard, his now dead wife: “Henchard was disarmed. His old feeling of supercilious pity for womankind in general was intensified by this suppliant appearing here as the double of the first” (324). However “supercilious” it may be, Henchard once had a “feeling of pity for womankind in general”—he had this feeling of pity specifically when he met Susan Henchard after almost twenty years of separation—
and the revival of his sense of pity at the sight of Lucetta suggests that he is capable of reflecting on the consequences of his behavior towards other people and feeling sorry on their account.

By the time Henchard turns his attention back to Elizabeth-Jane, he is indeed much better prepared to appreciate a reciprocal relationship than before:

Henchard regarded the sympathetic speaker for a few instants as if she struck him in a new light; then, without further remark, went out of the door and onward to his lonely cottage. So much for man’s rivalry, he thought. Death was to have the oyster, and Farfrae and himself the shells. But about Elizabeth-Jane; in the midst of his gloom she seemed to him as a pin-point of light. He had liked the look on her face as she answered him from the stairs. There had been affection in it, and above all things what he desired now was affection from anything that was good and pure. She was not his own, yet, for the first time, he had a faint dream that he might get to like her as his own—if she would only continue to love him. (361)

In this passage, Henchard is quite a different man. For one thing, he is not as arrogant or self-centered as before. His loss of all his money and reputation has significantly humbled him, and he is earnestly worried about Lucetta’s condition, showing his ability to care about other people. More importantly, Henchard thinks to himself, “So much for man’s rivalry,” implying that faced with the overwhelming power of death, he has learned to see the importance of leaving petty feelings of jealousy behind. What is most remarkable in this passage, however, is how Henchard’s attention is avidly focused on Elizabeth-Jane, and more specifically, on her ability to sympathize. Seeing the deeply concerned look on Elizabeth-Jane’s face, Henchard “for the first time” notices her capacity to sympathize with other people. Unlike his former self intent on finding an object on which he can pour “out his heart,” Henchard yearns for “affection from anything that [is] good and pure,” and he is now able to see the potential in Elizabeth-
Jane. Considering his utter lack of interest in the other parties in former relationships, Henchard’s desire for a reciprocal relationship illustrates a huge advancement in his understanding of human relationships and of sympathy, which has been brought about by his loss of wealth and reputation that has led him to give up his pride and acknowledge his dependence on others.

Nevertheless, Henchard’s desire for a fulfilling relationship with Elizabeth-Jane can never be gratified, and it is largely attributable to his possessive nature—after all, he has not really come to a point where he can sincerely believe and say, “So much for man’s rivalry.” Despite the fact that his relationship to Elizabeth-Jane is not of a romantic kind, Henchard becomes possessed by feelings of jealousy whenever he senses a threat to his “claim” on her exclusive affection for him. Henchard’s impulsive reaction to Newson’s query about Elizabeth-Jane’s whereabouts can be understood in this context.

After lying to Newson that Elizabeth-Jane died, Henchard speculates on his behavior:

Then Henchard, scarcely believing the evidence of his sense, rose from his seat amazed at what he had done. It had been the impulse of a moment. The regard he had lately acquired for Elizabeth, the new-sprung hope of his loneliness that she would be to him a daughter of whom he could feel as proud as of the actual daughter she still believed herself to be, had been stimulated by the unexpected coming of Newson to a greedy exclusiveness in relation to her; so that the sudden prospect of her loss had caused him to speak mad lies like a child, in pure mockery of consequences. (368)

Shocked by what he has done, Henchard realizes what has prompted him to “speak mad lies like a child,” which is none other than his fear that the appearance of Elizabeth-Jane’s biological father will take away her affection for him. In other words, Henchard does not believe that Elizabeth-Jane’s affection can be shared with anyone. Even though his lying about her death is not a deliberate act, he would not be stimulated to do such an
abominable act if he were not sure of the “prospect of her loss.” Henchard’s possessive desire for Elizabeth-Jane’s affection demonstrated in this passage reveals another interesting assumption he has about sympathy: the assumption that one needs to be in a position to deserve sympathy. The reason Henchard is so firmly convinced that the coming of Newson will displace Elizabeth-Jane’s sympathy for him is that he assumes that she sympathizes with him because of her belief in her biological connection to him. That is, he does not believe that he can ask for her sympathy just as he is. The fact that Henchard has recently been entertaining “the new-sprung hope of his loneliness that she would be to him a daughter of whom he could feel as proud as of the actual daughter she still believed herself to be” suggests that Henchard himself attaches a lot of importance to her “filial” connection to him in furthering their relationship.

Henchard’s assumption about one’s “qualifications” for a sympathetic relationship is closely related to his pride, which functions as the biggest obstacle to the fulfillment of his desire to receive sympathy. Given “Elizabeth’s strict nature” (386), it is hard to imagine how she would react, but Henchard gives up on regaining her trust and sympathy and waives “his privilege of self-defence” (402) when she accuses him of his lie. Instead, he says “with proud superiority” (402), “‘Don’t ye distress yourself on my account’” (402). Although “the sympathy of the girl seemed necessary to his very existence; and on her account pride itself wore the garments of humility” (376), Henchard’s pride ultimately prevents him from depending completely on her compassion
and running the risk of being pitied. Henchard therefore chooses to be lonely even after his death and leaves a will that begins with a statement “That Elizabeth-Jane Farfrae be not told of [his] death, or made to grieve on account of [him]” (409).  

That said, as suggested earlier, the novel suggests that Henchard is not solely responsible for his fruitless efforts at a sympathetic relationship. Instead of finding one individual accountable for the failure of sympathy, the novel raises a fundamental question as to whether there is such a thing as “genuine sympathy” through its emphasis on the theatricality of human relationships, making Henchard’s search for sympathy look even more tragic. As is illustrated in the discussion of Wordsworth’s and Eliot’s theories of sympathy, understanding human relationships in terms of theatricality or spectatorship is not unique to Hardy’s novels, and the idea that the sympathetic spectator cannot completely identify with the object of sympathy is an important starting point for all three authors in their exploration of the theme. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, however, Hardy does not merely emphasize the inevitability of theatrical acts and relations in sympathetic encounters but employs the trope of drama in depicting the interaction among characters in order to convey his tragic vision of the human condition. Hardy’s problematization of the ethical potential of the Casterbridge community and Elizabeth-Jane, allegedly the character who can exhibit the most intense feelings of sympathy in the novel, needs to be considered in the context of the essential theatricality of human relations.

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80 It is open to question, however, whether Henchard is being sincere in his desire to be alone even after his death, and I will discuss this question more in depth later in the chapter.

81 As discussed in the introduction, Rousseau understands the theater as a place in which we are taught “how to replace real sympathy with a painless representation or imitation of sympathy” (Marshall, “Rousseau and the State of Theater” 89), and the phrase “the essential theatricality of human relations” here refers to the inherent limitations in the human ability to fully understand or communicate with one another.
As compared with the community of Weatherbury in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the community of Casterbridge exhibits even less potential for sympathetic education. The description of Weydon-Priors—located near Casterbridge, this is the first rural community presented in the novel—prepares readers for Casterbridge’s lack of moral integrity:

The sight of real money in full amount, in answer to a challenge for the same till then deemed slightly hypothetical, had a great effect upon the *spectators*. Their eyes became riveted upon the faces of the chief *actors*, and then upon the notes as they lay, weighted by the shillings, on the table. (78) (italics added)

Right before this scene, Henchard puts his wife up for sale and asks for five guineas, and Newson takes him seriously and puts the money on the table. Up to this moment, everyone present in the furmity tent, including Henchard, has been taking Henchard’s offer to sell off his wife for a joke, and nobody has attempted to stop him. “The sight of real money in full amount,” however, changes the whole atmosphere, making everyone’s eyes “riveted upon the faces” of the parties involved. Despite this keen attention to the proceedings of the sale, nobody still bothers to dissuade Henchard from making a stupid mistake, demonstrating a lack of sincere concern about what they witness. For the people in the tent, Henchard’s sale of his wife is only a show of which they are “the spectators,” and thus they feel no moral obligation for what happens to “the chief actors.” The “great effect” that the sight of money has upon them has nothing to do with their emotional sentiment, which is why they can feel amazingly at ease with the ending of the “show.”

After Susan Henchard leaves with Newson “sobbing bitterly” (79), they merely make jokes about the whole matter, making such comments as “‘Serves the husband well be-right, . . . A comely respectable body like her—what can a man want more?’” (80) or
“‘Well, the woman will be better off’” (80). Here, the absence of any kind of emotional reaction on the part of the audience distinguishes Hardy’s view of the theatricality of human relations from that of eighteenth-century thinkers like Rousseau. The spectators of the scene of Henchard’s wife-sale do not engage in the act of sympathetic identification of any sort, and therefore not even superficial or empty feelings of sympathy, which Rousseau defines as the most problematic influence of theater in *Letter to M. d’Alembert on the Theater*, are generated in the process of viewing the scene. Instead, the people in the tent simply understand Henchard’s wife-sale as a pure source of entertainment that does not affect them in any way. The theatrical language used in this passage thus captures the sense of utter indifference with which people regard other people’s affairs.

With its implicit comments on the dehumanizing effects of capitalism, this wife-sale scene distinguishes Hardy’s view of rural life from those of Wordsworth and Eliot, explaining his increasing pessimism about the possibility of reconstructing the foundations of ethics on which to build intimate human connections. While Eliot does not emphasize the depth of rural people’s minds as much as Wordsworth does, she shares Wordsworth’s belief that as compared with urban life, rural life better retains the elementary qualities of the human mind. Even in her description of the failure of sympathetic exchanges within rural communities, Eliot focuses less on the destructive effects of industrialization or capitalism than on rural communities’ inability to adapt to historical changes. As I pointed out, in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, in which Hardy problematizes Weatherbury’s blind emphasis on its members’ conformity to communal values, Hardy agrees upon Eliot’s understanding of the moral potential of rural
communities. In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, however, Hardy does not see much difference between urban and rural areas in terms of potential for sympathetic education, as is illustrated by the wife-sale scene which suggests that rural areas are as much exposed to the alienating effects of capitalism as urban areas. As discussed above, the “spectators” of the wife-sale show interest in “the chief actors” of the show as long as a real transaction of money takes place. That is, for these people in the tent who have lost an ability to distinguish human interactions from mere financial transactions, Henchard’s wife is nothing more than a commodity put up for sale.

Just like Weydon-Priors, Casterbridge is dominated by a sense of emotional detachment and indifference, which Karl Marx would call “alienation,” and the Amphitheatre, one of the most ancient buildings in the town of Casterbridge, serves as a symbolic representation of the general atmosphere of the community:

> [The Amphitheatre] was to Casterbridge what the ruined Coliseum is to modern Rome, and was nearly of the same magnitude. . . . Melancholy, impressive, lonely, yet accessible from every part of the town, the historic circle was the frequent spot for appointments of a furtive kind. Intrigues were arranged there; tentative meetings were there experimented after divisions and feuds. But one kind of appointment—in itself the most common of any—seldom had place in the Amphitheatre: that of happy lovers. (140-41)

In contrast with the great barn in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, which represents the continuity of human history, the Amphitheatre signifies the discontinuity between past and present. Just like “the ruined Coliseum” in modern Rome, the Amphitheatre in modern Casterbridge heightens the sense of the loss of the past glory, and its dominant moods are “Melancholy, impressive, lonely.” That the Amphitheatre is used at the present time “for appointments of a furtive kind” also accentuates the contrast between
past and present. Nevertheless, the explanation the narrator offers for why such “an airy, accessible, and sequestered spot for interviews” has become a meeting place for intrigues and evil schemes intimates that in fact, the Amphitheatre somehow sustains its functional continuity:

Perhaps it was because its associations had about them something sinister. Its history proved that. Apart from the sanguinary nature of the games originally played therein, such incidents attached to its past as these: that for scores of years the town-gallows had stood at one corner; that in 1705 a woman who had murdered her husband was half-strangled and then burnt there in the presence of ten thousand spectators. Tradition reports that at a certain stage of the burning her heart burst and leapt out of her body, to the terror of them all, and that not one of those ten thousand people ever cared particularly for hot roast after that. (141) (italics added)

The narrator’s theory is that the Amphitheatre is now being used for sinister purposes because of some sinister incidents associated with the place. Interestingly, as the narrator himself points out, the original purpose of building the Amphitheatre itself is of “sinister” nature. Moreover, a closer look at the original function of the Amphitheatre suggests that the place has been used for essentially the same purpose throughout its history. The Amphitheatre was initially constructed for the audience who enjoys “the sanguinary nature of the games”; in other words, it was built to satisfy the spectators who take pleasure in watching other people’s desperate struggles with the threat of death. The town-gallows that “stood at one corner” very similarly evokes the image of people gathering together to witness other people executed. It is no coincidence, then, that the word “spectators” is used to describe people who were present to observe “a woman who had murdered her husband . . . half-strangled and then burnt there.” The term points to the emotional distance between the observers and the object of observation, thereby
characterizing the pervasive mood of the town: lack of sympathy for other people.

Although the Amphitheatre is no longer used for the display of public punishment in Casterbridge of the present time, the parallel between the woman executed in front of ten thousand people in 1701 and Lucetta, who is publicly punished through the skimmington-ride later in the novel, suggests that the “sinister” spirit of the Amphitheatre is still powerful in the Casterbridge community.

It is important to note here that as compared with the great barn in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, the continuity between past and present epitomized by the Amphitheatre is not only of a more negative kind—no one dwells upon the past history of the Amphitheatre as he does the barn with “a feeling almost of gratitude, and quite of pride” (*Far From the Madding Crowd* 126)—but also something unconscious, which I think is crucial to comprehending Hardy’s even darker portrayal of rural communities in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. While the Weatherbury community’s resistance to changes proves unconducive to sympathetic education, the Casterbridge community’s passive and unthinking attitude towards historical changes is even more problematic. Significantly, just like Weatherbury, Casterbridge is presented as a typical, although “at one remove further from the fountainhead,” agricultural town, and the novel lays a heavy emphasis on its distance from urban cities: “Casterbridge was the complement of the rural life around; not its urban opposites” (126). There is no pastoral touch in the description of Casterbridge, however, and the following passage efficiently illustrates the consequences of Casterbridge’s passive reaction to the encroachment of historical processes:
Thus Casterbridge was in most respects but the pole, focus, or nerve-knot of the surrounding country life; differing from the many manufacturing towns which are as foreign bodies set down, like boulders on a plain, in a green world with which they have nothing in common. Casterbridge lived by agriculture at one remove further from the fountainhead than the adjoining villages—no more. The townsfolk understood every fluctuation in the rustic’s condition, for it affected their receipts as much as the labourer’s; they entered into the troubles and joys which moved the aristocratic families ten miles round—for the same reason. And even at the dinner-parties of the professional families the subjects of discussion were corn, cattle-disease, sowing and reaping, fencing and planting . . . (130-31)

“[D]iffering from the many manufacturing towns,” Casterbridge apparently exhibits some characteristics of country life where people share intimate knowledge of what goes in others’ lives. The bond that unites the people of Casterbridge has nothing to do with morality or emotional values, however; instead, it is formed and governed by capitalist concerns. Just like the spectators of Henchard’s wife-sale, the people of Casterbridge do take serious interest in other people’s lives and even enter “into the troubles and joys” of other families, but it is only because it “affect[s] their receipts.” Even though the main subject matter of the discussion at “the dinner-parties of the professional families” concerns agricultural activities, it is not so much an expression of the townspeople’s affinity with nature as an indication of their profit-oriented minds. The townspeople’s reaction to Farfrae’s marriage to Lucetta can be understood in this regard. When the news of their marriage spreads, what people get most curious about is “Whether Farfrae would sell his business and set up for a gentleman on his wife’s money, or whether he would show independence enough to stick to his trade in spite of his brilliant alliance” (290). The fact that the townspeople’s interest falls only on the financial and material aspect of Farfrae’s and Lucetta’s marriage demonstrates how much the community is under the
influence of capitalist principles. The townspeople of Casterbridge are as isolated and
alienated from one another as people in urban cities, and in this sense, there is not much
difference between Casterbridge and the “manufacturing towns,” except that there is a
semblance of a strong bond among people, which is actually confined to material
concerns. This semblance of connection among people in a “rural” town like
Casterbridge is quite problematic because it keeps people unaware of the meaning of
their passive acceptance of historical changes that are in reality ruining their traditional
value system.

Casterbridge’s attitude towards one of its ancient customs, the skimmington-ride,
exemplifies the problems of its indifference to its tradition as well as to new emergent
values, which is also closely linked to the community’s lack of interest in its individual
members. When Jopp divulges the secret of Henchard’s and Lucetta’s past to the people
at the inn of Peter’s Finger, they immediately think of “a skimmity-ride” (332) as a way
of expressing their feelings about it. The feelings these people want to communicate
through this ancient custom are by no means sincere sentiments of moral judgment or
condemnation, however. The real purpose of the skimmington-ride is neither to punish
individuals who transgressed against communal values nor to restore the moral integrity
of the community; as is seen in the following conversation between Nance Mockridge
and a stranger to the town, they regard the whole matter purely as a source of great
entertainment:

“Still, are they going to do it shortly? It is a good sight to see, I suppose?”
“Well, sir!” she simpered. And then, bursting into naturalness, and glancing
from the corner of her eye, “‘Tis the funniest thing under the sun! And it costs
money.”

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“Ah! I remember hearing of some such thing. Now I shall be in Casterbridge for two or three weeks to come, and should not mind seeing the performance. Wait a moment.” (334)
“We will!” said Nance. “A good laugh warms my heart more than a cordial, and that’s the truth on’t.” (335) (italics added)

Here again, a theatrical term like “performance” is used to describe the townspeople’s distanced relationship to Henchard and Lucetta, whose effigies will be the main players of the “performance.” Except for Jopp, to whom “it was not a joke, but a retaliation” (342), no one seriously cares about Henchard’s and Lucetta’s past. Henchard and Lucetta just happen to belong to a higher social class, and these low-class people merely use the skimmington-ride to have “[a] good laugh” at the expense of high-class people. That the skimmington-ride is their ancient tradition does not mean anything to them, except that it provides a convenient way of having a chance to see “the funniest thing under the sun.”

As Mrs. Cuxsom points out, the custom is almost dying, and it has not been practiced for more than ten years, but no one attaches any significance to his act of reviving his tradition. Just as Henchard’s wife-sale was some “drama” to enjoy from a detached position, the skimmington-ride is merely a “performance” that does not affect the spectators in any substantial manner—Lucetta’s death does not even produce the effect equivalent to making ten thousand people stop caring for hot roast, as did the woman executed in the Amphitheatre in 1701.

For Hardy, a rural community’s most serious problem therefore is not its judgmental mindset but its fundamental indifference to everything except its immediate practical concerns, for that is what contributes to the situation of alienation in the
community of Casterbridge most. The following depiction of the community’s response—or lack of response—to the news that Farfrae has begun to date Elizabeth-Jane captures the atmosphere of isolation that dominates the community:

Thus they talked at the Mariners. But we must guard against a too liberal use of the conventional declaration that a great sensation was caused by the prospective event, that all the gossips’ tongues were set wagging thereby, and so on, even though such a declaration might lend some éclat to the career of our poor only heroine. When all has been said about busy rumourers, a superficial and temporary thing is the interest of anybody in affairs which do not directly touch them. It would be a truer representation to say that Casterbridge (ever excepting the nineteen young ladies) looked up for a moment at the news, and withdrawing its attention, went on labouring and victualling, bringing up its children, and burying its dead, without caring a little for Farfrae’s domestic plans. (384)

Obviously, people have already clean forgotten about the fact of poor Lucetta’s tragic death, not to mention their implicit responsibility for it. The narrator makes it clear, however, that the townsfolk’s lack of interest in Lucetta has nothing to do with her individual personality or her relationship to the community. It is just that for the townspeople who are consumed by their own daily concerns, “the interest of anybody in affairs which do not directly touch them” cannot last long. As a new mayor of Casterbridge, Farfrae’s life can be “better” material for an interesting drama, but people’s attention to his “domestic plans” is sustained only temporarily. No matter whose drama of life it is, as soon as the curtain closes, people forget about it and concentrate on their own lives, which, for other people, are also a drama.

It is no wonder, then, that the community cannot help Henchard fulfill his desire for sympathy in any way. As mere spectators of his mistakes in life and his ensuing sufferings, the townspeople never notice his emotional needs, and some of them even use his sufferings for their entertainment through the skimmington-ride. Unlike extremely
fragile Lucetta, however, Henchard is not so severely affected by some of the
townspeople’s brutal treatment of his past history, pointing to his immunity to the general
situation of alienation, and his failure to be affected can be understood as part of the
general alienation. His failure to obtain Elizabeth-Jane’s sympathy, in contrast, has a
huge impact on him: it breaks him down completely and leads him to leave a will that
dictates that no one should mourn his death, which Elizabeth-Jane carries out “as far as
practicable” (410). Elizabeth-Jane’s rationale for respecting Henchard’s dying wish is
that “the man who wrote them meant what he said” (410), and she believes that she
should follow his directions almost to the letter rather than trying to “give herself a
mournful pleasure, or her husband credit for large-heartedness” (410) by according him a
“proper” funeral. Here, Elizabeth-Jane’s interpretation of Henchard’s will and her way of
expressing her “sympathy” for him are very significant. If Elizabeth-Jane’s reading of
Henchard’s will is correct, the novel indeed endorses a nihilistic perspective on
sympathy. The narrator does not offer any explicit comments on the sincerity of
Henchard’s wish not to be mourned and remembered, however, and it is hard to conclude
that Henchard’s last words represent Hardy’s own view of sympathy—namely, the idea
that it is meaningless to seek sympathy in this world where everyone is alienated from
one another. In addition, considering the novel’s investment in drawing attention to the
flaws in Henchard’s character that prevent him from satisfying his desire for sympathy,
the question still remains whether Elizabeth-Jane could ever gratify his needs. On this
account, the novel’s presentation of Elizabeth-Jane’s character and her capacity for
sympathy is worthy of close investigation.
As the character who is most capable of feeling sympathy for others, Elizabeth-Jane displays many characteristics that put her in stark contrast with the townspeople of Casterbridge. First of all, with the exception of Henchard, she is virtually the only character who thinks and feels deeply. The description of her thought process on her mother’s deathbed suggests that the intensity of her nature is comparable at least to Bathsheba’s:

To learn to take the universe seriously there is no quicker way than to watch—to be a “waker,” as the country-people call it. . . . and all this while the subtle-souled girl asking herself why she was born, why sitting in a room, and blinking at the candle; why things around her had taken the shape they wore in preference to every other possible shape. Why they stared at her so helplessly, as if waiting for the touch of some wand that should release them from terrestrial constraint; what that chaos called consciousness, which spun in her at this moment like a top, tended to, and began in. (189)

Just as Fanny’s death takes Bathsheba to a new level of self-knowledge and thus of sympathy, Susan Henchard’s death teaches Elizabeth-Jane to “learn to take the universe seriously” by presenting her with an opportunity to meditate on the mystery of life and death, a necessary process in one’s sympathetic education. In contrast, the Casterbridge community treats Susan’s death even more irreverently than the Weatherbury community handles Fanny’s death. Defending Christopher Coney who dug up four ounce pennies from Susan’s grave and spent them at the Three Mariners, Solomon Longways says, “To respect the dead is sound doxology . . . But money is scarce, and throats get dry. Why should death rob life o’ fourpence? I say there was no treason in it” (191). Another important distinction between Elizabeth-Jane and the townspeople of Casterbridge is that she actually has superior capacity for sympathy and exercises it when fit occasions arise. As a keen observer of other people, Elizabeth-Jane is the least self-centered character in
the novel and thus is ready most of the time to sympathize with the people close to her. When Lucetta wants to consult Elizabeth-Jane about her love triangle, for example, Elizabeth-Jane is “earnest to listen and sympathize” (243) regardless of her personal feelings for the parties involved.

Despite this emphasis on the essential differences between Elizabeth-Jane and the Casterbridge community, the novel portrays Elizabeth-Jane’s relations with other characters also in theatrical terms—more specifically, she is presented essentially as a spectator of other people’s sufferings and pain. Described as “a dumb, deep-feeling, great-eyed creature, construed by not a single contiguous being” (204), Elizabeth-Jane is found merely observing other people’s lives most of the time rather than engaging in active exchanges of feelings or thoughts. Given the implications of Hardy’s depiction of human relations through the terms of theatricality in the novel, the fact that the character who is most capable of sympathizing with others plays mainly the spectator role seems to point to Hardy’s pessimism about the possibility of genuine sympathy. As compared with the townspeople of Casterbridge, Elizabeth-Jane is of course a very different kind of spectator, who is capable of being sincerely interested in other people’s affairs. As a matter of fact, her position as a spectator affects her ability to sympathize in two different ways: it both enhances and limits her capacity for emotional connection.

Elizabeth-Jane’s status as a spectator increases her capacity for sympathy by distancing her from her situation, which enables her to view matters from a perspective relatively free from her own bias or prejudices. Her understanding of Lucetta’s situation offers a good example:
The pain [Elizabeth-Jane] experienced from the almost absolute obliviousness to her existence that was shown by the pair of [Henchard and Farfrae] became at times half dissipated by her sense of its humourousness. When Lucetta had pricked her finger they were as deeply concerned as if she were dying; when she herself had been seriously sick or in danger they uttered a conventional word of sympathy at the news, and forgot all about it immediately. (250)

Through Lucetta, Elizabeth-Jane experiences the most painful feelings—“the almost obliviousness to her existence” shown by two men she cares about most. Elizabeth-Jane does not become possessed by feelings of jealousy or rivalry, however. Rather, positioned at a certain distance from the whole situation, she can see through Henchard’s and Farfrae’s absurd and silly behaviors toward Lucetta with a sense of humor and thereby continue to feel sympathetic toward Lucetta. Regarding Elizabeth-Jane’s status as a spectator, the narrator also states, “Elizabeth-Jane, being out of the game, and out of the group, could observe all from afar, like the evangelist who had to write it down” (254). The implication of this statement is that Elizabeth-Jane’s distanced position provides her with insights into things happening around her by preventing her personal feelings from affecting her judgmental faculty.

As helpful as Elizabeth-Jane’s position as a spectator is in keeping her from growing self-centered, it at the same time poses significant obstacles to her sympathetic education. As discussed above, the last phase of Bathsheba’s growth in her capacity for sympathy is acknowledging the need to open herself to others’ sympathy. Throughout the novel, Elizabeth-Jane never tries to reach this phase. It is not that she does not have a desire for others’ sympathy for her. As is illustrated by her initial fascination with Lucetta as someone with whom to exchange affection—she looks at Lucetta’s house “almost with a lover’s feeling” (210) at first—Elizabeth-Jane does have a deep need for a sympathetic
relationship. It is just that she has become too accustomed to suppressing her desire and making herself content to remain a spectator not only of others’ lives but also of her own life, merely wondering “what unwished-for thing Heaven might send her in place of” (251) what or whom she desires. Therefore, for Elizabeth-Jane, life in general, including her life, is a drama, and it is a “drama of pain”:

[Elizabeth-Jane’s] position was, indeed, to a marked degree one that, in the common phrase, afforded much to be thankful for. That she was not demonstratively thankful was no fault of hers. Her experience had been of a kind to teach her, rightly or wrongly, that the doubtful honour of a brief transit through a sorry world hardly called for effusiveness, even when the path was suddenly irradiated at some half-way point by daybeams rich as hers. But her strong sense that neither she nor any human being deserved less than was given, did not blind her to the fact that there were others receiving less who had deserved much more. And in being forced to class herself among the fortunate she did not cease to wonder at the persistence of the unforeseen, when the one to whom such unbroken tranquility had been accorded in the adult stage was she whose youth had seemed to teach that happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain. (410-11)

Elizabeth-Jane’s philosophy of life expressed in this last paragraph of the novel is strongly marked by a sense of resignation and acquiescence. With the gift of a husband she desired so much in the past and a social position that comes along with him, she is conscious that she is more “fortunate” than others, but she keeps reminding herself that one’s fortune does not necessarily correspond with one’s merits and that she should not take pride in her good fortune. More importantly, Elizabeth-Jane tries to stay aware of the fact that her current fortune might not last forever. Life is “a general drama of pain,” and her happiness at the moment is “but the occasional episode.” It would therefore be no surprise if the present episode of happiness ends without any warning and the episode of pain resumes. For Elizabeth-Jane, who views even her own life from a detached position,
no disastrous events in life could be too devastating or damaging. This is how she survives her loss of hope for a sympathetic relationship despite the fact that she has as strong a desire for sympathy as Henchard. As a spectator of the drama of her life, she has learned how not to let her life affect her. In this sense, Elizabeth-Jane’s capacity for sympathy does not really develop within the narrative.

These limitations in Elizabeth-Jane’s potential to achieve sympathetic education fully call for reconsideration of her response to Henchard’s dying wish and his death. When she finds out about the gift Henchard intended to give her on her wedding day, she regrets her harsh treatment of him and attempts to find him. What Elizabeth-Jane ends up finding is Henchard’s dying will that expresses his despair at the possibility of finding a sympathetic being. Here, a closer look at Henchard’s will is necessary for the reassessment of Elizabeth-Jane’s interpretation of the will:

**MICHAEL HENCHARD’S WILL**

That Elizabeth-Jane Farfrae be not told of my death, or made to grieve on account of me.

& that I be not bury’d in consecrated ground.

& that no sexton be asked to toll the bell.

& that nobody is wished to see my dead body.

& that no mourners walk behind me at my funeral.

& that no flours be planted on my grave,

& that no man remember me.

To this I put my name.

MICHAEL HENCHARD (409)

In this will apparently full of bitterness and resentment against the whole of humanity, Henchard’s despair at the possibility of others’ sympathy seems clear. The fact that he mentions “Elizabeth-Jane Farfrae” specifically also seems to point to his loss of hope for a sympathetic relationship, and many critics take Henchard’s will literally as Elizabeth-
Jane does. For instance, regarding Henchard’s will as the “completed testament of Henchard’s life” (127), H. M. Daleski believes that his will expresses his “stance of needing no one—for anything” (127). Similarly, by labeling Henchard’s will as “his bleak testament” (75) and reading it as a manifestation of “his final achievement of tragic understanding” (75), Geoffrey Harvey assumes that Henchard is being sincere in his rejection of anyone’s sympathy. A careful reading of the will, however, suggests that Henchard actually contradicts what he says in many ways. First of all, the manner in which he mentions Elizabeth-Jane implies that he actually wants his will to reach her and draw her attention to his death, for he not only makes her name look prominent in his will but also ensures by adding her married name that anyone who discovers the will can deliver it to her. In addition, for a man who does not wish to be remembered, Henchard is too careful to record his full name twice in the will, not to mention the fact that his directions for what he does “not” want people to do for him are very specific. Furthermore, as Abel Whittle reports, Henchard takes care to pin his will upon the head of his bed, and his act of leaving his will at a place where it can be easily discovered points to his desire to have it read by living people, which in turn intimates that he does want to be remembered. Despite the absence of any authorial comment on Henchard’s true intention in writing his will, the dying man’s appeal for sympathy and attention is indeed quite strongly present in the will.

Elizabeth-Jane, however, does not—or will not—read between the lines, and her sympathy for Henchard clearly reveals its limits when she says, “‘what bitterness lies there! O I would not have minded so much if it had not been for my unkindness at that
last parting! . . . But there’s no altering—so it must be” (409-10). This statement illustrates that Elizabeth-Jane’s sympathy is not unconditional and that Henchard was indeed right in his assumption about her “strict nature” (386) that would not allow her to forgive him and go back to loving him as a father. Elizabeth-Jane thus does not have too much trouble accepting the message of Henchard’s will as it is, which is not surprising considering that she herself has given up on the possibility of sympathy. Her resigned attitude toward sympathy and life accounts for the temporariness of the intensity of her response to Henchard’s death: “All was over at last, even her regrets for having misunderstood him on his last visit, for not having searched him out sooner, though these were deep and sharp for a good while” (410). Afterwards, Elizabeth-Jane lives a life “in a latitude of calm weather” (410), which strongly contrasts with Henchard’s life of passionate desire and despair. This implicit critique of Elizabeth-Jane’s passive acceptance of her role as a spectator of life makes it even more difficult to assume that the novel endorses her interpretation of Henchard’s will. Furthermore, Elizabeth-Jane’s conviction that the directions in Henchard’s will are “a piece of the same stuff that his whole life was made of” (410) stems from her ignorance of how badly Henchard longed for a sympathetic relationship throughout his life. Though situated in a position where she can view things “from the crystalline sphere of a straightforward mind” (250), Elizabeth-Jane is incapable of going beyond her “straightforward mind” and seeing through the proud man’s thin disguise of his desperate cry for sympathy and affection.
It is therefore hard to assume that Elizabeth-Jane’s reflections at the end of the novel speak for Hardy’s own view of sympathy and life as some critics believe, and Henchard’s appeal for sympathy is still left to be read and considered. Unlike Elizabeth-Jane, who remains ignorant of how desperately Henchard wanted her sympathy, readers are given access to his innermost feelings and desires, and the novel’s invitation to sympathy for him is quite obvious. What complicates the readers’ relationship to Henchard, however, is that the novel is careful not to render him easily available for sympathetic identification, pointing to the significance of his character in Hardy’s sympathetic education of readers. As the most intense and fascinating character in the novel, Henchard displays many disturbing qualities that make him seem morally problematic as well. For example, describing Henchard’s agony at finding out that Elizabeth-Jane is not his daughter, the narrator says, “For the sufferings of that night, engendered by his bitter disappointment, he might well have been pitied. He was like one who had half fainted, and could neither recover nor complete the swoon” (198). In this passage, Henchard’s sufferings coming from the realization that he does not actually have a daughter whom he has believed will be the one to fulfill his desire for sympathy are so great that his swoon cannot even be completed to relieve him of the burden of his consciousness of pain. The narrator’s statement that “he might well have been pitied,” however, warns the readers not to be too ready to indulge in facile sympathetic feelings for him, preparing them for his harsh and unfair treatment of Elizabeth-Jane afterwards. In the rest of the novel, the same pattern is employed in the presentation of Henchard: an

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82 Robert C. Schweik, for example, equates Elizabeth-Jane’s philosophy of life with Hardy’s own when he argues that her reflections aptly express “the final meaning which Hardy puts upon Henchard’s tragedy” (261).
intensified and sympathetic look into his sufferings arising from his ungratified desire for sympathy followed by a critique of his character. For the readers of the novel, what this means is that they have to think constantly about their relationship with Henchard—the implications of both sympathizing with him and withdrawing sympathy from him. During this process, the readers are led to be more self-conscious about their role as spectators of Henchard’s life full of contradictory impulses. Through the character of Henchard, Hardy seeks the possibility of making his novel more than a drama of which his readers are content to be passive spectators.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy neither denies that life is painful nor argues that our desire for sympathy can or should be gratified. Nevertheless, he sincerely and powerfully invites his readers to ask themselves whether it really is “a general drama” in which the possibility of the fulfillment of the desire for sympathy is completely blocked. Given Hardy’s critique of the limitations of Casterbridge’s and Elizabeth-Jane’s capacity for sympathy, it is clear what he sees as the biggest obstacle to the development of genuine sympathy: people’s unthinking acceptance of their role as spectators of others’ sufferings as well as their own. Hardy does not, however, provide a clear answer in the novel as to how one can escape the role of a passive spectator, as is demonstrated by his characterization of Henchard who both invites and rejects sympathy. As a matter of fact, Hardy himself does not seem to have a definite answer to whether life can be more than “a general drama”—again, Hardy’s vision of sympathy is much more pessimistic in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* than in *Far from the Madding Crowd*—and his sympathetic education does not go beyond making his readers see the need to ask and ponder upon the
question. For the novelist writing at an age in which there were no fixed codes of ethics, however, bringing his reader’s attention to his or her moral status and potential as a human being itself could be a huge achievement, and Hardy successfully accomplishes this goal in both *Far from the Madding Crowd* and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* through his depiction of the failure of sympathetic relationships in rural communities.
He wanted something—wanted the thing she always found it so difficult to give him; wanted her to tell him that she loved him. And that, no, she could not do. . . A heartless woman he called her; she never told him that she loved him. But it was not so—it was not so. It was only that she never could say what she felt.

—Virginia Woolf

_To the Lighthouse_

Toward the end of the first section of her novel _To the Lighthouse_, Woolf describes a scene in which a husband desperately wants his wife to tell him that she loves him but the wife is unable to make such pronouncements. Aware of her husband’s insecure feelings about what people think of him and his work, Mrs. Ramsay feels Mr. Ramsay’s strong need for sympathy and understanding, which is expressed at the moment through his desire to hear her say she loves him. Instead of saying the words her husband wants to hear, Mrs. Ramsay lets him know her feelings by assuring him that he is right about the weather and the possibility of making a trip to the lighthouse the next day. Although Mrs. Ramsay loves Mr. Ramsay and is capable of satisfying his need to be comforted and to have others reassure him of his importance, her inability to say the exact words her husband wants to hear in this scene seems to be a significant indication
of the human condition in the early twentieth century characterized by disjointed personalities and desires. The death of Mrs. Ramsay that soon follows this scene draws out more clearly the “modern” situation of individual atomization and cultural dislocation, revealing the ultimate inefficacy of her sympathy for her husband. Still desperate for sympathy and recognition after his wife’s death, Mr. Ramsay turns to Lily Briscoe and his children, only to be disappointed in his expectation to find anyone who can satisfy his desire even temporarily as Mrs. Ramsay did.

Woolf’s depiction of human relations in To the Lighthouse offers an insightful look at both continuities and discontinuities between nineteenth-century literature and Modernist literature. My investigation of the representations of sympathetic relationships in rural environments in the texts by Wordsworth, Eliot, and Hardy has indicated the weakening of the authors’ faith in the possibility of sympathy as well as an increasing sense of disillusionment with historical processes. As a transitional figure between late Victorianism and Modernism, Hardy especially seems acutely conscious of the absence of a coherent and accepted set of values and thus most pessimistic about the possibility of restoring the foundations of morality upon which meaningful personal relations can be built. In his later novels, such as Tess of the D’Urbervilles (1891) and Jude the Obscure (1895), the language of sympathy almost disappears, and his articulation of the tragic vision that emphasizes the force of an unmanageable fate and individual isolation is even more eloquent, illustrating the Modernist side of his writing. Modernist literature is indeed often defined by its preoccupation with “a lack of continuity of environment and a consequent superficializing of relationships” (Bantock 43), and the economic and social
changes in the early twentieth century account for the sense of atomization and fragmentation characteristic of Modernist literature. For one thing, the agricultural depression of the later years of the nineteenth century caused “the almost final breakdown . . . of a pre-industrial way of life and economy” (Bantock 15), provoking the increasing urbanization. As G. H. Bantock points out, rural depopulation and urbanization in the early twentieth century escalated the encroachment of altered emphases on social relations which was already taking place in the nineteenth century, reducing “man to the level of economic man, one whose community relationships were at the mercy of the cash nexus, one whose psychological motivations were thought of largely in terms of self-interest” (17). It is not a mere coincidence, then, that Hardy’s last novel, *Jude the Obscure*, in which his pessimism about human relations reaches its height, is set in urban areas. In addition, the First World War along with various political upheavals significantly contributed to completing the loss of the sense of moral certainty and coherent values, defining the dominant mood of Modernist writing as confusion, uncertainty, and despair.

With its powerful picture of alienated and dysfunctional individuals, *To the Lighthouse* supplies an apt example of Modernist literature that features a much more strongly marked pessimism about human relations as compared with nineteenth-century literature. As is illustrated by Mr. Ramsay’s situation, no matter how strong individuals’ desire for sympathy and for the human connection is, society is too fragmented and disjointed to satisfy that desire. In *To the Lighthouse*, fragmentation is a description not only of society but also of the self, and Mrs. Ramsay’s inability to say what she feels can
be seen as a symptom of her inner fragmentation, which does not seem unrelated to the ineffectiveness of her sympathy. Through her wifely and maternal devotion, Mrs. Ramsay might be able to indulge her loved ones’ need to receive sympathy—as Lily observes, Mrs. Ramsay plays the role of a sympathetic person mainly in the company of men—but she is not quite aware how the domestic forces occupy and tire her or how they could affect her sympathetic ability to soothe men’s broken egos and fulfill their need for constant reassurance. The fragmented aspect of Mrs. Ramsay’s character seems a very important mark of Woolf’s pessimistic perspective on the possibility of achieving a sense of unity through sympathetic relations in modern society, especially because of its implication that Mrs. Ramsay’s ability to bring together disparate things into a whole is in effect seriously limited. If Mrs. Ramsay’s actions could be motivated by forces about which she knows nothing, she cannot be in control of her sympathetic gestures and therefore might not be able to produce the desired effects.

The strong sense of fragmentation and loss of self-control that pervades the novel thus sets it apart from the nineteenth-century texts analyzed in this dissertation, in which the notion of self-responsibility and human agency is emphasized in the discussion of one’s sense of morality and capacity for sympathy. Although Wordsworth acknowledges that the developmental process of one’s ability to sympathize with others, especially in one’s childhood, is virtually imperceptible, his view of the shaping power of language and the significance of the careful use of that power suggests that he has a stronger belief than Woolf in the capacity of human beings to make choices and enact them on the world. Eliot’s intense critique of rural communities’ lack of sympathetic feelings in Adam Bede
and *The Mill on the Floss* suggests that the concepts of responsibility and individual agency also constitute an essential basis of her ethical system. Hardy, whose later works demonstrate many of the qualities of Modernist writing, is of course closest to Woolf in his stance on the question of the role of human agency in the development of sympathetic relations, although his optimistic rendering of Bathsheba’s sympathetic education in *Far from the Madding Crowd* and his criticism of the unethical nature of her community’s treatment of its members exhibit his Victorian side.

At the same time, however, the very fact that sympathy is still considered an important topic in a Modernist text like *To the Lighthouse* suggests that though Modernist literature displays a much stronger sense of despair about the possibility of sympathy, it also has a significant continuity with nineteenth-century literature. In other words, Modernist writers also believed that grappling with the issue of human relations was a worthwhile endeavor. More importantly, Modernist writers’ literary experimentation, such as the use of the stream-of-consciousness technique or pastiche, implies that despite their awareness of the problems of human alienation in modern society, they still sought to find ways of communicating with readers—that is, they did not completely dismiss the educational possibilities of literature. The main difference between nineteenth-century writers and Modernist writers is that in attempting to convey the “truths” about humans and human relations, Modernist writers emphasize the subjectivity and relativity of those truths more strongly than their predecessors. Toward the end of *To the Lighthouse*, for example, Lily thinks to herself that in order to gain a clearer picture of Mrs. Ramsay, she would need at least “fifty pairs of eyes to see with” (198). This metaphor of fifty pairs of
eyes explains Woolf’s technique based on the premise that by presenting the narrative as a collection of varied and even opposing consciousnesses, she can communicate a true likeness of her characters and their worlds, while Lily’s realization that even with fifty pairs of eyes, the truth about Mrs. Ramsay is nothing more than the accumulation of her private perceptions demonstrates Woolf’s understanding of the incomplete nature of her representations of her characters’ interiority.

The heavier emphasis that Modernist writers place on the subjective nature of reality and the limitations of our perceptions is closely related to the idea of fragmentation within individuals, which I pointed out as an important mark of Modernist writing. As is implied by the word “heavier,” however, in spite of the prevalence of realist literature, nineteenth-century authors were not completely unaware of the subjective aspect of their portrayal of reality. As a matter of fact, my analysis of how Wordsworth, Eliot, and Hardy respond to the epistemological and ethical questions about sympathy and reading raised in the eighteenth century suggests that although the notion of internal fragmentation was not yet fully developed, these authors were conscious of the problems of representation and took them as an important starting point in considering the didactic function of literature. Despite the fact that these authors’ beliefs in common humanity and human agency grew fainter, they all continued in their efforts to interrogate the moral and pedagogical value of literature, and this commitment to the educational possibilities of literature is an important legacy for Modernist writers. As I stated at the outset, the primary goal of my study has been to elucidate the ways in which Wordsworth, Eliot, and Hardy consciously try to build sympathetic relations with their
readers through their texts. By considering their choices of representational and narrative techniques in relation to their eighteenth-century predecessors, my research provides a new perspective on these nineteen-century authors’ articulation of the powers and limitations of literature.
I. Primary Sources


II. Secondary Sources


